**US surveillance scandal just the tip of the iceberg**

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**Chris Berg**

Americans are living in a vast security state ... and it has to stop.

Security contractor Edward Snowden. *Photo: AFP*More than a decade after the September 11 attacks, the US is having a debate about its

monstrous national security apparatus. Finally.

In that time, Congress has granted every wish of every security agency. The only condition was those wishes had to be connected, however vaguely, to the war on terror.

Last week, Americans learned the result. They now live in a vast surveillance state run by secretive intelligence bureaucracies and bloated private contractors.

We should care about this, too. Australia's national security agencies are pushing our Parliament down the same path.

Here is what we know so far about the American scandal. For the past seven years, the US government has been secretly hoovering up records of millions of phone calls. It has been able to gain access to enormous amounts of data from companies such as Google, Facebook and Yahoo on their users. For its legal authority, it relies on the rubber stamp of a secret court.

Those companies targeted are forbidden from discussing what is going on. **In March, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper explicitly denied to Congress that the program even existed.**

As one Democrat who received a classified briefing this week said, the public has only seen the ''tip of the iceberg''.

Australia has not gotten quite that bad. But every policy change goes one way - towards more state power.

The Attorney-General's Department wants Parliament to approve a suite of new security powers. This would include a massive data retention scheme, where records of all our internet usage would be kept by internet providers just in case we are later suspected of committing a crime.



The government is not transparent about what exactly these new powers would entail, or what they are supposed to solve. We have to piece together disparate pieces of information to figure out what our own government is doing.

For instance, we learned in February our foreign spy agency ASIS has been lobbying politicians for permission to collect intelligence on Australian citizens. But that is already the job of the domestic agency, ASIO. Why does ASIS want this power? It is not clear.

Earlier this year, we learned Australian bureaucracies are accessing phone and internet records nearly 1000 times a week without a warrant. Even the RSPCA can get access to these records. Yes, that RSPCA, the animal group.

And it is almost certain the American program has been been collecting data on Australians. Parts of the program give moderate privacy protections to American citizens but nothing to people ''reasonably believed to be outside the United States''. It is unclear how involved Australian agencies are. We know British agencies have been, but Canberra won't disclose anything.

This madness has to stop. The national security state has grown too big. It is too unaccountable. It is fundamentally undemocratic.

When the Attorney-General's office was questioned about its surveillance activities, a spokesman replied it was the ''long-standing practice of successive Australian governments not to comment on national security and intelligence capabilities''.

Such blithe dismissals might have worked in the past. But after what we have seen in the US, there is no longer a reason to give government any benefit of the doubt.

Nobody denies that law enforcement must keep up with the times. Nobody denies terrorism is a real and ongoing concern. But the past decade has seen security agencies use these two facts as leverage for unprecedented funding and power - far out of proportion to the technological problems they are worried about.

Security agencies have an advantage in the political game. They are a black box - opaque and secretive. It is easy to convince politicians they would be endangering lives if Parliament did not grant some new power, or if checks and balances were not relaxed a little bit more.

The agencies are helped by national security apologists, who seem more worried about loyalty to the state than any democratic accountability.

The first reaction of the conservative columnist David Brooks to the US scandal was to surmise that the person who exposed it - 29-year-old security contractor Edward Snowden - was just the product of an overly individualistic society. OK, one of the biggest surveillance programs in history is revealed, and Brooks concludes the real issue is young people?

Columnists say the darndest things. But Brooks' is not a lone voice. There is an active discussion in the US about Snowden's motives, his girlfriend and whether he has committed ''treason''.

Some perspective, please. Snowden's character is irrelevant to the question of how powerful security agencies should be in a free country. Those who try to play down, dismiss or deflect

this scandal are simply the willing tools of state power.

Just as despicable is the claim (heard occasionally from the left) that citizens have abandoned their right to privacy by handing personal information to companies. Talk about blaming the victim. We share stuff on Facebook, so it's our fault the government is out of control?

The surveillance scandal is an important moment. Even the most gung-ho conservatives in the US are having second thoughts about the national security state.

Let's hope that scepticism trickles down to Australia.

**Chris Berg is a research fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs. Twitter: @chrisberg**

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