

Australian minister lashes out at China over Pacific aid

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11 January 2018

The Australian government provoked a diplomatic row with China when one of Canberra's ministers slammed Beijing over its aid programs in the Pacific in an interview featured on the front page of the *Australian* yesterday. China yesterday responded with a formal protest, labelling the criticisms as “full of ignorance and prejudice.”

The furore is the latest step in a vicious, xenophobic campaign over the past year by the media and political establishment against Chinese “interference” in Australian politics. The government last month tabled far-reaching legislation in parliament that will lay the basis for criminal charges against anyone who acts as “an agent of foreign influence.”

In her interview, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells delivered a broadside of unsubstantiated accusations, declaring that China was “duchessing” politicians in the Pacific, lending funds on unfavourable terms and financing worthless construction projects. Fierravanti-Wells, who is Minister for International Development and the Pacific, claimed that China's actions had led to growing resentment among some island communities.

“You've got the Pacific full of these useless buildings which nobody maintains, which are basically white elephants,” the minister told the *Australian*. “I've gone to islands and you'll be driving along on some back road and all of a sudden you see this Chinese road crew building a road to nowhere and you think ‘hmm, what's all this about’.”

Fierravanti-Wells also attacked Chinese loans to the region. While the terms of loans made by the World Bank and Asian Development Banks were known, she said, “we don't know what the consequences are when [nations] have to pay back some of these Chinese loans.” The minister claimed that she had come across nations concerned about the use of foreign workers in

aid projects.

These comments are utterly hypocritical and cynical. Australian imperialism has a long and sordid history of exploitation and plunder in what it regards as its sphere of influence in the South Pacific. Australian foreign aid and other interventions have always been used to prosecute its economic and security interests in the region.

Australia withdrew aid from Fiji, supposedly in protest over the army's 2006 coup. Earlier, it resorted to military force in East Timor in 1999 and 2006, and a de facto occupation of Solomon Islands for a decade from 2003. In 2012, the previous Labor government bullied and bribed Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru into re-establishing offshore detention centres to incarcerate refugees indefinitely—a punitive policy continued under the present Liberal-National Coalition.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang yesterday branded Fierravanti-Wells's criticisms as “irresponsible,” adding “we have already made representations to the Australian government.” Lu declared that China respected the will of the Pacific islands' governments and their people and said Chinese aid had brought “real benefits to local people.”

A comment on the state-owned *Xinhuanet* yesterday was less diplomatic in its tone, declaring that the *Australian* article, “like many of its kind in the Australian media last year, is rich in allegations and speculations and short on hard evidence.” After defending China's aid policies, it concluded: “If Australia really cares about its Pacific neighbours, it should first learn from China to treat its much smaller neighbours as equals and refrain from behaving like an arrogant overlord.”

Of course, China, like all other major powers, uses so-called aid to advance its interests. For years, it has

engaged in rivalry with Taiwan, vying to use aid and loans as a means of buying votes in the United Nations. Currently eight Pacific nations have diplomatic relations with China, while six recognise Taiwan. The population of all these nations is tiny, with only PNG exceeding one million people.

The Australian government's attack on Chinese aid to the Pacific is bound up with the escalating US-led confrontation with China in Asia and globally, and the drive to war. Australia and New Zealand have long functioned as Washington's deputies, protecting its vital economic and strategic interests in the South West Pacific.

The growth of the Chinese economy and its demands for resources and markets have brought it into conflict with the United States around the globe, including in the Pacific. The Obama administration launched its "pivot to Asia" to undermine China on all fronts throughout the region and prepare for war. Trump has deepened that stance, threatening Beijing with trade war and continuing the military build-up in the region.

In a rare moment of candour, Hillary Clinton, secretary of state under Obama and chief architect of the "pivot," declared in 2011: "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in and let's talk straight, realpolitik. We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea—huge energy find. Exxon Mobil is producing it. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us.

"They're supporting the dictatorial regime that unfortunately is now in charge of Fiji. They have brought all of the leaders of these small Pacific nations to Beijing, wined them and dined them. I mean, if anyone thinks that our retreating on these issues is somehow going to be irrelevant to the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China, that is a mistaken notion."

Fierravanti-Wells's remarks have placed squarely into the public arena what has been discussed within various think tanks and foreign policy circles for years. The *Australian* cited the figures produced by the Lowy Institute estimating Chinese aid to South Pacific nations as being at least \$1.8 billion between 2006 and 2016. The think tank undertook a major project entitled "Mapping Chinese Aid in the Pacific" that resulted in an interactive map in 2015 of where Chinese funds

were going.

Government documents have repeatedly emphasised the need for Australia to protect its interests in the Pacific by countering rising Chinese influence. The latest Foreign Policy White Paper published in November again emphasised the need to maintain strong ties with Pacific Island countries, declaring that "their security and stability is a fundamental Australian strategic interest."

The deliberate stirring up of anti-China sentiment is a bipartisan policy. Labor's foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong criticised Fierravanti-Wells, in particular, and the government's foreign policy, in general, for "its clumsiness" in dealing with "a relationship that is of very great importance to Australia" but she did not condemn the basic orientation.

Wong criticised the government for cutting the aid budget, and thereby, in effect, opening the door for China to play an increasing role in the Pacific. In a similar vein, Labor's defence spokesman Richard Marles last year declared that Australia had not invested enough in its ties with Pacific nations, describing it as the "biggest national security blindspot." In other words, Labor is advocating more aggressive measures to counter China in the Pacific.

By hitting out at China in the public arena, the Turnbull government is playing a critical political and ideological role on behalf of Washington in its preparations for war. US imperialism has long regarded the Pacific as "an American lake" and is determined to prevent China gaining a foothold in any of the small island states that proved crucial during World War II in the Pacific war against Japan.



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