

# Why the lockdown of ‘fortress’ Parliament House must end

## ‘Tear Down That Wall’

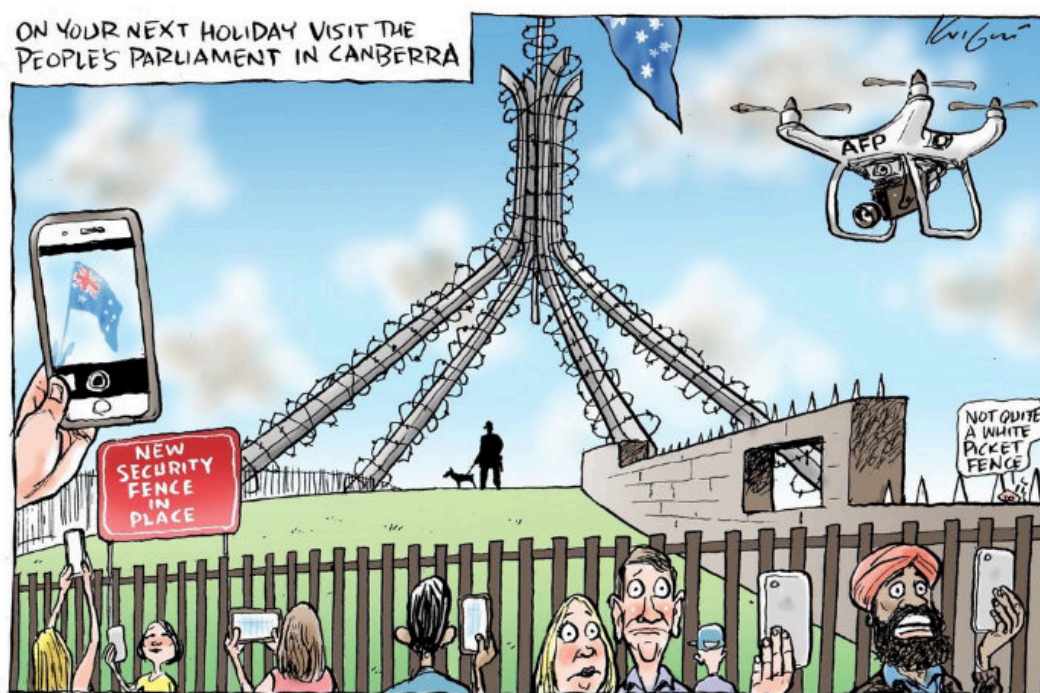
– US President Ronald Reagan to Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev re Berlin Wall, 12 June 1987

### Part 1: THE FORTRESS

By Dr Tony Murney

Australia’s Parliament House has progressively taken on the appearance of a [fortress](#) or maximum security prison since 2014.

The most obvious of the security changes includes erecting several [high security fences](#), deploying [armed guards](#) with assault rifles at key entry points and introducing highly-dangerous armed patrols inside the building itself.



– with thanks to Mark Knight

Authorities have also considered “[glassing-in](#)” the public galleries of both chambers to separate visiting citizens from Members and Senators on the floor of the House. As if this isn’t enough the former President of the Senate told his colleagues that consideration had been given to [installing hâ-hâ’s](#), ditch type fortifications, at various locations around the building. Talk about a siege mentality.

Something less noticeable but equally repressive was the earlier relocation of the “[protest area](#)” from its prominent and historic location immediately in front of the building to a more

remote small space further down Federation Mall, more than 150 metres from the parliament building.

The new site is half obscured from the building by an elevated garden constructed on the original site which reflects the growing “out of sight out of mind” mentality towards Australian citizens by those running the place.

### **Why challenging these changes is important**

None of this should shock ordinary Australians with the Parliament having become little more than a rubber stamp for processing some of the most destructive [human rights](#) legislation in Australian history by politicians who show a contemptible disregard for principle whilst living in perpetual fear of bad polling results.

