

# Behind the anti-China witch-hunt against Australian senator

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An extraordinary witch-hunt was unleashed yesterday against Australian Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, who has been accused of what amounts to treason for his dealings with Chinese property billionaire Huang Xiangmo. The renewed targeting of Dastyari constitutes a dramatic escalation of a broader campaign, under pressure from Washington, to suppress alleged “foreign influence,” especially Chinese influence, in Australian political life.

The immediate trigger for the latest outburst of lurid condemnations is the accusation that Dastyari had met with Huang in October 2016, in the wake of allegations that he had taken money from the billionaire in return for political favours. Attempting to ensure their conversation was private, Dastyari allegedly told Huang that they should turn off their phones and talk outside.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose government is wracked by deep internal crisis, along with some of his senior ministers, has immediately seized on the media claims to demand action against Dastyari. Opposition leader Bill Shorten has fallen into line with the anti-China crusade, forcing Dastyari to step down this morning from his positions as deputy Senate whip and chairman of a parliamentary committee.

Turnbull went further, demanding that Shorten force Dastyari to resign from the Senate, declaring that he was guilty of “disloyal conduct of the highest order”—in other words, treason. “Dastyari has shown he does not put Australia first and he does not owe his loyalty to Australia,” Turnbull insisted. “Sam Dastyari has shown that he is not on Australia’s side and it’s time he got out of Australia’s parliament.”

Attorney General George Brandis questioned why Dastyari had advised his “benefactor” of “counter-

surveillance techniques,” implying that he had leaked Australian intelligence agency secrets to a Chinese national. “I’m not saying it’s treason,” Brandis said, “what I’m saying is that Senator Dastyari’s position on the basis of what we know is completely impossible.”

It is hardly unusual, given that Dastyari and Huang were the targets of a campaign of vilification at the time, that the senator should take elementary precautions to ensure their discussion remained private. The fact that details have been leaked, strongly suggests the involvement of intelligence agencies—either the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) or its American counterparts or both.

How else could such a conversation have been recorded, and then leaked to the media?

Further fuel for the Dastyari witch-hunt has been conveniently provided by the leaking of a “secret tape” of a press conference held by the senator in June last year, which goes to the heart of allegations that he took money from Huang for political favours.

During the media conference, as reported in the Chinese press, Dastyari indicated that Australia should bow out of the disputes in the South China Sea. Both the Liberal-National Coalition government and Labor opposition have backed the US-led campaign to challenge Chinese maritime claims, as part of Washington’s broader challenge to China throughout the Asia Pacific.

At the time, Dastyari, a consummate opportunist, did not politically defend his comments or challenge the prevailing US propaganda, but instead, simply dissembled. Earlier this year, he claimed that he had been put on the spot and had misspoken in reply to an unexpected question. However, the tape obtained by the Fairfax Media and released this week makes clear that

Dastyari, while not specifically backing China's claims, did declare at last year's meeting that it "isn't our place to be involved."

Again the question arises: who supplied the so-called secret tape?

The Fairfax Media, along with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)—the so-called "liberal wing" of the Australian media—have been in the forefront of this right-wing patriotic campaign, not only against Dastyari, but against "Chinese influence," in general. In an explicit diatribe last year, senior Fairfax journalist Peter Hartcher denounced as "rats, flies, mosquitoes and pests" all those who, including Dastyari, along with Chinese students and businessmen, were concerned about the confrontational US attitude towards China. The implication was that these "pests" should be eradicated.

In June this year, a joint sensationalist investigation by Fairfax and the ABC churned out a barrage of accusations concerning "Chinese influence" in Australia, specifically targeting Huang and another Chinese businessman, Chau Chak Wing, over their connections with the Chinese Communist Party. The primary source of information for many of the allegations was ASIO, which has subsequently stepped up its activities against "agents of foreign influence."

Today, the Fairfax Media has published a lengthy article full of allegations and innuendo against Dastyari. Again, ASIO and unnamed security officials are cited liberally. ASIO secretly briefed senior Labor and Coalition figures in 2015, and named Huang as a person of concern. Today's article condemns Dastyari for failing to heed the warning and continuing his relations with Huang. In other words, what is now impermissible, even treasonous, is contact with any Chinese person deemed by ASIO to be a Chinese agent of influence, and any, even limited, criticism of the US-led war drive against China.

The reality is that whatever political influence is exerted by China in Australia pales into insignificance compared with the ties that the United States, and its military and intelligence agencies, have at all levels of Australian politics, the media, think tanks and, above all, the military-intelligence apparatus, including ASIO.

Since June 2010, a systematic blackout has been in place in the Australian media and political establishment about the events that led to the ousting of

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at the time. Rudd had suggested that the US should compromise with, rather than confront, China. Yet no investigation has been carried out into the key Labor Party figures, including Shorten, who were involved, and who were named in US embassy documents, released by WikiLeaks, as American "protected sources."

The campaign against Chinese agents coincides with the nationalist political furore that erupted in June over the dual citizenship or entitlement to dual citizenship of a number of federal parliamentarians. A High Court ruling in October upheld the strict interpretation of a section of the reactionary Australian constitution, which bars citizens from standing for parliament if they lack what the judges called "undivided loyalty" to the Australian nation.

The timing of the latest allegations against Dastyari could not have been more fortuitous for Turnbull and his crisis-ridden government. The prime minister called off the parliamentary sitting this week in a desperate bid to buy time, amid internal divisions over same-sex marriage, the push for a banking inquiry and rapidly falling political support, evidenced by last weekend's state election in Queensland. This crisis could be further compounded next week when all parliamentarians are obliged to confirm their citizenship status.

The witch-hunt against Dastyari is aimed at creating the political climate for the suppression of anti-war opposition, under conditions where the Trump administration is accelerating its preparations for war against North Korea and China. At the same time, it is aimed at diverting the immense social and political tensions, created by rapidly deteriorating living conditions, outward against a foreign "enemy"—China. The extraordinary vilification of Dastyari underscores the fact that Australia is being placed on a war footing.



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