

Australian opposition parties block extradition treaty with China

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The Liberal-National coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was forced last week to renege on undertakings given to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang that Australia would implement a long-delayed extradition treaty with Beijing.

Senator Cory Bernardi, a right-wing renegade who split from the government in February, led the campaign against the treaty, backed by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott within the governing parties. Ensuring the total humiliation of Turnbull, the Labor opposition joined with the Greens, Bernardi and other right-wing senators, to declare it would block any agreement in the parliament.

Capping off the debacle, Turnbull appears to have told Labor leader Bill Shorten that the legislation would not be introduced before speaking with his own cabinet and foreign minister, Julie Bishop. Shorten exploited the government's disarray by rushing to call a press conference last Tuesday morning and publicly announced the decision himself.

The proposed extradition treaty was first signed between China and Australia in 2007, in the final months of the Coalition government headed by John Howard. The Labor governments that followed—under Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Rudd once again—used their lack of a majority in the upper house of parliament to justify not introducing legislation to ratify the agreement. While Abbott was prime minister from September 2013 to September 2015, the Coalition government also delayed ratification.

Last week, the furore around the extradition treaty coincided with the ongoing debate in Australian foreign policy circles about the implications of the Trump administration and its “America First” agenda for US-Australian relations. Explicit calls have been made by former politicians and diplomats for Canberra to

distance itself from Washington and to instead forge closer ties with China on the grounds it is Australia's largest trading partner and will supplant American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

In response, the pro-US constituency has argued that the Australian government must align with the Trump administration's confrontational stance against China, partly to try and gain exemptions for Australian corporate interests from Trump's threats to pursue protectionist policies.

Turnbull's decision to proceed with the treaty was almost certainly a concession offered to China during Li Keqiang's visit to Australia from March 22 to March 26. China made a range of economic overtures to Australian business, as part of a broader diplomatic effort by Beijing to strengthen the wing of the Australian establishment that is arguing for a shift away from Washington.

The extradition issue was seized upon by the pro-US wing to strike back. With shameless cynicism, the US and Australia are held up by the propagandists of this layer as examples of “democracies” based on “liberal values,” whereas China is labelled both a totalitarian state and a threat to the US-dominated “global rules-based order.”

Cory Bernardi, who has declared his intention to build a political movement in Australia modelled on the policies of the Trump administration, conducted his campaign to block the treaty on an openly anti-Chinese and pro-US basis. He railed against China's human rights record and its judicial system, highlighting the fact that guilty verdicts were brought down in 99.9 percent of cases heard by Chinese courts in 2015. He particularly denounced any treaty on the grounds that none of Australia's “Five Eyes” partners—the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand—has extradition

arrangements with China.

As American whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed, the “Five Eyes” group collaborate to carry out the pervasive spying of global communications, including those of their own citizens.

Tony Abbott likewise denounced the proposed ratification of the treaty on human rights grounds, declaring last Tuesday that “China’s legal system has to evolve further before the Australian government and people could be confident that those before it would receive justice according to law.” Within the Coalition, Abbott is considered one of the ardent advocates of the closest strategic and military ties with Washington. The prospect was even raised in the media that he could have crossed the floor of parliament to vote against legislation.

The initial statements by Labor’s Shorten suggested that there were differences within the Labor leadership over whether to support or oppose the legislation. Shorten declared last Monday: “We’re currently considering this matter very carefully. It is a matter of great importance. It goes to questions of our relationship with China. It goes though, of course, to human rights, and it goes to questions of law.”

After a meeting of the entire Labor parliamentary caucus last Tuesday morning, the decision was taken to side with Bernardi and Abbott.

The human rights rhetoric from conservative and Labor politicians alike is transparent hypocrisy, to conceal the underlying strategic calculations as to whether to deliver a diplomatic rebuff to the Chinese regime. The Australian ruling class has not the slightest concern for the democratic and social rights of the Chinese people. The political repression by the Chinese regime is precisely what enforces the appalling wages and working conditions from which Australian companies, along with other transnational corporations, reap vast profits. The Australian establishment has no qualms about maintaining extradition treaties with the Gulf state monarchies—among the most dictatorial regimes on earth.

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* and one of the more vocal pro-Washington media commentators, could not restrain his delight over the collapse of Turnbull’s extradition agreement, hailing it as a “great day for democracy.”

He declared: “No country other than China makes a

remotely comparable effort to manipulate, coerce and control the political activities of its diaspora population in Australia as China does. And no other country has China’s ability to pressure an Australian government. This appalling treaty would institutionalise that manipulation and invite that pressure.”

The portrayal of Chinese-Australians as a potential fifth column on Beijing’s behalf has become a ubiquitous theme in the demands within the ruling elite that Australia remain in the closest alignment with Washington.

Historically, the country with the greatest ability to pressure an Australian government, is the United States. As recently as June 2010, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in an overnight inner-Labor Party coup in large part because of Washington’s dissatisfaction with his foreign policy orientation. Continuous pressure has been applied to every government since to fully back the US anti-China “pivot to Asia” under the Obama administration, the expansion of US bases and operations in Australia, the further integration of the American and Australian militaries and the deployment of Australian troops back to the Middle East. Under Trump, the pressure for assistance from Canberra remains relentless.

The Chinese regime’s response to the Australian government’s reneging on the extradition treaty has been muted. Instead of issuing a formal criticism of the human rights rhetoric in Canberra, it allowed Chinese-born Australian permanent resident Chonyi Feng, who it had blocked from leaving China, to return to Sydney. Just days out from what is expected to be a tense first meeting between Trump and Chinese president Xi Jinping, Beijing more than likely does not want to add another possible cause of controversy.



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