

“Watergate pales compared to what we’re confronting now”

Former US director of national intelligence campaigns against Trump in Australia

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Another vocal critic of US President Donald Trump has been provided a high-profile stage in Australia to denounce Russia and campaign for the president’s removal. Last week, it was Senator John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. This week, it was James Clapper, a former general, who was the national intelligence director from 2010 until Trump’s inauguration in January.

Clapper is currently a visiting “distinguished professor” at the Australian National University’s National Security College in Canberra, enabling him to spend the next month giving speeches and lectures around the country.

The National Press Club—which boasts it is an “iconic institution with membership comprising the influencers and decision-makers of Australia”—hosted his first public address on June 7. His audience included prominent political, business and military figures, and leading journalists.

In his prepared remarks, and during an extensive question and answer session, Clapper denounced Trump for waging an “assault” on America’s “institutions,” having an “inexplicably solicitous stance” toward Russia and acting with “ignorance or disrespect” toward the US intelligence agencies such as the CIA.

He stated as fact the entirely unsubstantiated allegations that “Russians” hacked the Democratic Party National Committee, planted “false information” and “orchestrated ‘fake news’” during the US presidential election. He accused the Russian news service RT of being a “regime-funded propaganda arm” that waged a “sophisticated campaign ... against Hillary Clinton, and for Donald Trump.”

As McCain did a week earlier, Clapper declared there was “well-founded concern here [in Australia] about our current administration.” He emphasised the “importance of the alliance between Australia and the United States” and the “deep and pervasive foundation of our bilateral bond.” He stressed the intimate relations between the country’s intelligence agencies and the “bilateral economic engagement” of \$1.9 trillion in investment and trade.

Australia, Clapper insisted, was also under assault. Again providing no substantiation, he baldly asserted: “[I]t is no secret that China is very active in intelligence activities against Australia, just as they are against us, and that China is increasingly aggressive in attempting to gain influence in your political processes, as Russia is in ours.”

Over the days preceding his speech, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Fairfax newspapers renewed a McCarthyite-style witch-hunt implying that sections of the Australian political establishment are being shifted from support for the US alliance by donations organised on behalf of the Chinese “Communist Party” government (see: “Australian media renews campaign against Chinese ‘power and influence’”).

Clapper’s essential message was that the interests of the Australian ruling class are best served by maintaining its strategic, military and intelligence alignment with the US, despite any concerns it has about Trump. The current president, he implied, may not be there much longer. Pointing to the advanced stage of the political civil war in the American establishment, he referred to Trump as “a transitory occupant of the White House.”

Clapper contrasted the crisis surrounding Trump with the Watergate scandal that resulted in Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974. He stated: “I think, when you compare the two, that Watergate pales really, in my view, compared to what we’re confronting now.”

The long-time intelligence chief insisted that the investigations underway in the US into purported links between the Trump presidential campaign and Russia would answer the question: “Is there a smoking gun with all the smoke?”

The response of the assembled media was an accurate reflection of the state of official Australian politics. Unlike in Europe and Asia, the dominant factions of the Australian establishment are not attempting to use the volatility and uncertainty generated by Trump as the pretext to shift their

foreign policy away from the US alliance. Reactionary figures such as McCain and Clapper are able to posture in Australia as champions of democracy, present Trump as a temporary aberration and not face any critical questions as to the sinister, militarist motives behind their campaign against his administration.

Not one journalist asked Clapper the obvious question: why should any credibility be given to any claim he makes, on any subject? He has spent most of the past seven years presiding over agencies that carry out espionage and intrigue against governments and corporations internationally, including numerous illegal assassinations and regime-change operations.

In response to whistle-blower Edward Snowden's revelations of criminal spying on the American population, Clapper flagrantly lied to the US Congress. He only avoided prosecution because decisions were made at the top levels of American politics not to pursue him.

Far from putting Clapper under any scrutiny, however, journalists lined up to express their gratitude for his speech and ask loaded questions that allowed him to develop his anti-Russian and anti-Trump tirade, and advocate even greater state spying on personal communications.

None of his unsubstantiated assertions was challenged, including an ominous statement that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks were a "hostile non-government intelligence service."

Clapper took the opportunity to elaborate on his advice to the Australian establishment. He stressed that while Trump was unreliable, "there are people in the administration that I think can be trusted." Echoing McCain, he named the former generals in the cabinet: Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster.

Clapper declared: "So what I look to Australia, and other staunch allies like Australia, [to do] is perhaps to help fill whatever void is created by the absence of US leadership."

The most glaring questions not asked of Clapper relate to the central theme of his entire speech: the absurd claim that Trump's election victory was the result of Russian "interference."

Hillary Clinton lost because large numbers of Democratic Party voters either abstained—in disgust with the right-wing, pro-Wall Street character of her campaign—or voted for Trump.

Of the two big business candidates, it was Trump who made populist appeals, however fraudulent, to the broadly-felt social grievances of millions of workers. He declared he would bring back jobs and prosperity. The Democrats, in contrast, told suffering working-class voters that things had "never been better." Clinton still won the popular vote, by a

margin of over three million. Trump was elected due to the vagaries of the state-based electoral college system.

In one revealing answer, Clapper contradicted his own narrative that Trump won because of Russia's nefarious hand. He stated: "His election was a big shock... It was actually a personal shock to me about how disconnected apparently I was from what I'll call the flyover part of the United States. And there's still a very, very strong body of resentment and frustration in our country with Washington, writ large."

Clapper's use of the term "flyover part" served only to underscore the contempt in ruling circles for the working class. It was a reference to the tens of millions of people across the US whose living standards have stagnated for decades and plummeted over the past 10 years. Barack Obama's administration imposed the full burden of the 2007–2008 financial collapse on the backs of the working people, while bailing out the banks and corporations. Clinton was viewed rightly as a figure who would continue Obama's anti-working class agenda, as well as escalate US wars and interventions in the Middle East and Asia.

The faction of the American establishment for whom Clapper speaks does not have the slightest concern for the conditions of the working class and makes no appeal to it. It does not oppose the devastating cuts the Trump administration is imposing to health, education, pensions and other social spending. Its opposition stems from a war-mongering insistence that Russia be dealt with as a hostile power, not, as figures around the incoming president had suggested, as a country that could be developed into a possible "friend."

Pointing to the prospect of significant political unrest if Trump were impeached, Clapper noted with perplexity that the president still had support, despite the frenzied efforts to tarnish him as a Russian pawn.

The ex-spy chief complained: "So far the coalition of people that elected President Trump are still there. They're still hanging in there. So, I don't know what it will take."



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