The changes alter the relationship between the people’s parliament and the people of Australia.

All citizens should challenge these changes until they are reversed: the “new” Parliament House, opened in 1988, was not built as luxurious, exclusive, ring-fenced, office accommodation for politicians.

It was [designed](#) purposely to be a symbol of Australian democracy, celebrating the rights and freedoms of all Australians. Basic, intrinsic features of the design are unique to Australia.

The heart of the building is subsumed beneath the national capital’s landscape rather than sitting like a watch tower above it, and the architects deliberately provided for citizens and their children to walk, run and play over its roof.

These elements were core features of why the particular design was chosen. They are symbols that the Parliament serves the people, not the other way around.

Open government was at the very heart of the design, inviting the people to walk around the building and inside it, and to sit in open public galleries overlooking the MPs on the floor below, not apart from them separated by armoured glass, as the business of the country was done.

Originally, citizens could even look in the windows at the side of the building and see their elected representatives at work. How harmful can that be?



**BEFORE...** (AAP image)



**AFTER...** (author)

It is no accident that barriers, fences and other obstructions between the building and the people were excluded from the design by the visionary men and women who shaped it. Then, like now, security agencies saw Australia’s future through a prism of fear and distrust rather

than the generosity of spirit needed to sustain the nation as one of now only 22 [“full democracies”](#) in the world.

The recent changes raise devastating questions as to how much longer we can hold this position and whether we are destined to follow the USA into the realms of what the *Economist* Intelligence Unit describes as [“flawed democracy”](#), or the United Kingdom which now lags behind its former colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

### **Why the new security measures?**

Australians consider Olympic gold as a measure of international success, but that pales into insignificance by comparison to being a solid gold democracy. Australia used to look to other countries for role models but, without realising it, Australia has become one of the few role models left standing as others fall by the way or fail to achieve their aspirations.

The precise reasons for the new measures are hard to pin down between opaque and evasive explanations amongst ever increasing invocations of secrecy.

Important security upgrades occurred earlier in the building’s life in response to clearly identified vulnerabilities. These involved a Pajero driving into the front entrance, at least one vehicle driving over the grass roof in the middle of the night, and a bunch of angry unionists forcing their way past the front doors.

But insights into the underlying reasoning for the most recent overhaul of security appears to be linked to two events.

The first involved claims by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott in September 2014 concerning alleged [“chatter”](#) about a possible attack on the building (such [“chatter”](#) is ever present).

The second followed an incident in October 2014 at the [Canadian Parliament](#), where a man was shot dead after he ran into that building carrying a firearm he had used just before to murder a soldier at a nearby war memorial.

### **Women wearing burqas banned**

The Australian Speaker of the House of Representatives at the time, Bronwyn Bishop, in attempting to substantiate the need for increased security, [reportedly](#) told a briefing they were *“responding to real threats”* and that *“One of the problems with this building of course was that it was designed for people to come in easily”*. Of course it was: that’s the hallmark of a non-elitist parliamentary democracy, critics noted.

Her comments came about the same time she and then President of the Senate, Stephen Parry, really took security into their own hands. In an unprecedented move, they banned women wearing [burqas](#) from the open public galleries of Parliament. This deeply discriminatory decision was overturned following widespread public condemnation of the move, at the first subsequent opportunity.

In raising these issues, it must be remembered that while the Speaker and President are relatively easy and frequently deserved targets, what is truly troubling is that the Parliament, through successive governments, actually let them do these things.

“Chatter”, whatever that means, is not a meaningful explanation for spending \$126,000,000 of taxpayers’ money on additional security arrangements as both the “Provisional” and “New” Parliament Houses have long histories of factual threats, actual security incidents and hosting

international dignitaries under far greater pressure and threat level than guarding any local politician.

***Parliament House guard with assault rifle*** (SCMP)

It seems to have been lost on Canberra's unnerved politicians that the Canadian incident occurred in Canada, not Australia, and that the only person killed was the gunman. It is especially important to understand that Canada has had, until May 2020, abysmally weak firearm controls by comparison with Australia. As a direct result, the two Parliaments operate in very different security environments and setting security policy based on such occurrences is entirely inappropriate.

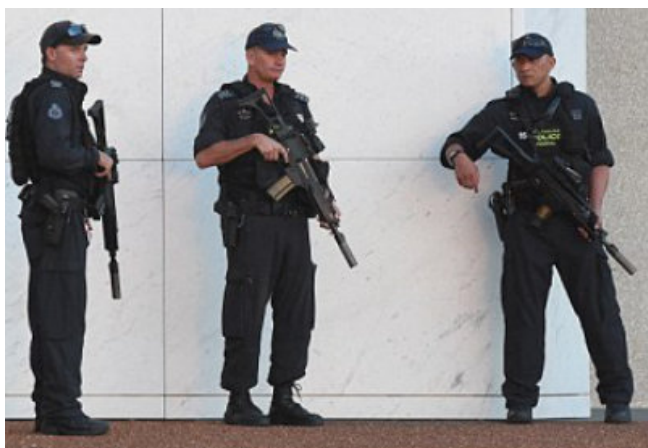


**Was any of this escalation in security necessary?**

Unfortunately, the answer is probably no.

People viewing terrorism through an empirical lens have very different views from those who adopt speculative or predictive approaches. The former is anchored in observable fact whilst the latter is not. Speculative approaches are subject to political manipulation and untested judgements with logical failures caused by emotive reactions, group think and overpowering tendencies to make the facts fit the theory rather than testing the theory against the facts.

This irrational behaviour is prone to generate scares of the now infamous “reds under the beds” type promulgated as a political expedient during the Cold War.



Two prominent [analysts](#) have labelled the current scare as “*the terrorism delusion*”, describing it as adherence to “*persistent false beliefs*” maintained “*in the face of strong contradictory evidence*”. The result is what one of them calls a “[ghost hunt](#)”. This is not to deny terrorism is an issue but to argue that national responses have been heavily disproportionate to the problem.

***Assault rifles - when too much is just not enough.*** (AAP Images Mick Tskikas)

A recent [analysis](#) of Australian terrorism revealed that only 11 people have been killed in terrorist incidents between the 9/11 (2001) attacks and 2019. Five of these were alleged perpetrators, leaving only six actual victims, with one of these being accidentally killed by police.

These few deaths compare to annual homicide levels of about 400-plus people a year in the Australian community (in excess of 7000 deaths over the post 9/11 period), and tens of thousands of offences with parallels to various terrorism offences, such as illegal [acts intended to cause injury](#) or [weapons and explosives offences](#).

## **Indistinguishable from background crime**

Over the past 19 years, terrorism has not been distinguishable from the background crime environment in Australia: indeed, it has been dwarfed by it.

Security at Parliament House in Canberra is deeply layered and capable of being quickly adjusted up or down through many levels.

It has been designed to deal with serious threats and incidents of the type identified in so-called “chatter”.

Several times since 1988 security people at Parliament House have demonstrated a capacity to interdict, react with speed to an event and re-establish stability quickly and without excessive use of force.

These are achievements all Parliamentarians should be proud of in their core role of being sensitive to the needs of their constituents while preserving the principles of open government.

*ENDS*

(Part 2 of this series looks at how the new security measures fence people in)

(Part 3 highlights the dangers to visiting children because politicians’ safety is over-emphasised).

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*Publisher’s note: The Serjeant-at-Arms, James Catchpole, and the Usher of the Black Rod, John Begley, sent a letter to the author seeking to intimidate him in respect of any further work on this subject, quoting the discretionary authorities of the all-powerful Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Senate to impose arbitrary penalties on him. CLA thanks them for self-identifying as the people to contact should anything go wrong with security at Parliament House, and for being the people nominated to receive letters of complaint.*