

Australian government vows to pass “foreign interference” bills

Mike Head
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The Australian government this week reiterated its determination to push through unprecedented “foreign interference” bills, even if they affect a broad range of people and organisations involved in political activity.

Attorney-General Christian Porter told the *Australian* on Thursday he would not withdraw the bills, which will compel thousands of people to list themselves on a public register if they lobby for, or co-operate with, a “foreign” person or entity.

Porter dismissed the newspaper’s suggestion that one of the measures, the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) Bill, could effectively defame people by portraying them as agents of foreign influence because they had to register.

“Whilst there can be significant improvements to the drafting to improve the regulatory impact, there is no overarching concern that mere registration paints a poor picture of anyone,” Porter said.

A key figure in the Liberal-National government, Porter rejected calls from Murdoch’s *Australian* and other corporate media outlets to scrap and redraft the FITS bill to target only “influence” exercised on behalf of foreign governments. Instead, he said the bill could be amended to provide a wider media exemption “without detracting from the overall intent and outcome.”

Porter’s comments underscore the far-reaching threat to freedom of speech and other fundamental legal and democratic rights contained in the package of five bills, which also criminalise any joint political activity with overseas or global organisations.

His remarks further demonstrate the intensifying pressure that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government is under. Washington and Australia’s US-connected military and intelligence apparatus are demanding that it override public opposition to the

bills, which particularly target alleged “Chinese influence” in the country.

Porter’s vow followed extraordinary interventions last week by Andrew Hastie, the chairman of the Parliamentary Joint Intelligence and Security Committee, which is reviewing the main “foreign interference” bills, and Duncan Lewis, the director-general of security. Both insisted the bills had to be pushed through parliament.

Without consulting Turnbull, Hastie, a former SAS commander, dropped a bombshell, using parliamentary privilege to accuse a prominent Chinese Australian billionaire of conspiring to bribe a UN official. Lewis, an ex-general who heads the main domestic surveillance agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), backed Hastie in accusing Beijing of plotting to undermine Australia’s political system.

Without any public explanation, the committee’s report on the bills has been delayed, despite the Labor Party’s “in-principle” backing for them. Whatever the reasons for the hold up, Porter’s remarks make it even clearer that the legislation is thoroughly anti-democratic.

The FITS register itself would provide a ready-made means for monitoring and persecuting anyone linked to China, but go far further.

A number of submissions to the parliamentary committee have warned that it has far-reaching implications for political and commercial activity. Constitutional law professor Anne Twomey pointed out that its language was so sweeping it would force thousands of people—including academics, authors and book publishers—to register as agents of other countries.

Any company with a “foreign principal” that operates in Australia, not just media companies, would have to

register and continuously lodge documents disclosing activities that could influence politics. Failure to register or comply with its rules would trigger criminal penalties.

GetUp!, a reformist lobby group, explained that an organisation would need to register if asked by a foreign group to campaign against an Australian policy, regardless of whether the campaign went ahead.

The repressive potential of the proposed bills was displayed this week. Former foreign minister and New South Wales state premier Bob Carr, who heads a China-Australia institute at a Sydney university, was denounced, and threatened with expulsion from the Labor Party. His alleged “offence” was to have questions asked in parliament.

Such proposals for parliamentary questions are routine, but Foreign Minister Julie Bishop accused Carr of acting against the “national interest” by asking about the government’s continuing paid employment of John Garnaut. An ex-Fairfax Media journalist, Garnaut worked with ASIO to write a still-classified report to Turnbull that led to the tabling of the foreign interference bills last December.

Garnaut was a senior advisor to Turnbull from 2015 to 2017. This March, while still employed as a government consultant, he testified at a US House committee hearing on “State and Non-State Actor Influence Operations: Recommendations for US National Security.” Garnaut told the committee that China was conducting aggressive influence peddling in Australia in order to weaken the US-Australia military alliance.

Carr was branded “Beijing Bob” in a recent book that claimed China is “silently invading” Australia. He is the second prominent political figure to be targeted in this reactionary nationalist anti-Chinese campaign. Last year, Labor Senator Sam Dastyari resigned from parliament after being accused by the government and mass media of being a “double agent” for the Chinese Communist Party regime.

The active role of the US military and intelligence machine in this witch hunt was amplified this week by the release of a report entitled “Countering Comprehensive Coercion” by a Pentagon- and corporate-funded think tank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA).

The report calls for “defensive” and “offensive”

action by the US and its allies, including Australia, to fight back against China and Russia, accusing them of waging “a unique form of authoritarian political warfare: comprehensive coercion” to subvert their “democratic opponents.”

No evidence is provided for these allegations, just vague references to secret intelligence material, plus frequent citations from Garnaut and other corporate media sources, and the anti-China books published by Australian Greens member Clive Hamilton and New Zealand academic Anne-Marie Brady.

As well as “transparency” laws to monitor “political warfare,” the report canvasses war and trade war options. It urges the US and its allies to “explore which military or economic measures would have the biggest impact on adversary decision-making.”

One of the report’s authors is Ross Babbage, a former high-ranking Australian intelligence and defence official and one-time Labor government ministerial adviser. The two US authors, Thomas G. Mahnken and Toshi Yoshihara, both held leading posts in the US Naval War College and other Pentagon agencies.

Previous CSBA reports described Australia as the Pentagon’s critical “gateway” to the Indo-Pacific in the conflict with China, and called for the Trump administration to initiate a major escalation of the US confrontation with China over the South China Sea.

The latest report is part of an offensive by the US ruling establishment, which began under the Obama administration, to ensure there is no wavering in Canberra’s commitment to its involvement in American war preparations against Beijing, despite China being Australian capitalism’s largest export market.

Such war plans require police-state measures to suppress political dissent, especially anti-war opposition. That, combined with the demonisation of anyone connected to China, is the purpose of the “foreign interference” legislation.



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