

Australian government plans anti-democratic laws on pretext of Chinese “sub-espionage”

By Oscar Grenfell
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An “exclusive” in the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers last Friday reported that the Australian government is preparing a “once in a generation shake-up” of espionage laws, on the McCarthyite pretext of combating “clandestine Chinese Communist Party influence over politics in this country.”

The article, which provides no evidence for its hysterical warnings of a Chinese “communist” plot to undermine Australian democracy, reads like a press release by the government or the country’s intelligence agencies to promote the planned legislation.

Attorney-General George Brandis and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the main domestic spy agency, appear to be the only sources for the story.

The headline of the article declares: “George Brandis considers new laws cracking down on Chinese spying in Australia.”

The article, however, states the legislation will target “sub-espionage.” In the Orwellian double-speak of the intelligence agencies, adopted uncritically by Fairfax Media, “sub-espionage” has nothing to do with spying or espionage. It covers political donations, lobbying and the funding of research projects and think-tanks.

The proposed laws have not been detailed anywhere, except in sketchy outline in the Fairfax report. Yet the *Sydney Morning Herald* followed up with an editorial yesterday hailing the planned legislation. It said there was “good reason to toughen and update protections against foreign interference,” but repeated the previous vague talking points about “sub-espionage.”

The repeated anti-China witch-hunts over the past year have been aimed at creating an intimidating and jingoistic atmosphere, in which any opponent of Australia’s alignment with US preparations for war against Beijing can be labelled a “foreign agent.”

On at least three occasions in the past 12 months, series of articles have appeared in the press, seemingly out of the blue, warning of the imminent dangers posed by “Chinese

interference” in Australian politics.

Each time, the reports have been based on hazy allegations emanating from the intelligence agencies, which have sought to present political lobbying, corporate investment and research with any nominal connection to China, in the most alarming manner.

These coordinated campaigns have coincided with an escalation of military tensions in the Asia-Pacific region and growing threat of war with North Korea, a formal ally of China. They have been accompanied by calls for greater repressive powers for ASIO and other agencies.

The latest Fairfax report was preceded by articles denouncing Chinese students and university research projects last week. It was published amid repeated declarations by the Trump administration that it is prepared to “totally destroy” North Korea.

These threats to commit a war crime of the highest magnitude, which could rapidly develop into a broader nuclear conflagration, have been backed by the entire Australian political establishment, including the government and the Labor Party opposition.

This support for Trump’s bellicose stance is of a piece with Australia’s integration into the US “pivot to Asia,” a massive military build-up in preparation for conflict with China, launched by the Obama administration in 2011. Since then, Australia has been ever-more deeply integrated into the US war machine.

Significantly, Fairfax reported that Brandis travelled to Washington in July, and “was briefed by US national security officials about introducing US style ‘foreign agent’ laws into Australia.”

His visit coincided with a series of Australian public appearances by high-profile representatives of the US military and intelligence establishment, including Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain, and former National Intelligence director James Clapper.

Each insisted that Australia must remain committed to the US alliance, despite Trump’s reckless foreign policies and America First demagoguery. Their visits were directed against

any wavering by sections of the corporate and financial elite who are concerned that Australia's alignment with the US drive to war in Asia threatens its trade relations with China. McCain and Clapper both warned of "Chinese influence" in Australian politics.

As the Fairfax report notes, Brandis' trip shortly followed a series of Fairfax Media-Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) "investigative" reports, warning that "Australian sovereignty" was "under threat from the influence of China's Communist Party."

The suggestion in the article, however, that Brandis' "concerns" were triggered by these reports is misleading. The Fairfax-ABC reports presented no evidence for their hysterical claims and included many contradictions. For instance, among the individuals named in a Fairfax-ABC list of "Chinese donors" to political parties was Chau Chak Wing, an Australian citizen for 20 years. Others included a Hong Kong-born Catholic businessman, and a Taiwanese-born supporter of the pro-independence movement that is opposed to Beijing.

In reality, the record shows that the ABC-Fairfax series was little more than a propaganda exercise aimed at creating the political conditions for the government to press ahead with sweeping attacks on civil liberties.

According to Fairfax, the measures being planned by the government include the "modernising" of treason laws and the expansion of measures targeting the "theft" of trade secrets. The laws are also slated to create a public "Foreign Agents register, modelled on the US system."

The US Foreign Agents Registration Act, created in 1938, was part of a broader campaign to demonise and persecute opponents of US militarism in the lead-up to World War II, on the pretext they were agents of a "foreign power."

The 1938 law has been used in the current anti-Russia campaign spearheaded by the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies, which is aimed at forcing the Trump administration to adopt a more aggressive stance toward Moscow, and cracking down on civil liberties.

This month, associates of "Russia Today," a Moscow-funded broadcaster that has been denounced for reporting on mounting social inequality in the US, attacks on democratic rights, and the drive to war, were instructed to register as "foreign agents" under the act.

The Fairfax report indicated that the proposed Australian legislation would be used in a similarly draconian and repressive manner.

The article denounced the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China, a lobby group of Chinese-Australians, for standing candidates in recent New South Wales local council elections. It warned against the sponsorship of a think-tank by a Chinese

businessman, and repeated baseless claims that the funding of university research projects by Chinese individuals and businesses constitutes "interference" in the Australian political process.

After presenting this list of activities, which include individuals exercising basic democratic rights, Fairfax menacingly stated: "Australian intelligence agencies have been frustrated about their inability to prosecute or deter those involved in such activities under laws designed to deal with traditional Cold War style espionage."

Fairfax repeated accusations that universities were facing, "attacks on academic independence by nationalist Chinese students or government-aligned student societies."

These claims of bullying, which were advanced last week by China Matters, a think-tank with close ties to the Australian government, are without foundation. They are an attempt to present minor disputes between Chinese students and academics, allegedly over how Chinese foreign policy is presented, as a coordinated campaign to stifle debate.

The implication of the argument is that it is illegitimate for the more than 170,000 Chinese students studying in Australia to advance political positions that conflict with the Australian government, and its plans for war with China.

In another clear indication that the new laws will threaten basic political and democratic rights, Fairfax said they will "include new offences to protect confidential government information against leaks such as those involving Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning."

Snowden has been persecuted for exposing the vast surveillance operation conducted by the US National Security Agency, and its partners in the Five Eyes program, including Australia, against the world's population. Manning was sent to prison for leaking evidence of war crimes in the US-led military interventions in the Middle East and internationally.

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