

Australian Labor senator resigns amid anti-China witch-hunt

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13 December 2017

Labor Senator Sam Dastyari announced his resignation from federal parliament yesterday afternoon, following hysterical accusations from the Liberal-National Coalition government and the corporate press that he is an “agent of influence” for the Chinese Communist Party regime.

The Labor senator is the first politician to be ousted in a year-long anti-China witch-hunt, prosecuted by the major parties, the corporate media and the intelligence agencies. It centres on entirely unsubstantiated claims that the Chinese government is “interfering” in “Australian democracy” through “influence operations” and political donations.

In the days preceding the resignation, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared that Dastyari had “sold Australia out,” while Immigration Minister Peter Dutton described the Labor senator as a “shady figure” and a “double agent who shouldn’t be in the Australian parliament.”

This morning, Turnbull called for Dastyari to leave the parliament immediately, rather than at a later date prior to the resumption of the Senate in early February. He declared that Dastyari had “betrayed” Australia and warned that he was “still taking money from the taxpayers of the country that he put second.”

Dastyari had also come under intense pressure from within his own party, with Labor leader Bill Shorten demoting him to the backbench and senior Labor shadow ministers publicly calling for him to resign from the Senate.

Dastyari, a right-wing Labor powerbroker from New South Wales, has been a central target of the anti-China campaign because of his role in soliciting donations from Chinese businessmen.

The immediate trigger for Dastyari’s resignation were media reports over the past weeks featuring lurid allegations about the senator’s ties to Huang Xiangmo, a Chinese property developer who has donated to both

Labor and the Liberal-Nationals.

Dastyari has been particularly denounced over allegations in the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* that he provided “counter-surveillance advice” to Huang. He took the elementary step of warning the Chinese businessman last year that their mobile phones could be tapped, including by US government agencies.

The Fairfax Media’s “exclusive,” likely based on information supplied by ASIO, made clear that Dastyari’s fears were not unwarranted. The Australian media has completely ignored the deeply anti-democratic implications of the surveillance of elected politicians by the intelligence agencies, instead labelling Dastyari’s advice as “disloyal” and even “treasonous.”

The Turnbull government has exploited the hysterical denunciations of Dastyari to try and divert from its own deepening political crisis. The Coalition is deeply divided over a range of issues and its majority is hanging by a thread amid widespread popular opposition.

However, the central purpose of the protracted anti-China witch-hunt, is to legitimise Australia’s frontline role in US plans for war in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2011, the Labor government of Julia Gillard, with the support of all the establishment parties, aligned Australia with the US “pivot to Asia,” including a vast American military-build up in preparation for war with China.

The anti-China campaign, initiated late last year, has coincided with a ratcheting-up of US provocations against Beijing, and threats by the Trump administration over the past six months to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea.

The stream of hysterical commentaries and unproven allegations is aimed at overcoming anti-war sentiment and bludgeoning the population into accepting ever-more direct Australian involvement in conflicts that could lead to a catastrophic nuclear war, by creating a climate of fear and suspicion directed at China.

The campaign was initiated in August 2016 by the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation and rapidly joined by Fairfax Media-owned publications and other corporate outlets.

Among the first “exposes” was a report in the *Australian Financial Review* that Dastyari had accepted \$1,670 from a Chinese company for travel expenses. He was branded a “Manchurian candidate” and stripped of his frontbench Senate positions.

Over the following weeks, the campaign broadened, with *Sydney Morning Herald* international editor Peter Hartcher calling for a purge of “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows,” including politicians and business figures with links to China, Chinese student and community groups, and anyone opposed to Australia’s unconditional alignment with US plans for war against Beijing.

In June 2017, Fairfax and the ABC carried out a joint investigation, in close collaboration with ASIO, into “how China’s Communist Party is secretly infiltrating Australia.” It presented donations by Chinese-born businessmen to Labor and the Liberal-Nationals as a nefarious Chinese government plot to subvert Australian politics. The “investigation” was shot-through with contradictions, including the fact that some of the named businessmen had no links to the Chinese regime.

These unsubstantiated claims have now been invoked by the Coalition government to justify draconian new laws, unveiled this month, targeting “unlawful foreign influence.” The proposed legislation will include the creation of a register of “foreign agents,” modelled on US laws which have been used against Russian-owned media companies this year, and a ban on foreign donations for any political activity.

What is being prepared is nothing less than a purge, aimed at criminalising any divergence from Australia’s commitment to US-led threats and provocations in the region.

Attorney General George Brandis stated earlier this month that Dastyari’s “alleged conduct” “does not reach the threshold of the existing laws of treason and espionage,” adding, “that is why... we are introducing a new offence of unlawful foreign interference.”

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on December 5 gleefully declared that political free speech would likely be targeted, commenting, “Political activity such as Labor senator Sam Dastyari’s infamous pro-China speech after receiving money from a Beijing-linked businessman would become a crime under new laws to curb foreign interference, the Turnbull government has indicated.”

In reality, Dastyari’s alleged remarks were a tepid suggestion that Australia not become directly involved in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The US has deliberately stoked longstanding territorial conflicts between China and south-east Asian countries, including the Philippines, to ramp up pressure on Beijing.

Dastyari did not criticise US militarism, or the US-Australia alliance, which he supports. Media commentaries, along with Labor and Liberal-National politicians, however, have claimed that his comments were not in line with official Labor policy, which was to agitate for Australia to conduct its own military provocations in the South China Sea in Beijing.

Dastyari’s ouster signals a stepped-up campaign targeting figures within the political establishment with ties to Chinese business interests and anyone who has expressed concerns about Australia’s alignment with the US war drive in Asia.

Amid the imminent danger of a US attack on North Korea, this is aimed at ensuring that the official political set-up is unwavering in its commitment to participate in war at any time. Further witch-hunts and purges are on the agenda, with ASIO leaking to the press earlier this month that it has identified ten candidates to previous local and state elections that it said had “close ties to Chinese intelligence.”

The anti-China campaign will increasingly be directed at anti-war opposition from workers and young people. Already, government-connected think tanks warned that the 130,000 Chinese international students in Australia could constitute a potential “fifth column.” This xenophobic agitation recalls the actions of Australian governments in World War One and World War Two, when “enemy aliens” were locked-up in internment camps, and anti-war activists viciously persecuted.



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