

Australian government to push through anti-democratic “foreign interference” bills

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Despite numerous submissions to a parliamentary committee that provide chilling examples of how its sweeping “foreign interference” bills will eviscerate freedom of political expression and organisation, the Liberal-National government is trying to ram the legislation through as quickly as possible.

Submissions and government answers to committee questions have revealed that, for instance, political parties could be criminalised for participating in global campaigns within Australia, and protestors could be jailed for up to 20 years for blocking a public road over an international issue, such as uranium mining.

To get the bills through as quickly as possible, Attorney-General Christian Porter last week offered minor amendments to their draconian secrecy clauses. The move was to try to satisfy concerns expressed by the large media corporations, which could be classified as “foreign principals” under the legislation. Porter unveiled vague “public interest” exemptions for professional journalists and media staff.

However, with the overwhelming support of the same corporate media establishment, and in-principle backing from the Labor Party, the government remains adamant about the central provisions and thrust of the legislation. The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security is now due to report next month, potentially clearing the way for a bid to push the bills through during parliament’s May budget session.

While nominally directed at combating “improper influence” by any foreign power, the bills are aimed, as Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has stressed, against China in particular. The legislation has vast implications for free speech and political dissent. For the first time, criminal offences, carrying up to 20 years’ imprisonment, would apply to simply

undertaking political activity in partnership with any overseas organisation.

In addition, all individuals or organisations engaged in any political activity with a possible international link, including lobbyists, activist groups, media organisations and charities, would have to register under a Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme—a new form of political intrusion and surveillance.

The bills amount to a fundamental assault on legal and democratic rights, including freedom of association. They could be used to jail government opponents under conditions of mounting war preparations by the US and its closest allies, such as Australia, against China, which the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy has branded a “strategic” threat to US global pre-eminence.

The five bills add to the barrage of unprecedented police-state laws already passed since 2001 under the banner of the “war on terror.” These measures are directed at silencing opposition and suppressing unrest as the war danger grows, accompanied by ever-widening social inequality and deepening cuts to social spending.

Among the examples raised in committee hearings:

A Labor MP asked the Attorney-General’s Department to clarify the “foreign agents” registration scheme. One scenario concerned officials or members of like-minded political parties from the UK and Australia meeting to agree on pursuing common party platforms.

Would that constitute “collaboration” with a “foreign principal”? The evasive answer was: “Possibly. This will depend on the facts and circumstances.”

Another question was: “Which of the Australians present would have to register—parliamentarians, party officials, party members? The answer was: “It is not

possible to provide a more definite answer without a full understanding of all the relevant facts and circumstances.”

A further scenario was an environmental organisation, headquartered overseas, but operating through a local branch in a global campaign urging governments to commit to a particular climate target. Again, the department’s answer was “possibly, depending on the facts and circumstances,” the Australian branch would have to register.

Another question was whether an overseas grandmother asking her Australian-based grandson to write to the home affairs minister about the progress of a cousin’s student visa would require the grandson to register. This answer was unequivocal: “As the Bill is currently drafted, the Australian permanent resident would be required to register under the Scheme.”

The Chinese Community Council of Australia said the 1.2 million Chinese Australians would be at particular “bureaucratic risk” under the bills, as would “academics who research and teach Chinese economic, cultural and foreign affairs policies,” organisations that “shed light on the pros and cons of the interplay of Australia, Chinese and US policies” and “cultural, community and business exchange groups who publish comments and papers about aspects of foreign relationships on social and public media.”

GetUp!, a reformist lobby group, said anyone who communicated Australian breaches of international law to a world body, such as the UN or an international news agency, would be liable to life imprisonment, or 25 years’ imprisonment for merely collecting or possessing such evidence.

However, GetUp!, which is generally aligned with the Labor and Greens parties, did not call for the scrapping of the bills. Instead, it urged redrafting, so that the legislation would only “capture bona fide threats to Australian sovereignty.” What is in effect the defence of the Australian capitalist nation-state is in keeping with the government and corporate media campaign against alleged Chinese “interference” in Australia.

Another submission gave a clear indication of the pressure being applied by the US and the Australian military and intelligence apparatus for the rapid passage of the bills. Professor Rory Medcalf, a former senior intelligence officer who heads the National Security College at the Australian National University, told the

committee: “Foreign interference, specifically from the authoritarian Party-State that is the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a real and pressing challenge to Australia’s democratic institutions and foreign policy independence.”

Australia, Medcalf declared, is “a strategic bellwether” in Beijing’s quest to “attain a military and economic edge over the United States, its allies and partners.” Therefore, the Australian response would be “globally significant” and “Australia’s seriousness of purpose and reliability as a security partner will be judged by other democracies, in part, on how we handle (or ignore) the foreign interference issue.”

In effect, Medcalf was outlining the demands of the military and intelligence services, which increasingly have been integrated into the US war plans. He cited repeated recent warnings issued by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) against what he termed China’s “‘sharp power’ intrusive influence” in Australia.

Medcalf praised as “excellent” Clive Hamilton’s new book, *Silent Invasion, China’s Influence in Australia*, which insists that a US-led war against China is the only way to stop Australia from becoming a “tribute state of the resurgent Middle Kingdom.”

According to Medcalf, the bills “reflect the kind of legislation Australia urgently needs to protect its national security from what ASIO has identified as an unprecedented set of threats of foreign interference and influence.” His testimony, however, underscores the enormous political influence that Washington, unlike Beijing, exerts in Australian ruling circles, both directly and indirectly.

Medcalf’s submission is a further warning that the legislation is part of preparations for a catastrophic, potentially nuclear, military conflict, and seeks to suppress any criticism, opposition or mobilisation against militarism and war, and the ruling class responsible for them.



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