

Australian intelligence agency demands sweeping powers to suppress Chinese “interference”

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The WSWS warned last September that hysterical media accusations about “Chinese agents of influence” in Australian politics and society raised the prospect of “political purges, police raids, mass arrests and internment camps for ‘traitors’ and ‘enemy aliens’.”

With the renewal of a McCarthyite-like anti-Chinese campaign over recent weeks, that prospect is becoming ever-closer to reality. The Liberal-National Party Coalition government has initiated an inquiry by the Attorney-General’s Department, tasked with proposing updates to legislation relating to treason and espionage, as well as new laws against “foreign interference.”

The inquiry has been given bipartisan support by not only the opposition Labor Party, but the Greens and the various populist third parties in the parliament.

A Joint Committee on Security and Intelligence hearing last week provided an ominous insight into the type of police-state measures being contemplated. The committee consists of 11 Coalition and Labor representatives from both houses of parliament. Its current chair is Andrew Hastie, a right-wing Liberal MP and former Army and Special Air Services (SAS) officer, who did tours of Afghanistan in 2010 and 2013 and the Middle East in 2014–2015. Elected to parliament only in 2016, he has been rapidly elevated based on his military credentials.

The committee took testimony from Heather Cook, the acting head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), who declared: “Foreign interference is happening in Australia.”

Cook did not directly name China but she did not need to. The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Fairfax Media newspapers are conducting a “joint investigation” into “Chinese

Communist Party influence” in Australia and have acknowledged that ASIO is the primary source of their information.

Serving as ASIO’s conduit, the media has implied that Chinese and Chinese-Australian business figures, leading establishment politicians and personalities, universities, Chinese-language newspapers, and Chinese students studying in Australia are all—consciously or not—part of an attempt by the Chinese regime to shift Australian foreign policy toward Beijing and away from the US alliance.

In this context, Cook told the parliamentary committee: “Foreign powers want to gain advantage for their nation or to disadvantage us.” They were trying, she asserted, “to influence our polity, bureaucracy and civil society ... and clandestinely interfere in Australia’s affairs.” Their activities, she claimed, were “extensive, unrelenting and increasingly sophisticated.”

Cook proceeded to outline ASIO’s demands. The intelligence agency wants the draconian powers it has been granted since 2002 on the fraudulent pretext of combatting “terrorism” to be extended to all areas of “security.”

Under anti-terror legislation, ASIO can seize a person suspected of terrorist activities and secretly hold them for questioning for up to seven days, without charges. Those interrogated cannot tell anyone they have been detained. Cook declared: “The fact that we don’t have it open to us under our current legislative regime, to be able to use a power such as compulsive questioning in the espionage and foreign interference space, is definitely a limitation.”

Cook’s statements have sweeping implications. Through the media, ASIO has indicated that it

considers any expression of political opposition to Australian and US policy toward China as the possible outcome of “foreign influence.”

If ASIO is granted the powers it is demanding, the organisers of a demonstration opposing Australian military involvement in US-backed “freedom of navigation” operations against Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea could potentially be hauled in, held and questioned for seven days, ostensibly to determine whether they are Chinese government “agents of influence.”

Cook proceeded to insist that the age limit at which ASIO can detain people for “compulsive questioning” be lowered from 16 to just 14. She also indicated that ASIO wants the attorney-general to have the power to verbally grant search warrants against people suspected of aiding “foreign interference,” rather than ASIO and the police having to wait for a written document.

While the Attorney-General’s Department considers such measures, a parallel inquiry by Special Minister of State Scott Ryan is drawing up proposed revisions to Australia’s political donation laws. Currently, foreign corporations can donate to political parties and political pressure groups such as GetUp! Liberal and Labor, in particular, receive millions of dollars each year from American, European, Japanese and Chinese-based companies.

The Coalition government has mooted that it will table legislation by the end of this year banning such donations. This will make the establishment parties even more dependent on the donations they receive from Australian banks and corporations—the majority of which have extensive share-holder interests from American-based finance capital.

The campaign to purge “Chinese influence” from the Australian establishment reflects the immeasurably greater influence of American imperialism.

Washington considers Australia an essential ally in the Indo-Pacific region. It hosts critical communications and spying facilities, and provides air and naval bases for American forces. US strategic documents, recalling how the Australian continent was used to wage the initial stages of the Pacific War against Japan from 1942, designate it as a “sanctuary” in the event of a major war against China.

Washington both cultivates and relies upon a vast network of pro-US elements in the major political

parties, business, the media and the military-intelligence apparatus to prevent any shift by Australia from its strategic alignment with the US. American intrigue in the country increased significantly over the past decade, as China emerged as Australia’s largest trading partner and factions within the ruling elite began suggesting a refashioning of foreign policy in response.

Of even greater concern to both Washington and the pro-US constituency is that large sections of the Australian working class and youth are opposed to any more involvement in American-led interventions and wars.

The 2017 survey of public opinion by the Lowy Institute, a strategic think tank, underscores the contradictory and volatile popular sentiments. Reflecting the general affinity with the American people, the majority of the population supports the US alliance. A clear majority, however, opposes participation in a war against China over “disputed territories and islands”; or against Russia even if it “invaded one of its neighbours.” Despite the media hysteria over the threat posed by North Korea, a majority opposes any involvement in a war on the Korean Peninsula.

The media propaganda against China is aimed at silencing anti-war sentiment by stoking nationalism and chauvinism. The legislative changes being discussed seek to give the state apparatus powers to carry out the violent political repression of opposition, which will take increasingly overt forms as the dangers of war increase.



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