

Anti-China witch-hunt in Australia escalates

Peter Symonds
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A front-page article in Saturday's *Australian* ramped up the ongoing xenophobic campaign against "Chinese influence" in Australia. It reported that the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had "identified 10 political candidates at state and local government elections whom it believes have close ties to Chinese intelligence services."

The article, headlined "Security agencies flag Chinese Manchurian candidates," is a crude beat-up. No-one is named, no evidence is provided and ASIO's unsubstantiated allegations are treated as good coin without any questioning of its motives. What the article does demonstrate is that the anti-China witch-hunt is being driven by the Australian intelligence agencies—backed to the hilt by Washington—amid the growing danger of a US-led war against North Korea and China.

Ross Babbage, a former intelligence analyst with the Office of National Assessments, told the *Australian* that Chinese security agencies were engaged in a far-reaching campaign "to recruit and insert and encourage, and to some extent fund, agents of influence." He is currently a senior fellow at a prominent US think tank—the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

Babbage added: "We have not seen this type of activity in Australia since the Cold War." The reference to the "Cold War" is significant as it is precisely a McCarthyite climate of fear and intimidation that the media and political establishment is seeking to whip up. By relaying ASIO's "concerns" about unnamed political figures, all politicians are being placed on notice that they could come under scrutiny as "agents of influence" if they step out of line.

ASIO was notorious for its skulduggery during the Cold War and persecution of anyone alleged to have communist or socialist affiliations or sympathies.

The *Australian* article came just two days after Prime

Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced plans for sweeping new laws to criminalise "unlawful foreign influence," create a registry of "foreign agents" and ban all foreign funding of political activities. The expanded treason and espionage legislation will carry draconian penalties of up to life imprisonment.

That the directives are coming from Washington was underscored by the comments of the Australian ambassador to the US, Joe Hockey, last week. "It's being very closely watched [in Washington]," he said. "It is a really serious issue and it represents a threat to what many Australians fought and died for and that is a free and transparent and open democracy."

In reality, the opposite is the case. After more than a decade of attacking basic democratic rights under the rubric of the bogus "war on terror," the country is being put on a war footing that will create the conditions for the round-up of anyone deemed to be aiding the enemy—namely China.

The government announcement provoked condemnation from the Chinese embassy in Canberra and the foreign ministry in Beijing. Foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said on Friday that he was "shocked" by Turnbull's allegations against China. "We have expressed strong dissatisfaction at this and have already lodged solemn representations with the Australian side," he stated.

Turnbull hit back on Saturday, declaring: "There has been foreign influence in Australian politics, plainly." He again lashed out at Labor senator Sam Dastyari as "a clear case of somebody who has literally taken money from people closely associated with the Chinese government and, in return for that, has delivered essentially Chinese policy statements."

Dastyari has been the whipping boy for the anti-China campaign extending over more than a year. Just prior to last week's announcement of the new legislation, lurid allegations concerning the Labor

senator hit the headlines. His allegedly pro-China comments consisted of suggesting that Australia should not join the United States in its provocative challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Dastyari is a right-wing Labor powerbroker and money raiser, who has always supported Australia's military alliance with the US and its involvement in Washington's criminal wars in Afghanistan, Libya and the Middle East. Yet he was targeted last year for his association with Chinese property developer Huang Xiangmo, who has donated not only to Labor, but also to the Liberal-National Coalition.

Among the latest allegations against Dastyari is that he offered "counter-surveillance advice" to Huang—suggesting during a meeting that the two leave their mobile phones in another room to prevent anyone listening in. Clearly someone was listening in—in all probability ASIO, which by its own admissions to the *Australian* is extensively monitoring politicians, and undoubtedly many other individuals.

The persecution of Dastyari continues unabated, with Immigration Minister Peter Dutton telling Sky News over the weekend that "a lot more is to come." He continued: "He's a shady figure. If he's a double agent he shouldn't be in the Australian Senate." Dastyari has already stood down from all political positions, but the vendetta against him will not halt until he is forced out of the Senate, and, if the new legislation is enacted, charged and brought before a court.

The anti-China campaign is provoking real fears in business circles about the potential that it will damage Chinese trade and investment. In 2016–17, trade between Australia and China reached \$175 billion, nearly three times Australia's trade with the United States. Some 1.2 million Chinese visited Australia last year spending \$9.2 billion and the value of Chinese students studying at Australian universities is estimated at \$8.5 billion.

Australia China Business Council chairman John Brumby last weekend warned: "The relationship [between the two countries] is finely balanced. It is at a tipping point... It's crucial to understand that by far the biggest single factor that has driven Australian prosperity over the past two decades has been the rise of China and we ignore that at our peril."

Former Australian ambassador to China, Geoff Raby, told the *Australian* that official economic

retaliation by China over the "foreign influence" witch-hunt was unlikely. However, he added: "If the Chinese government projects Australia as an unfriendly nation and they sustain that, then it could well have an impact on tourism to Australia and the education sector."

For more than a decade, successive Australian governments have attempted to balance between the United States—the country's longstanding military ally and top investor—and China, which is now Australia's top trading partner. That balancing act has become ever more precarious as US imperialism, first under President Obama and now Trump, has mounted an escalating confrontation and military build-up against China.

The immediate flashpoint is North Korea where an imminent US-led attack on the Pyongyang regime is being closely discussed in the military, intelligence and foreign affairs apparatus in Washington and preparations are being made. A war with North Korea carries the very real danger of escalating into a devastating conflict with China. The poisonous campaign against "Chinese influence" in Australia is a signal that the ruling class is rapidly falling into line with the US war drive and preparing accordingly.



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