**Q + A**

**Episode 4**

**DR JOHN COYNE**

**Interviewed by Corin Dann**

**JOHN** Look, there’s always a number of factors that contribute to successful terrorist attacks. In this case, I think that had the New Zealand Government adopted the gun laws that had been used in Australia since the dreadful Tasmanian attack at Port Arthur, that were introduced by the Australian Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, I think that this attack would have looked very, very different.

**CORIN** And this is because there are no semi-automatic weapons in Australia since that ban?

**JOHN** That’s exactly right. I mean, there’s a saying amongst many very senior law enforcement officials here in Australia that even the crooks have bad guns in this country. Those who are looking to get semi-automatic weapons through the illegal economy, they quickly bubble up and to the attention of law enforcement and intelligence officials. I don’t think, unfortunately, the same case can be made for New Zealand.

**CORIN** So, your message to the gun lobby and those wishing to preserve the laws in New Zealand is that changing the laws to the way they are in Australia would make a difference?

**JOHN** I think this is very, very clear that they would and have made a difference in Australia. Many nations in western liberal democracies now look towards Australia and what we’ve done in terms of gun ownership. And this is not to say that it’s anti-gun. What has happened is assault weapons and semi-automatic weapons have been removed from private citizens who don’t have a reason to hold them. Unfortunately, that has seen the demise of certain types of sporting activities and competitions. However, the community is safer, and we no longer, in this country, in Australia, have serial or spree killings involving weapons.

**CORIN** Should the security services – in New Zealand, but also potentially in Australia, given the suspect was Australian – should he have been picked up by the security services, the intelligence services?

**JOHN** Look, I want to sit there and assure you and those people who are watching this programme – having worked with your agencies, both law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and been part for almost a quarter of a century of the Australian agencies in this case, I want to say that on both sides of the ditch, I can guarantee that law enforcement officials and intelligence officials worked hard – and they do so all the time – to prevent these types of attacks. There will be a large number of those officials who will be poring over the details as they become available in this specific case of Tarrant, wishing that they had have of disrupted his attack. The question of whether or not they could have – well, look, it is an incredibly difficult environment that our intelligence and security agencies work in. They receive a great volume of reporting, and it’s increasing all the time, and it’s very difficult online to identify the difference between a young person who is sprouting absolute rubbish online versus someone who has bought into such a horrible, vilifying dogma as Tarrant has. So it was a very difficult task, and I’d hate to be able to sit there and say, ‘Yes, it could’ve been prevented by better intelligence.’ What I’d say is that our agencies – be they policing or be they national security – can always do more with more money and can always do more with more laws. But what we have to do is ask ourselves – have we struck the right balance between freedom of speech and security? And on this occasion, it would’ve been better to see this sort of attack not occur.

**CORIN** In your experience as a security expert, are you seeing a rise of extreme-right activity online?

**JOHN** I think that we’re seeing it online. The question is... I guess, over the last 30 years in Australia – well, in fact, throughout our history, almost since the time of the first arrival here in Australia – we’ve seen various nationalist and white supremacist groups come and go. In the ’80s, we saw a gentleman called Jack van Tongeren who was involved in firebombing five Chinese restaurants in Australia – ended up serving time. In the 1990s, we saw the rise of a right-wing militia group called the AUSI Freedom Scouts. We’ve seen numerous other groups arise and fall, but they tend to have a very small membership. The problem of today is that these small, hard-core number of right-wing extremists now have the benefits of social media that we all have and are able to hook up globally into a global network, and they’re able to create their own echo chambers where they spread their own poisonous message to each other – and the whole time, egging each other on. So unfortunately, I think that there is a real potential for the problem that has been around for a long time – white supremacy and right-wing extremism – to continue to become an issue for security agencies.

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