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**Extension of Counter-terrorism laws: An attack on the Australian way of life**

**Community representatives today declared proposed changes to counter-terrorism legislation an attack on Australian democratic freedoms.** The Federation of Community Legal Centres, the peak body for 49 Victorian community legal centres, said the Prime Minister has not demonstrated how this assault on our democratic freedoms and liberties, and a restriction on citizenship rights, will keep Australians safe.

Australia already has one of the most extreme counter-terrorism regimes in the world. There are over 27 pieces of far reaching and comprehensive counter-terrorism legislation in place. Current counter-terrorism laws are currently under review by a Parliamentary Committee. Others are due to be reviewed within the year.

“This legislation should be subject to strict review because it gives the Federal government extraordinary powers with little provision for public scrutiny”, says Vicki Sentas, Federation of Community Legal Centres spokesperson, “The Federation calls on the Federal Government to not proceed with any new legislation until the reviews are complete and the reports have been made public.”

**There a number of concerning aspects of the proposed extensions of the law.**

**Control Orders and Detention**

The proposal to place a person under a control order so that they are required to wear a tracking device, or to place a person in preventative detention for 14 days because of something they may do, has the potential to vest the authorities with a broad discretion to target the liberties of individuals, and to discriminate against particular communities. “These proposals also raise serious questions about the scope of Commonwealth power to detain people who have not been charged with or convicted of any offence,” says Patrick Emerton, Legal Academic from Monash University.

**Financing Terrorist Organisations**

The proposal to strengthen existing offences is hard to reconcile with the existing laws. For example, providing or collecting funds for use in a terrorist act already carries a life sentence as a maximum penalty. How will the government strengthen this particular offence?

**Creation of new offences**

“In relation to the proposed offence to create new offences for leaving baggage unattended in an airport precinct, the Federation believes that this proposal has the potential to criminalise mere forgetfulness,” argues Dan Nicholson, from the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

It is already an offence in Australia to threaten political violence, punishable by life imprisonment. The Prime Minister suggests that creating a new offence will address problems with those who communicate messages against Australia’s forces overseas. Would this mean that it would become a criminal offence to participate in an anti-war protest ?

**Citizenship restrictions**

Finally, the liberal character of Australia's citizenship laws should be a matter of national pride. It marks a strong contrast between Australia's open multicultural policy and the exclusivity of many other countries. "To restrict citizenship rights, and to broaden the grounds on which citizenship can be stripped from people, would be to threaten a return to a narrow and discriminatory immigration policy," says Patrick Emerton, Legal Academic from Monash University.

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