

# After Washington briefings, Australian Labor Party reiterates support for “foreign interference” bills

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Yet another anti-China media witch hunt was instigated in Australia this week, just after parliament’s security committee received briefings from the US military and intelligence agencies in Washington on alleged Chinese “interference” in the Asia-Pacific region.

Led by the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), media outlets raised an outcry against a government grant to a gas producer with alleged links to China’s ruling party.

On March 28, Resources Minister Matt Canavan had announced grants of \$6 million each to four gas explorers, including Westside Corporation, as part of a Gas Acceleration Program, which the government claims will boost domestic gas supplies and put downward pressure on soaring prices.

Westside is part of the Chinese-owned Landbridge Group, which a Northern Territory government awarded a 99-year lease on Darwin Port in 2015. This sparked a major furore, and a review of Australia’s foreign acquisition law. US President Barak Obama publicly rebuked Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, complaining that US authorities were not consulted about the transaction.

A Landbridge spokesman this week again rejected media allegations that the company acts as an arm of the Chinese government, insisting it is a private company, and not state-owned. The group has previously denied its founder and chairman, billionaire Ye Cheng, is a member of the Communist Party.

This did not stop the scare campaign, with a prominent part being played by Australian Strategic Policy Institute executive director Peter Jennings, whose government-financed think tank has close links

to the Australian and US security agencies.

Jennings told the ABC that Landbridge was “really acting as an arm of the Chinese government” when it made foreign investment decisions. “There is reach back to the Chinese Communist Party and to the Chinese intelligence apparatus, and that’s something that we should be concerned about,” he said.

These unsubstantiated accusations from intelligence sources are part of an escalating series of anti-China allegations, including that Beijing plans to build a military base in Vanuatu, is financing “white elephant” infrastructure projects in South Pacific states to entrap them in debt, and intends to take over Australia.

Intensive efforts are being made to poison public opinion against China, and Chinese people, in preparation for Australian participation in any US war against China. The Trump administration’s National Defence Strategy, adopted in January, openly accuses China of seeking to displace the US in order to achieve global “pre-eminence.”

Continuing pressure is being applied by the US political, military and intelligence apparatus on Canberra to ensure there is no wavering from the line up against China, which is Australian capitalism’s largest export market.

The latest controversy over Landbridge erupted within days of Pentagon, CIA and FBI officials briefing members of the Australian parliament’s Joint Intelligence and Security Committee on what the *Australian* called “growing concerns over Chinese interference in the region.”

Speaking from the US, a senior member of the committee, Penny Wong, the Labor Party’s shadow foreign affairs minister, told the ABC on April 17: “A

key focus of the visit is foreign influence, and obviously we have legislation that is being considered by the committee in Australia.”

It is now almost six months since the Turnbull government introduced a five-bill legislative package that targets alleged “Chinese interference” in Australian political and commercial life. In tabling the bills last December, Turnbull cited “disturbing” intelligence reports about China’s activities.

On April 19, Wong confirmed the briefings on Sky News and emphasised Labor’s bipartisan support for the bills, despite strong objections by China, as well as considerable domestic civil liberties concern.

“Safeguarding Australia’s sovereignty is above politics,” Wong declared. She reiterated Labor’s support for “the appropriate set of laws to seek to prevent foreign interference in our political processes.”

Wong made her comments when asked to respond to a public complaint by China’s ambassador to Canberra, Cheng Jingye, who said “systematic irresponsible negative remarks” regarding China had adversely affected bilateral relations.

The parliamentary committee, which consists of six Coalition and five Labor members, is due to hand down a report on the two main “foreign interference” bills, which the government is currently slightly amending. These bills will overturn many basic democratic rights by criminalising much anti-war political activity or campaigns that have any international connection.

Unprecedented new “foreign interference” offences will be created, for example, with prison terms of up to 20 years for working with a foreign or international organisation to “influence a political or governmental process.”

The bills also impose far-reaching surveillance over political groups, via intrusive registration regimes, and contain a range of new or expanded offences, such as “treachery,” involving up to life imprisonment, for activity regarded as a threat to any Australian war-related activities.

Last month, the committee already signed off unanimously on another of the bills, which will transfer responsibility for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country’s domestic spy agency, to the new super-department of Home Affairs, which now also controls the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Border Force.

This bill, now expected to be pushed through parliament on a bipartisan basis next month, will concentrate immense power in the hands of Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, including to authorise secret ASIO operations.

Before the legislation has even passed, the *Australian* reported this week that a new high-level “counter-espionage unit” has been created within the Home Affairs department to link ASIO, the AFP, the military and other agencies in operations against alleged foreign spies and interference.

A senior ASIO officer has been appointed to head the cross-agency unit. The security and intelligence agencies, which have been handed vast resources and powers since 2001 under the pretext of combating terrorism, are now shifting their central focus to preparing for war, which also means suppressing anti-war opposition.



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