

Australian intelligence agencies raided Chinese journalists in June

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Chinese government and press revealed yesterday that four journalists employed by the country's state media outlets were subjected to police raids and interrogation by Australian intelligence agencies in late June.

They also exposed the fact that two Chinese nationals, who are well-known academics, had their visas cancelled at the recommendation of the Australian Intelligence and Security Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency, and that several journalists left the country after ASIO interrogations.

Taken together, the revelations underscore a dramatic deterioration of relations between Australia and China. This has taken place in the context of the Australian political and media establishment's fulsome support for a major escalation of US diplomatic, economic and military provocations against Beijing this year.

The Trump administration has intensified the anti-China campaign initiated under Democratic Party President Barack Obama, aimed at ensuring US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Its Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has made bellicose statements, indicating that the US position on China amounts to regime-change, and has encouraged further moves against supposed "Chinese influence" abroad, including in Australia.

The ASIO raids have underscored the anti-democratic and repressive character of Australia's "foreign interference" laws, passed in 2018 by the Liberal-National government and the Labor Party and hailed by the Trump administration as a model to be emulated internationally. The legislation, particularly directed against China, creates the conditions for criminal prosecutions of individuals and groups connected to any "foreign principal."

It was introduced amid a frenzied campaign from the political and media establishment, along with the US-connected intelligence agencies, alleging without any evidence pervasive "Chinese interference" in Australian politics, and virtually every aspect of society. The raids on the Chinese nationals were only made public by Chinese media, in response to reports this week that two Australian journalists hastily departed Beijing on the advice of the Australian government.

Media reports, and a government statement, initially suggested that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Bill Birtles and the *Australian Financial Review's* Mike Smith had

been in imminent danger of detention and even prosecution by Chinese authorities.

Comments by Birtles since he arrived back in Australia have painted a more complicated picture. He wrote that last week he had been told by the Australian embassy that he should leave China post haste. At the time, Birtles "didn't want to leave. I felt safe and things seemed normal."

It was only on Wednesday night last week, hours before Birtles was to leave China that police officers knocked on his door and requested an interview. The next morning, he went to the Australian embassy, at his own initiative, to seek advice. Only then did Australian officials instruct him not to leave the embassy grounds. Smith also stayed in the building for several days. According to the reports, the only condition placed on the two journalists by China was that they consent to an interview before leaving the country.

From Birtles' statements, a murky picture emerges, with a distinct hint that what could have been a relatively minor, but unpleasant matter for the journalists involved, was deliberately transformed into a major international incident by the Australian authorities. When Birtles and Smith left China this week, they had not been detained or arrested by the police at any point. Birtles wrote that he "had become a pawn in a much bigger diplomatic stoush."

Birtles and Smith were reportedly questioned by Chinese police about Cheng Lei, a news anchor for Chinese state media's CGTN network. She was detained in mid-August, in an investigation into unspecified "criminal activities endangering China's national security." Cheng is an Australian citizen. For whatever reason, though, the response to her imprisonment by the Australian government and corporate press has been decidedly muted.

The reports by Chinese state media yesterday, revealing the raids against some of their representatives in Australia, were clearly aimed at pointing to the hypocrisy of the Australian government and media statements of outrage over the questioning of Birtles and Smith.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian provided details of the Australian police operations. The four Chinese journalists had been raided on June 26. Their laptops had been seized "and even children's tablets and electronic

toys for their kids.” They were employed by Xinhua News Agency, China Media Group and China News Service.

Zhao added: “As we understand, the Australian side hasn’t provided any reasonable explanation so far for searching and hasn’t returned all the seized items to our journalists.” He demanded that the Australian government end “such blatant irrational behaviours, stop harassing and oppressing Chinese personnel in Australia under whatever pretext.”

The June 26 police action took place the same day as ASIO agents and federal police officers raided the Sydney home and office of Shaoquett Moselmane, a little-known Labor Party backbencher in the upper house of the New South Wales state parliament. Details of the raid were leaked to the press, who duly camped outside Moselmane’s house before it occurred and then wrote lurid articles presenting him as a patsy, or worse, of the “Chinese Communist Party.”

Moselmane, who was immediately suspended from the party by Labor’s leadership and forced to seek indefinite leave from parliament, later spoke out against the witch-hunt he was subjected to. He revealed what the media must have known, but concealed, at the time—that he was not the target of a “foreign interference” investigation.

Instead, it was his part-time parliamentary staffer John Zhang who was in the crosshairs.

Aside from the fact that Zhang is Chinese, and has been involved in Chinese community organisations, the publicly-released “case” against him, at least as presented in the media, appears to hinge on the fact that Moselmane has made favourable comments about China’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic and has warned of the US campaign against Beijing while Zhang has worked in his office.

Zhang has initiated a Supreme Court challenge to the allegation that he engaged in “reckless foreign interference” and that he acted “on behalf of, or in collaboration with” the “Chinese state and party apparatus.”

At least part of the case against Zhang is based on his and Moselmane’s participation in a private chat group. According to a report in the *Australian*, some of the Chinese journalists who were raided were also reportedly in the chat group.

In an apparently related development, Chinese scholar and media commentator Chen Hong and Australian studies scholar Li Jianjun, recently had their visas cancelled at ASIO’s recommendation and were denied re-entry to Australia. The Australia bureau chief of China News Service, Tao Shelan, and China Radio International’s Sydney bureau chief, Li Dayong left Australia after ASIO questioning. Two others reportedly departed in similar circumstances.

The academics appear unlikely agents of Chinese “interference.” Li Jianjun had received grants from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to undertake a Ph.D at Western Sydney University in Australian literature. Chen Hong has been visiting Australia for decades and has met with multiple prime ministers. In 1994, for

instance, former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke asked Hong to serve as his translator in China. In other words, he is well known to Australia’s political and media establishment.

Chen told the *Australian* that he received a notification from Australia’s Home Affairs’ department early last month, informing him that his visa had been cancelled because ASIO had “assessed you to be directly or indirectly a risk to security.” There was no elaboration or evidence and Chen strongly rejected the imputations.

The only “evidence” against Chen appears to be that he has criticised the US-Australian anti-China campaign and was a member of the private chat group with Zhang and Moselmane. Li was also reportedly a participant.

A chilling portrait emerges, of academics and journalists being targeted by intelligence operatives, solely because of their political views and their connections to Chinese academic institutions. Chen said that the chat group had been used to arrange dinner parties and other social gatherings.

Of the journalists who were raided, the *Australian*, clearly basing itself on material from official sources, stated: “It is understood the four journalists were not spies inserted into Australia, posing as reporters, but journalists who had become engaged in espionage or foreign interference.”

Put into plain English, they were not spies. But they were treated as though they were, likely because they had made statements challenging the war drive against China, and were thus considered fair game in the “foreign interference” witch hunt.

The revelations are a warning that the Australian ruling elite has placed the population on the frontlines of an aggressive US confrontation with China that could rapidly spiral out of control and lead to war. The world wars of the last century were preceded by the same sort of diplomatic incidents, murky allegations and escalating retaliations between states that are being witnessed now.

They also demonstrate that the drive to military conflict is incompatible with democratic norms, and is being accompanied by attacks on democratic rights that will increasingly target, not only Chinese academics and journalists, but domestic social and political opposition.

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