

Australia: Chinese defectors given cold shoulder

Mike Head
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All the characteristic features of the Howard government—hypocrisy, opportunism, callousness and lies—have been on open display over the past three weeks in the affair of Chen Yonglin, a Chinese diplomat who attempted to defect on May 26.

When Chen, a 37-year-old political affairs officer at China's consulate in Sydney, approached the government, his claims were, on the face of it, quite explosive. He claimed there were up to 1,000 Chinese spies in Australia and that his duties at the consulate over the past four years had included monitoring people linked to the banned Falun Gong movement, democracy advocates and supporters of the secession of Tibet, Taiwan and the Turkic regions of western China.

Rather than investigate his claims, the government immediately refused him diplomatic asylum and then alerted the Chinese embassy—forcing Chen to go into hiding with his family. The diplomat was later told he could apply for a refugee visa, a process that could take months. According to Chen, immigration and foreign affairs officials said success would be “extremely impossible”. With Beijing demanding his repatriation to China, his fate seemed perilous.

Left with little choice, Chen went public with his allegations, followed by three other high-level Chinese defectors who surfaced with similar stories. All had sought asylum in Australia, only to be shunned and told to apply for refugee status. One, Hao Fengjun, worked for a Chinese government security agency called 610, which he said received voluminous reports on Chinese people living in Australia.

Another, former Beijing University law professor Yuan Hongbing, also supported Chen's charges that Beijing has an extensive network of agents in Australia. He and his assistant are still waiting for decisions on their applications for protection visas, filed while on a tourist trip last July.

A lawyer representing a fourth defector, an unnamed ex-security official, said the man had witnessed torture of Falun Gong practitioners in China. He had been granted refugee status after two months, but not before his safe house had been ransacked and documents handed to the immigration department had been lost.

Despite the serious character of these allegations, until last week neither Chen nor Hao had been interviewed by Australian intelligence agencies. Whether their claims turn out to be true or not, this response is extraordinary. Former agents from a nominally “communist” power have sought to defect and hand

over details of a massive spy network in Australia, only to be given the cold shoulder.

After a week of denying that Chen had even applied for territorial (political) asylum, the government last week confirmed his public complaint that Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer had rejected his application within 24 hours, even though he had not been interviewed by Australian officials.

Downer's coverup fell apart when copies of Chen's letter to Downer, in which he asked for protection for himself and his wife, Jin Ping, 38, and six-year-old daughter, were leaked to the media. This week Downer admitted in parliament that he had personally discussed Chen's defection bid with the Chinese ambassador Fu Ying.

It appears that, acting on government instructions, officials at the Department of Immigration office in Sydney, where Chen initially sought asylum, actively discouraged him and urged him to return to the Chinese consulate. In fact, they seem to have violated the Migration Act by informing the Chinese authorities of Chen's application. Sections 336E and F of the Act make it an offence, punishable by up to two years imprisonment, to disclose the identity of a protection visa applicant to a government from which the applicant is fleeing.

Apparently, the United States also turned down Chen's request for asylum. A spokeswoman for the US embassy told Reuters that Chen had contacted a US consulate in Australia about his situation, but was unable to comment further.

Once news of Chen's treatment became public knowledge, the government confronted heavy criticism. Professor Geremie Barme, a China expert at the Australian National University, said there was no way of knowing if Chen's allegations were true but it was “outrageous” that intelligence agencies were being denied the chance to interview him. Warren Reed, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer and intelligence commentator, said it was a case of “monumental bungling or there's something more sinister”.

Media editorials urged the government to find a diplomatic way out of the mess. In general, they were as indifferent as the government to the democratic rights of the defectors and Australian Chinese citizens alike. Their primary concern was to maintain Canberra's profile as a “human rights” defender on the international stage.

Writing for Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*, foreign editor Greg Sheridan urged the government to stop using “weasel words of

equivocation and evasion”. If Chen were sent back to China, it would “lose all credit for its courageous actions in backing the US-led coalition to free Iraq”. At the same time, Sheridan hastened to add, no real damage would be done to the lucrative trading relations with China if Chen were granted a visa.

The erstwhile small “l” liberal press advised Howard that Australia’s vital economic interests would not suffer if a backroom solution were found. An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recommended that the government “finesse him [Chen] into a special visa, having allowed any storm to blow over”.

