

# Australia's spy chief demands passage of "foreign interference" bills

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28 May 2018

In a chilling display of the growing assertiveness of the military-intelligence apparatus, the director-general of security laid down the law to Australia's parliament last Thursday.

Testifying at a Senate estimates hearing, Duncan Lewis, who heads the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic surveillance agency, insisted that senators must pass the government's "foreign interference" bills.

Lewis said ASIO saw the bills as providing "integral and urgently required tools to help combat the current threat" of "foreign interference" on an "unprecedented scale."

ASIO's intervention came amid an unexplained delay in a parliamentary committee report on the legislation, which was initially tabled in parliament last December. Nearly six months on, the bills have yet to be put to a vote, despite ongoing "in principle" bipartisan Labor Party backing for them.

Lewis spoke out in the context of mounting US-China tensions that could have vast economic and politically destabilising implications for Australian capitalism, which depends on both China and the US economically, while relying on the US militarily.

Without providing a skerrick of evidence, Lewis said there are more foreign spies operating in Australia than during the Cold War. "Espionage, interference, sabotage and malicious insider activities can inflict catastrophic harm on our country's interests," he declared.

The ASIO chief painted an alarming picture of a country in danger of being overtaken by a foreign power.

"Foreign actors covertly attempt to influence and shape the views of members of the Australian public, the Australian media and officials in the Australian government, as well as members of the diaspora communities here in Australia," Lewis testified. "It undermines potentially our sovereignty, our security and our prosperity."

Lewis did not mention China by name but his reference to "diaspora communities" made the "foreign" target explicit. For the past two years, media outlets have promoted

sensational claims, fed by unsubstantiated intelligence briefings, of Chinese-Australian business figures and Chinese students operating as agents of Beijing, exerting insidious influence in partnership with local "fifth columnists" in the political and corporate elite.

Lewis highlighted the threat to Australia's "alliances"—that is, the post-World War II military and strategic alliance with the US.

He declared: "Foreign actors from a range of countries are seeking to access privileged and-or classified information on Australia's alliances and our partnerships, our position on international diplomatic, economic, and military issues, on our energy, on our mineral resources and our innovations in science and technology."

At a media conference the next day, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull vowed that his government remains "absolutely committed" to the legislation. Turnbull was asked by a journalist whether the government should back away from the bills, given China's criticism of the claims being made of its "interference."

The prime minister vowed to ensure "that it is Australians who decide who will sit in our parliaments and what the policies of our governments will be."

When Turnbull personally introduced the bills last December, he literally accused China of plotting to dominate Australia. He referred to a classified report by ASIO, as well as media reports "suggesting 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."

These bills not only target China and Chinese Australians in preparation for wartime conditions. They constitute a far-reaching attack on freedom of speech, especially anti-war opposition, including by outlawing political activity in cooperation with foreign or international organisations.

Director-General Lewis, a former military general, is a key figure in Australia's security apparatus, which operates as a "deep state" within ruling circles. He was elevated into prominence by the last Labor government, which appointed

him as Australia's inaugural National Security Adviser in 2008. Before that, he commanded the SAS regiment and was Special Operations Commander for Australia in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In last Thursday's testimony, Lewis pointedly defended Andrew Hastie, the chairman of parliament's joint security and intelligence committee. The previous night, Hastie had exploited parliamentary privilege to release secret US FBI information accusing a prominent Chinese-Australian businessman, Chau Chak Wing, of conspiring to bribe a UN official.

Hastie, a government member of parliament, was given the information during recent briefings in Washington, and used the unproven allegation to again accuse Beijing of plotting to undermine Australia's political system.

As if to reinforce Hastie's message, Lewis told the hearing that Hastie's disclosure of FBI files has had no impact on intelligence relationships with Australia's Five Eyes partners—the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Moreover, Lewis revealed that Hastie had cleared his release of the FBI material with ASIO before making his dramatic charge against Chau. Lewis disclosed that he immediately tasked ASIO's Washington office to confirm that Hastie had been briefed on the allegation in the US.

Yet Hastie had not informed Turnbull of his planned speech, a fact that Turnbull was forced to admit in parliament last Thursday. In other words, Hastie, also a former SAS officer, sought permission from ASIO, not the prime minister, before issuing his political bombshell.

Hastie's speech cut across efforts by the government to repair chilled relations with Beijing after signs of Chinese retaliation against Australian imports because of the "interference" witch hunt.

Hastie's speech and the ASIO chief's testimony signal a drive by the US military-intelligence establishment, with which Australia's agencies are closely linked, to reinforce its insistence that there must be no wavering by Australia from lining up against China, the country's biggest export market.

Significantly, the US embassy also intervened, issuing a statement that Hastie's release of FBI information was no threat to US-Australian relations, "and our embassies work hard to ensure we are in lock step as we work together to address common challenges."

The US chargé d'affaires in Canberra, James Caruso, even visited parliament on Wednesday to make it clear that Washington was comfortable with Hastie's actions.

Exactly why Hastie's security and intelligence committee has not yet released its overdue report on the "foreign interference" bills remains unclear. Because of the delay, the bills may not be able to proceed to a vote until mid-August,

after parliament's six-week winter recess.

Major media companies, including Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, have called for the bills to be withdrawn and re-cast because of their sweeping implications for media coverage, including the capacity of the media owners to operate globally and selectively publish information for their own political purposes.

There are also rifts within the ruling class over the prospect of war with China, given the immense profits at stake. And there are concerns that despite two years of whipping up anti-Chinese chauvinism, any participation in a US-led war would trigger widespread popular opposition.

Over the past year, with Labor's support, Turnbull's Liberal-National government has launched the most extensive revamping of the country's security and intelligence apparatus since the political convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Since 2001, ASIO and other political surveillance agencies already have been handed vast repressive powers, and trebled their size, under the cover of the "war on terrorism." Now their powers and resources are being centralised via a new Office of National Intelligence and a Home Affairs super-ministry.

That restructuring is based on an intelligence report handed to the government last July, which warned that "the global strategic influence of the United States has declined in relative terms and that trajectory is set to continue." It also pointed to deepening political disaffection, saying that "heightened tensions and instabilities" were exacerbating "a growing sense of insecurity and alienation."

The "foreign interference" bills are designed to give the intelligence and police apparatus enormous powers to harass, intimidate and jail opponents of the drive to war and austerity.



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