

Australian establishment falls into line with anti-China allegations

By James Cogan
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Australia's political parties are rushing to call for action against "Chinese power and influence" in the country, in response to a sensationalist investigation by the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Fairfax Media newspapers.

On Monday night, the ABC's "Four Corners" current affairs program was devoted to airing the "serious concerns" of the Australian and American intelligence agencies. The program presented donations, made by corporations owned by two Chinese billionaires, to the governing Liberal Party and opposition Labor Party, as a clandestine attempt by the Chinese government to purchase influence within Australia's corridors of power.

The activities of organisations and research bodies, established to promote closer Australian-Chinese relations, as well as those of Chinese student associations, were also portrayed in the most sinister light.

Yesterday, Attorney General George Brandis announced that the government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was drawing up legislation to strengthen Australia's "espionage and foreign interference laws." In a statement, Brandis asserted: "The threat of political interference by foreign intelligence services is a problem of the highest order and it is getting worse."

Turnbull declared: "China should always respect the sovereignty of other nations, including, of course, our own."

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten declared that Labor would never again accept donations linked to the two Chinese businessmen, whom "Four Corners" insinuated, without any substantive evidence, were stalking horses for the Chinese state apparatus—Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing.

The minor parliamentary parties have joined in the hysteria.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce—head of the rural-based National Party that governs in coalition with the Liberals—told the ABC that changes should be made to Australia's laws allowing foreign-owned corporations to make political donations. "If people are buying influence in our nation, well, we can't abide by that in any shape or form

from any country, not just China, any country."

Cory Bernardi, who split from the Liberals to form the Australian Conservatives earlier this year, demanded the establishment of a royal commission, with sweeping powers. A commission should investigate "evidence of foreign state actors in domestic political activities," Bernardi insisted. "Some of that relates to China, but why limit it to China if more evidence is there?"

Despite such remarks, there have been no lurid media accounts concerning donations made to Liberal and Labor by American transnationals, or those from countries apart from China. Nor are concerns being raised over the massive injections of cash they receive each year from the major Australian banks and companies, which count among their largest shareholders some of the most powerful American and British investment funds.

The sole concern of the intelligence agencies, such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), is the possibility that Australian politics will be influenced by Chinese-linked sources. The ABC and Fairfax Media are serving as the direct conduits of these spy agencies.

The media investigation, or more accurately anti-Chinese propaganda campaign, is unfolding amid rising geo-political tensions. The provocative efforts of the US and its allies, including Australia, to challenge and undermine Beijing's strategic and economic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, is generating the undeniable danger of a major war in the region. Most significantly, the prospect exists that the Trump administration will order the massive US military force, which is currently deployed to the Korean peninsula, to launch a pre-emptive assault on North Korea, a Chinese ally, over its refusal to end its nuclear and missile weapons' programs.

Australian imperialism, through its military alliance with the US, provides key basing arrangements for the latter's Pacific forces, while hosting crucial communications and spying bases such as Pine Gap. It would be drawn immediately into a second Korean War, or direct conflict

with China.

In this context, the military-intelligence apparatus in both countries, along with powerful sections of the ruling elites, have two major concerns.

Firstly, they fear that the emergence of China as Australia's largest export market and trading partner, has spawned a constituency in business and politics that opposes the US-led build-up toward war with Beijing, and is calling for a shift in Australian foreign policy away from its alignment with Washington.

Secondly, and the cause of even greater alarm, decades of brutal wars and interventions by American imperialism have generated widespread opposition within the Australian population to US foreign policy. This sentiment has only burgeoned since the election of Donald Trump as president, and his ever-more bellicose and unpredictable "America First" militarism and nationalism.

A recent survey conducted in Australia, Japan, China, India, Indonesia and South Korea by the US Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney—a body explicitly established to promote support for the US-Australia alliance—generated politically significant results.

The USSC findings in Australia include:

- * 72 percent believe China has the most influence in Asia, while only 11 percent named the US

- * 61 percent think the Trump administration will have a "negative" impact on the Indo-Pacific region

- * Just 40 percent believe the US has a "positive" influence on Australia, one of the lowest rates in all the surveyed countries, while 32 percent rated it as "negative"

- * Only 18 percent believe the US does "more good than harm" across the region, compared with 31 percent who think it does "more harm"

- * 19 percent nominated the US as the country most likely to "cause a conflict" in the region, less than the 13 percent who selected China. In the current political climate, North Korea was selected by 51 percent.

Such sentiments lie behind the transparent attempt, orchestrated by the intelligence agencies, university think tanks such as the USSC, and sections of the media, to generate suspicion and hostility toward China. Efforts are underway to brand any opposition to US military provocations, over issues such as North Korea and the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as support for the Chinese regime.

Yesterday's intervention by recently retired US director of national security, James Clapper, simply underscored the key role of Washington in this campaign. Clapper, speaking at the National Press Club, asserted that China in Australia, and Russia in the US, were "seeking ways to influence using many techniques; diplomatic, economic, military that they

haven't done before.... It's focused here, it's focused regionally and focused globally."

In both the US and Australia, the campaign over Russian and Chinese "interference" is laced with anti-communist overtones reminiscent of the Cold War.

The ABC is plumbing the depths in its efforts to promote an Australian nationalist backlash against China. Its website features today an article that insinuates Chinese citizens view Australia with contempt because the country is sometimes described on Chinese-language social media with two characters that, used together, translate as Australia being an unspoiled or tranquil place. Taken separately, the characters translate literally as "Earth" [?] and "Australia" [?].

The article, however, suggests that these characters are used by nationalistic Chinese speakers to convey that they regard Australia as economically backward and socially uncultured.

Such commentary dovetails with a campaign to portray many of the one million Australian citizens of Chinese descent, as well as the 140,000 Chinese students studying in the country, as a potential fifth column, loyal to a "foreign power."

The Chinese-speaking community can expect to be subjected to far closer monitoring and scrutiny by the country's intelligence agencies in the coming period, using the sweeping surveillance powers that have been extended to them on the pretext of combatting "terrorism."

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