

Australian senator falls victim to anti-China witch-hunt

Mike Head
9 September 2016

Senator Sam Dastyari, a key Labor Party factional powerbroker, this week became an initial casualty of a virulent anti-China witch-hunt that swiftly emerged to dominate the Australian media and political establishment over the past week.

Dastyari's rapid removal from office sends a wider message to the parliamentary elite that no dissent will be tolerated to the bipartisan policy of backing Washington in its escalating strategic and military confrontation with Beijing.

A key supporter of Labor leader Bill Shorten, Dastyari was forced to resign on Wednesday as a shadow minister and leader of opposition business in the Senate. He quit just six days after the Fairfax Media highlighted a \$1,670 donation from a Chinese-Australian business tycoon to the senator to pay the bill for an overused parliamentary travel allowance.

Dastyari had previously disclosed the gift in his parliamentary record of donations. But it suddenly became linked by the media, spearheaded by Fairfax's *Australian Financial Review* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, to comments he allegedly had made supporting China's stance on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Dastyari was accused of betraying Australia's "national interests" by adopting a position at odds with the policy of the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party to insist that Beijing abide by the July 12 arbitration court ruling in The Hague, which rejected China's territorial claims as invalid.

This bipartisan front is in line with the Obama administration's increasingly provocative demands for China to obey the ruling, which resulted from a US-orchestrated challenge by the Philippines to a court whose jurisdiction the Beijing regime never accepted.

The Murdoch-owned media outlets quickly joined the attack, insisting that Shorten must sack Dastyari. In yesterday's *Australian*, foreign editor Greg Sheridan declared that the "real scandal" was "not the money, but Dastyari's comments on the South China Sea."

Sheridan charged Dastyari with making "comments which slavishly followed Beijing's line and contradicted Labor policy" on a "critical national security issue." Dastyari's "words and actions" were "so scandalous" he had to be removed from all frontbench political posts.

The previous day, an *Australian* editorial accused Dastyari of "disloyalty" to "Australia's interests on a matter of national security." The editorial said any notion that Australia should "remain neutral and respect China's decision" to build "military bases and harbours" in the South China Sea was "anathema to patriotic Australians."

Significantly, the move against Dastyari came amid concerns in the US media about Australia's reliability as an ally in a war against China. In the *Wall Street Journal*, David Feith wrote on Wednesday that President Barack Obama's visit to Asia for a round of summits showed how "fickle" were America's allies in the region.

Feith said Australia was "ambivalent" about deterring "Chinese misbehavior" because China was its largest trading partner and polls taken by the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre had found the public more likely to support stronger ties with China than with America.

Pointing to the political instability in Australia, Feith stated: "Given that Australia now rotates through leaders about once every two years, it may not be long before one rises with plans to distance the country from Washington."

In response to the anti-China drumbeat, Shorten not only sacked Dastyari but publicly committed himself, for the first time, to sending Australian warships into the 12-mile territorial limits around Chinese-controlled islets to directly confront China.

Until now, the US has been alone in conducting such provocations, under the fraudulent banner of “freedom of navigation operations.” It needs Australia to follow suit in order to demonstrate that it is not isolated in the region. That demand was reinforced by US Vice President Joe Biden’s four-day visit to Australia just after the July 2 election, in which Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government barely survived.

Previously, Shorten had not explicitly backed calls by Labor’s former defence spokesman Stephen Conroy for Australia to mount such operations, and Conroy’s bellicose criticisms of Turnbull for not doing so.

This week, clearly concerned for his own political future, Shorten declared that both he and Conroy were “absolutely resolute about supporting the right of the Australian Navy to have freedom of navigation exercises in these areas.”

Shorten’s shift underscores Labor’s position as outflanking Turnbull’s government in committing itself to Washington’s drive for a showdown with China. Earlier this year, the *Australian’s* Sheridan hailed Conroy’s “bold call” on the South China Sea and said Labor was now more “reliable” on foreign policy than the Coalition.

The feverish media campaign extends far beyond Dastyari. An article in today’s *Australian* quoted “one senior Labor source” alleging that former Labor Foreign Minister Bob Carr was “pushing an aggressive pro-China position” inside the Labor Party. “Sam was just the monkey—the organ-grinder is Bob Carr,” the source said.

Carr is under growing fire for heading the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney, which was established in 2014 with a \$1.8 million donation from property developer Huang Xiangmo.

Also in the firing line is former Prime Minister Paul Keating, who recently restated his opposition to any “reflexive” support for US strategies to counter China’s influence. An *Australian* column by Griffith University politics professor Andrew O’Neil said Keating’s position amounted to “rolling over” to

accommodate China.

These sharp conflicts reflect the intensifying dilemma of Australian capitalism, caught between the US, the strategic and military protector on which it has depended since World War II, and China, on whose markets its major companies, particularly the mining giants, rely heavily.

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd proposed an “accommodationist” stance, suggesting that Washington concede greater regional influence to Beijing in order to avoid war—while stressing his support for the US alliance. He was ousted in mid-2010 by Labor’s US-backed powerbrokers to make way for Julia Gillard. Her government’s unconditional alignment with Washington was underlined in November 2011 when Obama used the Australian parliament as a platform to formally announce the US “pivot to Asia” to confront China.

In response to Washington’s demands that Australia take a frontline role in the South China Sea, a renewed purge of any dissenting voices has begun. This drive will not stop at the Labor Party. Already, the media has reported that the country’s intelligence agencies, which have intimate ties with their US counterparts, do not trust Turnbull because he “isn’t taking their warnings about the security threat posed by China seriously enough.”

The Dastyari affair has been escalated into a whipping up of anti-Chinese sentiment, demonising any politician, business figure or organisation that questions a militarist policy toward Beijing. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, international editor Peter Hartcher called for a “Four Pests Campaign” to defend Australia against such “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows.” Dastyari was just one “rat,” he asserted. “There will be many more.”

In this fetid atmosphere, one million Australian residents of Chinese background, along with some 140,000 Chinese students in Australia, are being depicted as a potentially traitorous “fifth column” inside the country.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact