

Australia's US-backed anti-China witch hunt escalates with raid on MP's home

By Mike Head
27 June 2020

After months of pressure from Washington, the Australian government took its anti-China campaign to a new level in Sydney yesterday, orchestrating raids on a Labor Party member of parliament's home and office.

The operation is a further step towards branding anyone as a "foreign agent"—basically a traitor—who calls into question the political establishment's line up with the Trump administration's mounting diplomatic and military offensive against Beijing.

Personally authorised by Attorney-General Christian Porter, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers made the first major public use of "foreign interference" legislation that the Liberal-National government pushed through parliament—with the complete backing of the opposition Labor Party—in 2018.

With TV cameras filming, they conducted a dawn raid on the home of a New South Wales (NSW) state upper house member of parliament, Shaoquett Moselmane, followed by a similar ransacking of his parliamentary office and a day-long questioning of him.

It was a large-scale operation. A dozen plain-clothed federal agents raided Moselmane's house at Rockdale, in Sydney's south, at 6.30 a.m. and began conducting an extensive search. An hour later, six forensics officers arrived. At 9 a.m., detectives searched three cars outside Moselmane's house.

By noon, Moselmane had arrived at his office at NSW Parliament House with his lawyer, to be questioned by ASIO. Men in suits were filmed hovering around the office's entrance, accompanied by NSW police officers. Reportedly, the home and business address of Moselmane's part-time staff member John Zhang were also the subject of a search warrant.

No charges have even been laid, but Prime Minister Scott Morrison immediately backed the raids, underscoring the government's direct involvement, and prejudicing any chance of a fair trial in the event of a "foreign interference" prosecution. The presumption of innocence has been

blatantly violated.

Morrison said he had been briefed on the raids the night before they were carried out. He declared that the raids, by themselves, demonstrated that the threat of foreign interference is "real" and "extremely serious."

"The government is absolutely determined to ensure that nobody interferes with Australia's activities," Morrison said, clearly pointing the finger at China. "We won't cop anyone coming and seeking to interfere in our political system, in our energy sector, in any area of perceived area of opportunity for an outside actor."

The Labor Party was just as quick to denounce Moselmane. NSW Labor leader Jodi McKay confirmed she was aware of the raids, and that the party would suspend Moselmane's party membership. She described the unsubstantiated reports that Chinese government agents had infiltrated his office as "dreadfully concerning" and "terrible."

Both McKay and federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese were briefed by ASIO and the AFP yesterday. Labor's shadow attorney-general, Mark Dreyfus, pledged Labor's support, saying foreign interference was "a real and growing threat that we take very seriously."

Blazing headlines and double-page spreads dominate today's newspapers, carrying sensationalist headlines such as "ASIO chases Chinese agents in the House" (the *Australian*) and "The Enemy Within" (the *Daily Telegraph*). Nine Entertainment's *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* have led the media campaign, with a "special" promised for the network's "60 Minutes" program on Sunday evening.

The raids against Moselmane are a direct threat to the basic right to free speech. Moselmane, a Muslim MP who represents an area of Sydney with a large Chinese population, has hardly hidden his views. He has made speeches, including in state parliament, calling into question Australia's unequivocal alignment behind the intensifying US conflict with China, opposing the foreign interference laws as an anti-China witch hunt and crediting China's swift response to the COVID-19 pandemic with saving lives

globally.

Such views are held far more widely than Moselmane. The WSWS has basic political differences with him, and the entire Labor machine. But his persecution opens up to ASIO-AFP raids and potential prosecution anyone who voices anti-war views, opposition to the draconian foreign interference laws or criticism of the Trump administration's attempts to divert attention from its homicidal response to the pandemic by accusing China of letting the coronavirus loose on the world.

Likewise, Moselmane is being blackguarded because his own parliamentary register of interests records that he has visited China nine times since he entered parliament in 2009 and is the honorary chair of the Australian Shanghainese Association and a member of the Australian Chinese Association. Such visits and memberships are common throughout Australia's 1.2 million people of Chinese descent.

These allegations highlight the anti-democratic content of the foreign interference laws. Under the deliberately vague wording of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act, anyone who supposedly cooperates with a "foreign" group, including international organisations, must register with the government, which can then hand extensive information over to the intelligence and prosecution agencies.

Anyone who fails to register can be charged with an offence under the parallel Espionage and Foreign Interference Act, punishable by up to 20 years' jail, for "covertly" collaborating with an overseas group or individual to seek political change.

As the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have warned, these laws contain sweeping offences, ranging from treason to breaching official secrecy and collaborating with a "foreign" organisation. These provisions could be used to criminalise whistle-blowing and other political dissent, including opposing Australian involvement in a US-led military conflict with China.

When Morrison's predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull, worked with Labor to ram through this legislation in 2018, without any public debate, it was regarded by Washington's political elite and military-intelligence apparatus as a global precedent for suppressing any dissent over US preparations for war against China to reassert American hegemony.

For the past year, Morrison's government has been scrambling to respond to criticism from Washington and its partners in the Australian spy and military agencies that the legislation has not been used. Last December, the government announced a \$90 million AFP-intelligence taskforce to pursue prosecutions and in February, ASIO chief Mike Burgess gave a rare public speech, vowing to instigate prosecutions.

Now, according to the Nine network newspapers, citing "multiple sources aware of the foreign interference investigation," the move against Moselmane "could ultimately result in an Australian and world first: a prosecution for foreign interference offences arising from an alleged covert Chinese Communist Party plot to influence a serving politician."

Just last week, Morrison and his ministers ratcheted up their part in the US aggression against China by accusing Beijing, without any evidence, of conducting "cyber attacks" and online "disinformation" operations against Australia.

Increasingly, unsubstantiated accusations about alleged "Chinese spies" are being regurgitated in the corporate media, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, to paint a picture of a bid by Beijing to actually take over Australia.

The same media and political establishment remain silent about the primary source of foreign interference in Australian politics—the United States. As whistle-blower documents published by Julian Assange on WikiLeaks and earlier disclosures by Christopher Boyce have proven, Washington has a record of interventions, including in the ousting of two Labor prime ministers—Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010. Neither Whitlam nor Rudd were opponents of the US alliance, but they were seen by US governments as insufficiently reliable in enforcing it.

Today, the Trump administration is insisting that the Australian government step up its involvement in the US conflict with China, including by providing greater access to military bases and strengthening the US-led "Five Eyes" worldwide surveillance and cyber-warfare network.

Morrison's government is also seeking to divert, in a reactionary nationalist and anti-Chinese direction, the deepening working class unrest over mass unemployment, falling living standards and soaring social inequality, all magnified by the global COVID-19 disaster.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>