

US ambassador backs campaign against “Chinese influence” in Australia

Peter Symonds
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The US ambassador to Australia, John Berry, yesterday bought into the ferocious media campaign underway against alleged Chinese influence in Australian politics. His very public intervention not only confirms American involvement in this crusade, but highlights Washington’s determination to ensure that Canberra does not waver in its support for the US “pivot to Asia” against China.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* featured a front-page interview in which Berry expressed his “alarm” at Beijing’s “involvement” in Australia’s domestic politics. His comments follow the “exposure” of small payments by a Chinese businessman to opposition Labor Party frontbencher Sam Dastyari, supposedly in return for conciliatory remarks toward Beijing. Dastyari was quickly forced to resign.

Taking aim at China, Berry declared: “We have been surprised quite frankly, at the extent of the involvement of the Chinese government in Australian politics.” He bluntly accused Beijing of “directly funnel[ing] funds to political candidates to advance their national interests in your national [election] campaign.”

While declaring that donations by any foreign government should be considered illegitimate, he insisted: “Our hope is that, in resolving this, Australia will consider doing what many other democracies have done: that is to protect their core responsibility against undue influence from governments that don’t share our values.”

Much could be written about the staggering hypocrisy involved in an American ambassador railing against foreign influence. Washington has for decades prosecuted its national interests through wars of aggression and coups, not to speak of systematically cultivating agents of influence, including through bribes, in countries around the world. In Australia, the

US had a hand in the removal of two Labor prime ministers—Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010.

There was nothing diplomatic about Berry’s direct intervention in Australian domestic politics. “Australia is a sovereign nation,” he said, but then immediately made clear that Canberra should outlaw all foreign donations forthwith. “I can see no argument of how a foreign government’s involvement through political contributions advances Australia’s interests.”

Berry’s remarks follow a week of unrelenting media “exposures” of alleged Chinese influence over politicians and former politicians, think tanks, business figures, Chinese student organisations and Chinese associations. In one way or another, their “crime” has been to criticise or counter the accelerating propaganda campaign emanating from Washington to condemn Chinese “expansionism” and “aggression” in Asia, particularly in the South China Sea, or to suggest that Australian interests do not lie in involvement in the US war preparations against China, Australia’s largest trading partner.

No one should be so naive as to believe that this anti-China campaign has arisen out of the blue. Indeed last Saturday, the *Australian*’s foreign editor Greg Sheridan revealed that the Liberal-National Coalition government early last year “established a multi-agency effort to assess by exactly how much, and how effectively, the Chinese government in Beijing was gaining influence over Australian national policy.”

According to Sheridan, the project was coordinated by the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and involved input from several agencies, including the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the departments of defence and foreign affairs, and the Australian Federal Police (AFP). After several months,

the investigation shifted “the focus away from illegality towards influence—the grey area, the area of vulnerability.”

The state apparatus in Canberra is tied by a thousand threads to Washington via the US alliance. In particular, the intelligence agencies such as ASIO and ONA are part of the “five eyes” intelligence-sharing agreement with the US. The “multi-agency effort” clearly provided the ammunition that has been fed to trusted journalists to launch the campaign to demonise against anyone critical, even in a limited way, of the US war drive against China. Sheridan himself has close ties to the military, intelligence and foreign policy establishment, not only in Canberra, but also in Washington.

Even if the allegations of Chinese activities were true, as Sheridan acknowledged, supposed “Chinese agents of influence” have done nothing illegal. That has not stopped the more hysterical commentary from implying that the individuals allegedly involved are traitors or government ministers branding Dastyari as “Shanghai Sam.”

In these circumstances, the US ambassador’s intervention calling for foreign donations to be banned is particularly significant. It is the first step in creating the legal framework for police measures to be taken against those accused of being “Chinese agents” and intimidating anyone who criticises US propaganda and preparations for war with China.

The whole political establishment in Canberra is quickly falling into line. The government has launched a sweeping inquiry into political donations. Several government ministers and backbenchers, along with the opposition Labor Party, have called for a ban on foreign donations.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese embassy reacted with a statement to the *Australian* rejecting Berry’s “unfounded allegations.” It noted that “some people always love to give lectures like a preacher about the domestic politics, rules and laws, and foreign policies of other countries.”

Berry’s remarks also underscore the militarist agenda underlying the ideological assault on “Chinese influence.” Over the past five years, as part of its “pivot to Asia,” the US has greatly expanded its military presence in the Asia Pacific and recklessly inflamed key regional flashpoints as a means of undermining

China.

As the “pivot” has stalled on the diplomatic and economic fronts, the Obama administration has accelerated its military build-up and engaged in “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. It has directly challenged Chinese maritime claims by sending US navy warships within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits around Chinese-controlled atolls.

Washington wants other countries to follow suit and has identified Australia as the first candidate. A string of visiting American admirals, generals and politicians, including US Vice President Joe Biden, has pressed the Australian government to authorise its own FONOPs to confront China. Such military action is highly provocative and threatens to trigger Chinese retaliation that could escalate into open conflict.

Berry was the latest to imply that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was dragging his feet. He insisted that Washington had made “no request” to Canberra to conduct FONOPs and added that the decision was “absolutely and entirely up to Australia.” Nevertheless, he said, China was “using bullying pressure in the South China Sea” and pursuing “untoward cyber-security policies.” He emphasised that China would only “improve” if it were “directly challenged” by the international community.

The *Australian Financial Review* last week signalled that Turnbull is on notice. He has Chinese business connections and was critical of the “pivot” when it was first announced in 2011. An article entitled, “PM’s stance on China worries experts,” declared that the intelligence agencies believed the prime minister “isn’t taking their warnings about the security threat posed by China seriously enough.” An unnamed source drew a parallel between Turnbull and Whitlam, making the implicit threat that Turnbull could suffer the fate of Whitlam, who was ousted via a constitutional coup in November 1975 with the involvement of the CIA.



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