

How Parliament's fortress fences lock people in to danger

'Tear Down That Wall'

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

Part 2: FENCED IN

By Dr Tony Murney

The maze of steel security fences and barricades around Parliament House is the most obvious feature of the new security regime sustained by claims that security trumps symbolism.

They are pretty hard to miss, despite comical efforts to reduce their visual impact by painting them green.



- Cartoon courtesy David Pope, Canberra Times

Admissions extracted from the President of the Senate also revealed [secret plans](#) to build a “thermal fence” around Parliament House with “everything from virtual perimeter alert systems, thermal security cameras, threat detection and assessment technology and motion sensors”.

The introduction of this *Star Wars* type technology makes any sane person wonder why anything else is needed. The end result is that security barriers around Parliament House will be from three to eight layers deep, depending on the path taken from one place to another.

These layers include the ever-popular ‘dragon’s tooth’ fence, the 2.6m ‘penitentiary special’, the sneaky, invisible, heat-seeking fence, the ‘ornamental’ anti-vehicle concrete plinths and

numerous 'decorative' anti-vehicle bollards. They do not include existing armed guard posts, patrol routes nor the rumoured establishment of additional posts.

Some of the new bollards are meant to go down into the roadway to let Commonwealth cars pass and then go up again...but sometimes they have gotten it very wrong. Members of the political elite have been getting laughably [unexpected promotions](#) to new heights as their cars are unceremoniously jacked-up into the air, damaging transmissions and motors. The bollards have so far successfully put [five](#) Commonwealth cars out of action while terrorists have scored nil. Who needs terrorists when we can do it to ourselves and, of course, there is no prize for guessing who gets to pay for the repairs?

This description might give the impression Australia's politicians are not very well liked (if you see the fences as keeping them safe), but does any of the excessive new measures make sense from a security perspective?

High security fences, very much like the infamous Maginot Line, the Berlin Wall or the Great Wall of China cost huge amounts of money to build and maintain but have generally proven to be ineffective. Their main weaknesses are:

- they are static and visible to adversaries;
- can be easily assessed for vulnerabilities; and
- are defeatable using low cost, well-established and time proven methods.

The Parliament's recently constructed security barriers suffer from all of these deficiencies. Although they look imposing, these unpopular eyesores can be overcome for less than \$20 and only keep honest people out. This is a terrible security strategy with a poor cost-benefit ratio.



Multiple physical security perimeters are in place around the House of Representatives and Senate as well as an invisible 'thermal fence'. Note: after all this expense, the gate is left wide open which undermines precautions across the entire system – your tax dollars at work. (TM)

Worse, incrementally-layered security fencing can have unintended consequences which hinder security and emergency service access. Just as they restrict public freedom of movement, they can have similar effects on police or security forces responding to an incident, while also restricting routine access and line of sight inspection. Another security own goal.

Security fences of the type constructed at Parliament House can become problematic during disorderly protests because they create lines of contestation which did not previously exist. This usually happens when protestors seeking to show dissent cross indefensible *lines in the sand*, such as long fences or barricades which guards feel obligated to protect for no reason other than the existence of the barrier.

This is highly undesirable in volatile crowd control situations as there is potential for increased injury to people on both sides of the contest. Yet another security own goal.

The new fences are also *tailor-made* for the application of ‘chaining’ and ‘bannering’ tactics all around the building where this has not previously been an issue. More own goals?



Security fences generate visibility risks and visual vandalism. White sheds centre right are a ‘construction slum’. Is it a national monument, or a jail crossed with a rubbish dump? (TM)

Layered fences of this type are also dangerous to building occupants during evacuations due to their *fish-trap* effect because they obstruct the most direct and visually apparent routes of escape, with people being caught between defensive layers during security or other emergencies.

This is especially problematic for children and the disabled, and more generally for all building occupants at night or when there’s visual impairment, like thick smoke or fog (both of which could be anticipated during emergencies in Canberra).

A [recent count](#) of the dragon’s teeth surrounding Parliament House showed that the Australian taxpayer had bought more than 5,500 of these things.

It was not possible to count them all because hundreds are placed behind other steel security fences and it is impossible to say what each one costs because the Speaker and President misleadingly insist that revealing this information would help terrorists. Really?

From a cost-benefit perspective, these numbers look a bit better than the \$20 needed to overcome these multimillion dollar barricades because Australia’s politician get the benefit of 25 whole steel spikes each to notionally protect them from other Australians.

Possible other uses? If they got together and welded their dragon's teeth end to end straight up into the air, they would stick up over six kilometres into the sky above Canberra. This is high enough to constitute a hazard to aircraft. But, what good would that do?

Unfortunately, the only current use is for the spikes to remain in the ground. Under this cost-benefit scenario each spike notionally keeps about 4500 Australian citizens away from the building which raises important questions of whether Australia's parliamentarians really fear their constituents this much and, if so, why?

By one estimate Australia's Commonwealth politicians have spent more than \$1m each on upgrading their security inside Parliament House since 9/11 in 2001, with the recent round of upgrades alone costing over \$500,000 for each member of our literally-treasured political elite.

This was the building originally designed to illustrate that the people were more important than the politicians.

It is noteworthy that our politicians have not extended this essential protection to other national institutions in Canberra such as the High Court, War Memorial or even the Treasury. Is this a failure of leadership in the face of the enemy, or just a demonstration of self-centred cowardice where Australia's heroic leaders have seen fit to vandalise the nation's premier symbol of democracy for their own benefit? What does it say about how they value their own worth as MPs by comparison with, relatively, the value of the High Court judges?

Indeed, it could be concluded from this that Australians more broadly have stood firm in the face of terrorism whilst the nation's leaders have allowed themselves to be so intimidated by Osama Bin Laden and his mates that they were prepared to sacrifice those for whom they are responsible along with the Australian way of life to preserve their safety and wellbeing.

ENDS Part 2

(Part 1 discusses 'The Fortress' that Australia's Parliament House has become).

(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.