Almost immediately, the government went into damage control, issuing a stream of statements to the effect that Chen’s application for a protection visa would be considered “on its merits”. Howard intervened personally to promise that trade considerations would not influence the case, insisting that it was “nonsense talk” to suggest otherwise. Health Minister Tony Abbott declared that Chen was at “no risk of being sent back to China”.

This apparently new-found compassion was highly selective. No such promises have been made to any of the several thousand other people who seek asylum in Australia each year, notably those held in detention centres for years on end. In fact, it has also emerged that almost 50 Chinese people held in Australian immigration detention centres were put in isolation for up to 20 days last month and interrogated by Chinese officials—a flagrant breach of international refugee law.

Pamela Curr, campaign co-ordinator for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, said: “It’s unbelievable that the Australian government allowed their potential persecutors to interrogate them and get their details, including those of their families and children.”

The Howard government’s repudiation of fundamental legal and democratic rights is rooted in definite business interests.

Over the past decade, Australian-based companies have cashed in on China’s rapid industrial growth by signing billion-dollar deals to supply raw materials, particularly coal, gas and iron ore. Australian exports to China have grown by an average of 19 percent a year since 1999.

On June 8, in the midst of Chen’s defection, BHP Billiton, one of the largest Australian-based companies, announced that it would spend \$10 billion over the next three years on 20 mine expansion projects to meet Chinese demand for base metals and coal. It said its sales to China had increased fivefold, from \$US600 million in 2001-02 to an estimated \$US3.3 billion this year. “It [China] is becoming a very critical part of [our] market,” chief executive Chip Goodyear told the *Australian*.

During the past year, Chinese and Australian officials have launched a feasibility study into a so-called free trade agreement between the two countries, with estimates of a \$25 billion boost to the Australian economy over the coming decade. Just three weeks ago, China’s second most important leader, National Peoples Congress chairman Wu Bangguo, visited Australia to discuss the deal, predicting that it would be a “significant development” in the ongoing relationship between the two countries.

Like the Bush administration in Washington, the Howard government is well aware that the Beijing regime is a brutal dictatorship, exercised in the interests of an elite layer of

bureaucrats, burgeoning billionaires and their international patrons. For all the crocodile tears spilt over the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and subsequent crackdowns on labour unrest and democratic rights, transnational corporations highly value its repressive measures. That is why hundreds of billions of dollars of investment have poured into the country since 1989.

A number of media commentators have made passing reference to the stark contrast between Chen’s case and the defection of a junior Soviet diplomat, Vladimir Petrov, in 1954. But none has sought to explain the political significance of the comparison.

Unlike Chen, Petrov was embraced by the conservative government of the day, led by Sir Robert Menzies. His defection came at the height of the McCarthyite anti-communist witchhunt instigated in the US as part of the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

In return for handing over a few dubious Soviet documents, Petrov and his wife Evdokia were given the equivalent of \$10,000—an enormous sum of money in those days—political asylum, new identities and lifetime protection.

After weeks of secret negotiations with Petrov, Menzies and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director general Charles Spry, carefully engineered the timing of the announcement of his defection. It came on the last sitting day of parliament before the 1954 federal election and was utilised to establish a red-baiting royal commission into alleged Soviet espionage in Australia.

Among the targets were leading trade union officials and members of the Communist Party of Australia, which Menzies had four years earlier sought to outlaw. On the back of his dirty scare campaign, Menzies, who was widely hated in the working class, narrowly scraped back into office.

Over the ensuing months, the Petrov royal commission became a political cesspit. Members of Australian Labor Party leader Herbert Evatt’s staff were accused of links to Soviet agents, helping to trigger a split in the ALP and secure a landslide victory for Menzies when he called an early election at the end of 1955. Menzies’ Liberals were to remain in office for another 17 years.

Prime Minister John Howard is an unabashed admirer of his predecessor. Like Menzies, his stock in trade has included the manipulation of so-called intelligence material for sordid political ends—from the demonisation of refugees to the lies about weapons of mass destruction.

The only difference is that in 1954 it suited Menzies’ purposes to embrace a Soviet defector and wildly exaggerate his revelations, whereas today Howard is desperate to suppress whatever information this Chinese defector might have.



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