

Australian government launches ‘foreign interference’ taskforce

By Mike Head
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Under pressure from Washington and beset by legislative setbacks and scandals, the Liberal-National Coalition government responded this week by announcing a \$90 million police and intelligence taskforce to launch prosecutions of alleged foreign agents.

While acting as a diversion from the government’s turmoil and underlying political crisis, the announcement was clearly made to meet demands, echoed throughout the corporate media, for “scalps” to be produced under the “foreign interference” legislation pushed through parliament last year with the opposition Labor Party’s support. No one has yet been prosecuted under the laws, which carry penalties of up to 20 years’ imprisonment.

“This taskforce to counter foreign interference is about identifying it, disrupting and prosecuting,” Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared at a media conference on Monday, flanked by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who is in charge of the security and border protection apparatus.

Coming amid a barrage of hysterical accusations by the US-connected spy agencies, media outlets and politicians about alleged Chinese interference in Australia, the announcement is firstly targeted against anyone linked to China. It is designed to help create a political climate of fear and anxiety in which war preparations and military spending can be ramped up.

Lurid and unsubstantiated accusations about alleged “Chinese spies” are being planted in the media, trying to paint a picture of a bid by Beijing to take over Australia. The most dubious claims by supposed Chinese defectors about the infiltration of the Liberal Party are being splashed across headlines.

It goes without saying that the media and political establishment remains completely silent about the chief source of foreign interference in Australian politics—the United States. Washington has a long history of intervening, including as part of the ousting of two Labor

prime ministers—Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010.

With US President Donald Trump escalating his administration’s trade and economic confrontation with China, the demand for the imprisonment or deportation of “Chinese agents” represents a far-reaching threat to basic democratic rights.

Those in the immediate line of fire include Chinese business people, lobbyists and those politicians who have concerns about the potential damage to Australia’s lucrative exports to China. More broadly, some 1.2 million citizens or residents of Chinese descent are being placed under suspicion.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have warned, the “foreign interference” laws contain sweeping powers and offences, ranging from treason, sabotage, advocating mutiny and breaching official secrecy, to failing to register as a “foreign agent.” All could be used to criminalise dissent and anti-war activity. The outlawed activities could extend to anyone opposing involvement in a US-led military confrontation with China.

At the press conference, Morrison boasted that Australia was setting the precedent for similar anti-democratic laws in other countries. “As I move around at various international fora, one of the key issues that other leaders raise with me is they inquire into how Australia has been able to move so successfully in both identifying, calling out and taking action to counter foreign interference,” he said. “Australia is seen as a world leader in this area.”

How closely this issue is being monitored by the US political and media establishment was displayed by a headline in the *Wall Street Journal*: “Spooked by China, Australia Creates Task Force to Thwart Foreign Interference.”

The article said the recently-appointed new Australian

Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) chief, Mike Burgess, had told the newspaper: “Hostile foreign-intelligence activity continues to pose a real threat to our nation and its security.”

A senior officer from ASIO, the domestic spy agency, will lead the high-level taskforce. It will bring together investigators from the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the money-tracking agency, Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC), the electronic surveillance force, the Australian Signals Directorate, and the satellite intelligence unit, the Australian Geospatial Intelligence Organisation.

Both Morrison and Dutton will be involved personally. The Office of National Intelligence, which sits in the prime minister’s department, will “support the taskforce,” along with the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator established last year in the Department of Home Affairs.

“This is an \$87.8 million investment into our agencies,” Dutton emphasised, on top of \$38.8 million already “invested” since 2018–19 to set up a Foreign Interference Threat Assessment Centre within ASIO and support criminal prosecutions.

The police-state apparatus, assembled under the banner of the “war on terrorism” since 2001, is being expanded. Morrison added: “Since we came to government, we have put in an additional \$3.1 billion into ASIO and AFP to deal with the many threats that Australia faces, including this one [‘foreign interference’].”

Sections of the media and political establishment have gone into overdrive to condition public opinion for wartime-like measures. The *Australian* said the taskforce would “put the country on a virtual war footing to combat national security threats from an unprecedented level of foreign interference and espionage.”

On Nine Media platforms, *Sydney Morning Herald* political and international editor Peter Hartcher wrote: “The Morrison government finally is putting some teeth into the gummy mouth of Australia’s foreign interference laws.” He declared: “The Chinese Communist Party is an authoritarian political project that will continue to expand its covert and coercive power in Australia unless and until it meets resistance.”

Hartcher demanded more. “Congratulations, Prime Minister,” he wrote. “But does your government have the political will to follow through in the implementation?” He set six urgent “tests,” at a “minimum,” for the government, such as “whether we see arrests, prosecutions, deportations of people engaged in the

subversion and coercion that is occurring against our country.” Other “tests” were subjecting all new members of parliament to ASIO “security screening,” targeting “hundreds” of supposed Chinese “United Front” associations among Chinese-Australians and “screening” out Chinese visitors and immigrants.

One of the most vitriolic interventions came from Senator Jacqui Lambie, an “independent” right-wing populist. Speaking in the Senate on Tuesday night, she accused the government and Labor of lacking the “courage” to confront Chinese interference. “What are you scared of?” she demanded. “This is an existential threat to our society, and Australians are scared.”

Lambie backed calls, led by “Centre Alliance” Senator, Rex Patrick, to establish an inquiry into Australia’s relationship with China. For now, the Coalition and Labor oppose such an inquiry for fear of losing export markets in China, on which the Australian economy depends heavily.

However, the Labor Party, which is totally committed to the US military alliance, has aligned itself with the anti-China crusade. In parliament on Monday, Labor MP Tim Watts accused the government of not doing enough to crack down on Chinese social media platforms, such as Tiktok, which he claimed, without providing any evidence, were being used for “foreign influence operations” and “even electoral interference.”

The entire ruling establishment is anxiously seeking means to suppress rising social and political discontent amid worsening economic conditions, escalating social inequality and the mounting danger of war. At the same time, key sections of the political and intelligence elite are trying to divert this disaffection in reactionary and dangerous nationalist directions, particularly directed against China.

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