

The Secretariat

Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee

Room S1.61, Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir/Madam,

We wish to express in the strongest possible terms of our opposition to certain provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Bill (No 2) 2004, in particular, the introduction of the new offence of 'associating with terrorist organisations', and the proposed new power to seize a person's passports even before an ASIO warrant has been issued against them. Australia already has far-reaching anti-terrorism laws. The Commonwealth Criminal Code criminalises such acts as being a member, even an informal member, of an organisation that the government proscribes as a terrorist organisation. Now the Bill proposes to make it an offence to even 'associate' and 'communicate' with people connected to such organisations.

We vehemently object to this because it disproportionately infringes freedom of association, and imposes guilt by association. Furthermore, the offence depends upon the exercise of executive discretion in declaring an organisation to be a terrorist organisation under the Criminal Code, an exercise of discretion which itself is based upon the overly broad existing definition of terrorism. As a result, the police and the government have very broad discretion in how the law is applied, and there is grave concern that it will be selectively exercised. For example, there is already evidence that the anti-terrorism laws have been selectively applied to Muslim members of the community. In other areas of the law, selective application is regarded as objectionable and undesirable, so why should it be allowed in this case?

What is particularly alarming is the combined effect of this amendment with the newly introduced bail provisions where a person charged will only be granted bail in exceptional circumstances. A person could very easily be charged and locked up in jail on the thinnest of evidence before it is even tested in a court of law. This means a person could end up being in jail for doing nothing more than phoning someone twice, even if he or she is later found to be innocent.

Existing laws already give ASIO more powers than an intelligence-gathering agency should have. We strongly oppose the giving of further powers to ASIO to seize a person's passports even before a warrant has been issued against them. ASIO's role is to gather intelligence, not to have the unconstrained power of being able to prevent a person from leaving the country simply by making a request for a warrant to be issued for that person's questioning or detention. ASIO's functions and operation are not easily open to scrutiny, which makes the vesting in ASIO of this sort of power particularly dangerous and open to abuse. Unless there are definite guide lines, accountability and limitation of power, who will check ASIO?

We oppose the fact that the Minister's decisions to transfer prisoners are not open to judicial review. We also oppose the limits placed upon the Administrative Appeals Tribunal to review decisions of the Minister if he or she issues a certificate in relation to a decision to seize a person's passports. Fundamental to the concept of democratic government is the fact that all administrative decisions must be reviewable in order to instil and ensure public confidence.

Fundamental to a fair and democratic society is the guarantee that all citizens are afforded their basic civil rights and freedoms. Any response to terrorism must be measured and reasoned, and above all, needs to uphold our democratic and civil rights, rather than undermine them. We are oppose to make our free country a fascist police state.

It is unclear how the amendments will improve Australia's national security. There is little evidence of community support for terrorism in this country, and terrorists will commit terrorist acts regardless of whether they receive occasional phone calls. The only clear effect of the amendments will be to deal a devastating blow to the civil rights of Australians by inflaming suspicion and ill-will towards others, especially those in the Muslim community. This Bill is motivated by a desire to show that something is being done, rather than having a genuine impact in making Australia safer. For these reasons, we urge you to excise these provisions in the Bill. WE STRONGLY BELIEVE NONE SHOULD BE MADE ABOVE LAW.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours faithfully,

Shahabuddin Khan &

Dr. Tahmina Akhtar Banu