

Opposition to Australian “foreign interference” bills

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Significant public opposition has developed to the so-called foreign interference bills that the Liberal-National Coalition government is seeking to push through parliament with the opposition Labor Party’s in-principle agreement.

Two parliamentary committee reports on the bills are due for release within the next fortnight, clearing the way for the government to try to get the legislation passed in the May budget session of parliament.

The bills are directed explicitly against a supposed Chinese conspiracy to gain control over Australian political, economic and social life. Introducing the legislation last December, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull claimed that “the Chinese Communist Party has been working to covertly interfere with our media, our universities and even the decisions of elected representatives right here in this building.”

The bills contain far-reaching attacks on fundamental democratic rights, particularly targeting international political activity. They introduce unprecedented criminal offences, carrying up to 20 years’ imprisonment, for simply undertaking political campaigns in partnership with an overseas organisation, or for receiving or circulating information deemed “harmful” to Australian capitalism’s security or economic interests.

In addition, individuals or organisations engaged in any political campaigning, including environmental groups, parties and charities, would be banned from receiving overseas donations. If working for or, potentially working with, overseas groups or organisations, they would have to register under an intrusive Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme—a new form of political surveillance.

As the WSWS has documented in detail, the measures are driven by US-led preparations for

economic and military warfare against China, which the Pentagon’s latest National Defense Strategy openly brands a “strategic” threat to US global pre-eminence. The draconian criminal offences and registration regimes will be used, above all, to suppress and outlaw anti-war opposition.

The two most recent expressions of opposition to the bills are a parliamentary submission signed by 31 scholars of China-related studies, and an open letter to parliamentarians issued by more than 200 charities and political groups.

The submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security by “Concerned Scholars of China and the Chinese Diaspora” condemns the threat to intellectual freedom and the “stigmatisation” of Australia’s more than 1.2 million residents and students of Chinese descent.

“We are alarmed that the new legislation would criminalise the simple act of receiving information deemed harmful to the national interest, let alone discussing it in public,” the submission states. “While exemptions have been proposed for journalists, this does nothing to assuage our concern that the freedom of scholars to fulfil their public function will be threatened by these laws.”

The signatories point to the lack of evidence produced by the government, or any of the media commentary, that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is seeking to take over Australia, allegedly assisted by “pro-Beijing” academics.

“We strongly reject any claim that the community of Australian experts on China, to which we belong, has been intimidated or bought off by pro-PRC interests,” the submission states.

“We situate ourselves in a strong Australian tradition of critical engagement with the Chinese political

system, and it is precisely our expertise on China that leads us to be sceptical of key claims of this discourse. We see no evidence, for example, that China is intent on exporting its political system to Australia, or that its actions aim at compromising our sovereignty.”

The academics say Chinese-linked individuals and organisations are being singled out for conducting activities comparable to those conducted by many others, “among them our allies.” As is well known, the US exerts extensive economic, political and military-intelligence influence in Australia, including via university institutes.

“We are witnessing the creation of a racialised narrative of a vast official Chinese conspiracy,” the submission states. “In the eyes of some, the objective of this conspiracy is no less than to reduce Australia to the status of a ‘tribute state’ or ‘vassal.’ The discourse is couched in such a way as to encourage suspicion and stigmatisation of Chinese Australians in general.

“The alarmist tone of this discourse impinges directly on our ability to deal with questions involving China in the calm and reasoned way they require. Already it is dissuading Chinese Australians from contributing to public debate for fear of being associated with such a conspiracy.”

The 31 signatories include David Brophy, a senior history lecturer at the University of Sydney, Stephen Fitzgerald, who was Australia’s first ambassador to the PRC, and Wanning Sun, a media and communications professor at the University of Technology, Sydney.

A somewhat different orientation is advanced by the open letter to members of parliament issued by a range of environmental, religious, cultural, indigenous, immigrant, trade union and charity organisations. While objecting to the serious threat to democratic rights, it argues that the bills miss their stated mark of stopping “foreign interference.”

The letter states: “The stated intention of the bill is to stop foreign interference in the Australian electoral process and on national security. But it has quickly become apparent to charities, community groups and other not-for-profits that the Bills propose grave and far-reaching changes that extend well beyond their publicly stated purposes.

“If enacted, the proposed legislation will tear at the fabric of our democracy, unpicking the freedoms that have made our national conversation so rich ... The

changes will stop charities, community organisations and not for profits from speaking out about issues that are of great importance to the Australian community.”

Sponsored by “Hands Off Our Charities” alliance, the letter mainly focuses on one of the bills, the Electoral Funding and Disclosure Bill, on which parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is due to report on March 28.

That committee has received over 200 submissions raising concerns about the vast implications of the bill, which bans all organisations that conduct “political campaigns” from receiving overseas funds, and may require them to register under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme.

Avoiding any challenge to the main, anti-democratic thrust of the “foreign interference” provisions, the open letter asks the government and politicians to redraft the bill to eliminate its “harmful aspects.”

There is no doubt that the bills amount to a direct assault on freedom of speech and association. One scenario cited at a recent parliamentary committee hearing involved members of like-minded political parties from Britain and Australia meeting to agree on pursuing common party platforms. According to a written answer provided by the Attorney-General’s Department, that could constitute illegal “collaboration” with a “foreign principal.”

Such provisions are integral to the core thrust of the bills, which seek to demonise Chinese people and could be used to jail Chinese residents and government opponents under conditions of mounting war preparations by the US and its closest allies, such as Australia, against China.

A much-publicised new book by Greens member and academic, Clive Hamilton, typifies the tone of the government-media campaign. Provocatively titled, *Silent Invasion, China’s Influence in Australia*, it 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.”



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