

Australian media renews campaign against Chinese “power and influence”

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6 June 2017

Nine months ago, Peter Hartcher, the international editor of the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald*, published a provocative article calling for action against “foreign manipulation” in Australia by alleged pro-Chinese government “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows.” Under conditions of immense war dangers on the Korean Peninsula and flaring tensions between China and the US and its allies over strategic influence in Asia, last September’s anti-Chinese campaign is resurfacing to the centre of Australian political life.

The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Fairfax’s newspapers—the so-called “liberal” wing of the Australian media—are conducting a joint “investigation” into “how China’s Communist Party is secretly infiltrating Australia.” Last night, the ABC’s current affairs’ program “Four Corners” was dedicated to sensationalist claims that the Chinese regime is seeking to exert clandestine “power and influence” over Australian politics and foreign policy.

Top journalists from both outlets, including Melbourne *Age* foreign affairs’ writer Daniel Flitton, a former intelligence analyst, and the ABC’s political editor, Chris Uhlmann, are conducting the investigation. And they make no secret of the fact that they are serving as the direct conduit for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which is repeatedly cited as their primary source of information.

In introducing “Four Corners,” Chris Uhlmann directly compared purported Chinese government activity in Australia with the unsubstantiated allegations that the “Russian government and its agents sought to subvert the US election and, possibly, help deliver the presidency to Donald Trump.” Paralleling the campaign in the US to portray Trump as a puppet of Moscow, the program was laced with anti-communist overtones, reminiscent of the hysteria that characterised the Cold War.

The ABC and Fairfax news media are churning out what can only be described as anti-Chinese propaganda, not investigative journalism. The “evidence” presented of

Chinese “subversion” in Australia is even more threadbare than the claims in the US of Russian interference.

“Four Corners” made great play of the case of Sheri Yan, a businesswoman with political connections in Beijing, who specialised in arranging meetings between Chinese political and corporate leaders and their Australian and American counterparts. In 2015, she was arrested in the United States and pleaded guilty to taking part in bribing the late John Ashe, then president of the UN General Assembly.

Yan is married to former Australian intelligence official Roger Uren, who retired in 2001. At the time of her arrest in New York, ASIO raided their apartment in Canberra and purportedly found government documents dating back to the period of his employment. But Uren was never charged with any crime, nor has Yan been charged with any attempt to bribe Australian politicians.

ASIO, however, according to the ABC/Fairfax investigation, has linked the Yan case with its “serious concern” over the activities in Australia of two Chinese billionaires, Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing. Yan was at one time employed by Chau.

Much of the “Four Corners” program dwelt on the fact that companies owned by the two businessmen have made substantial, entirely legal and publicly disclosed donations over the years to Australia’s major establishment parties, Liberal and Labor. Huang, who immigrated to Australia in 2011, also donated \$1.8 million to help establish the Australia China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.

Set to ominous background music, more befitting a crime movie, “Four Corners” showed images of a host of current and former Australian politicians, who have received political donations from these men, or appeared at public events beside them. A partial list includes former Liberal Party trade minister Andrew Robb, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, and Labor Party senator Sam Dastyari and shadow treasurer Chris Bowen.

In the course of the “Four Corners” ‘investigation,’ the ABC chose to interview Peter Jennings and Rory Medcalf,

strategic commentators well-known for their fulsome support for the US-Australia military alliance; Peter Mattis, a former CIA agent, now “China-watcher;” and, directly on behalf of the American state, Mike McCaul, the multi-millionaire Republican who serves as the chairman of the US House Committee on Homeland Security.

Each expressed agreement with ASIO’s “concern” that such donations could be aimed at buying influence for the Chinese Communist Party in the corridors of power in Canberra.

McCaul told the program that Australia was “allowing a foreign government to influence your elections, and in this case, China is the biggest offender.” Coming from a representative of the US state, which has never shied away from wielding its influence on political and economic life in Australia—including taking part in conspiracies to remove at least two prime ministers who fell foul of its agenda—this was nothing short of absurd. Moreover, the donations by American-linked corporations to Australia’s establishment political parties runs into the millions each year.

The “evidence” of so-called “Chinese Communist Party influence” consisted of remarks made by Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, one day after Huang Xiangmo cancelled a large donation to the Labor Party. Dastyari differed with Labor’s announcement, during the 2016 federal election campaign, that it would support the Australian navy conducting a “freedom of navigation” operation against Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Far from influencing Australian foreign policy, Dastyari’s statement opposing such an operation only became front page news after the federal election, in late August 2016. Just days later, Labor’s powerbrokers compelled him to resign from the party’s shadow cabinet.

The Fairfax media utilized Dastyari’s comments to initiate a hysterical anti-Chinese vendetta in its newspapers. Hartcher, in his *Sydney Morning Herald* article, labelled Dastyari as one the most prominent of the pro-Chinese political “rats” in Australia, but insisted that “many more” would be exposed. Implicit in last night’s “Four Corners” program was that the politicians it portrayed could well fall into the “rat” camp, if they do not take steps to prove their allegiance to Australia’s alignment with Washington.

Echoing Hartcher in 2016, “Four Corners” insinuated that many of the one million Australians of Chinese background, along with the 140,000 Chinese students currently studying in the country, constituted a virtual fifth column, loyal to, and spying on behalf of, the Chinese state. In the most sinister fashion, the program showed footage of a 2016 demonstration by several thousand Chinese students, opposing US actions against Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. The implication was that the ABC

considers such protests an illegitimate challenge to US and Australian foreign policy.

In April 2017, “independent” senator Nick Xenophon, seemingly in possession of insider knowledge, delivered a rare foreign policy speech, on the eve of the visit to Australia by vice-president Mike Pence—the first by a top official of the Trump administration. Xenophon spoke, with great concern, of the prospect of Australia joining the US in provocative actions against China, which could result, he said, in a full-scale war with the country’s largest export market and trading partner. He declared that such a war would “rip ... Australia’s social fabric apart” and could lead to the establishment of “internment camps” for hundreds of thousands of Chinese-Australians and Chinese citizens.

Since Xenophon’s statements and Pence’s visit, the US-Australia alliance, directed above all against China, has been repeatedly reaffirmed by both the Turnbull government and the Labor opposition. This was underscored last week by prominent Trump critic, Senator John McCain, and yesterday, during the Australia-US ministerial talks involving Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

Nothing in bourgeois politics can be dismissed as simply coincidental or accidental. The Australian political and military-intelligence establishment is seeking, through its major media mouthpieces, to generate nationalist and anti-Chinese sentiment within the population, aimed at intimidating and silencing the widespread opposition in the Australian working class and among young people to the US-led preparations for war.



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