US demands swift passage of Australian “foreign interference” bills

Mike Head
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US officials are exerting mounting pressure on both the Liberal-National Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party to push two key “foreign interference” bills through the Australian parliament this month, before a six-week winter parliamentary recess.

The bills are intended to outlaw any political or commercial activity that is deemed to serve the interests of China. They also seek to criminalise many forms of anti-government political dissent, particularly opposition to Australian involvement in US-led wars directed against China.

According to the *Australian* on June 4, unnamed US officials “sought assurances” that the Labor Party will support the government’s unprecedented laws after the party raised concerns about their impact on media conglomerates. The officials “quizzed Labor MPs on whether they fundamentally supported the bills.” One “source” told the newspaper: “(They were) seeking reassurance about Labor’s position.”

Two days later, the newspaper reported that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull threatened to push ahead with the extraordinary legislation in two weeks, with or without a report from the parliamentary security and intelligence committee.

After widespread condemnation of the bills, including on free speech grounds, the committee’s report had been delayed while efforts continued to draft cosmetic amendments to secure a completely bipartisan Coalition-Labor recommendation to back the bills.

Following the US intervention, the committee report was published yesterday, providing the requisite unanimous support for the main “espionage and foreign interference bill.” The report proposed 59 amendments, none of which alter the central anti-democratic thrust of the bill.

Attorney-General Christian Porter immediately accepted the recommendations and foreshadowed similar amendments to the related Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme (FITS) Bill. He declared that both bills must now be passed before the end of the month. Without providing any evidence, he claiming that was essential to stop “foreign agents” perverting “democratic processes” during the campaign for five by-elections on July 28.

The pressure being applied from Washington is blatant. The *Australian* also said key US congressional leaders were applying “close scrutiny” to the Australian “experience with China” and planning parallel laws.

“In recent months, China experts in the Trump administration have shared briefings with their Australian counterpart in Washington on the issue,” the newspaper said. “Congress has also invited Australian China watchers, including Mr Turnbull’s former senior adviser John Garnaut and controversial academic Clive Hamilton to testify before committees in Washington.”

When Turnbull first tabled the bills last December, he said his government “took seriously” media and spy agency reports accusing China of seeking to “interfere” in Australia’s political, business and academic affairs.

Amid intensifying allegations of Chinese “meddling” in Australia, Washington’s intervention underscores the reality: The US ruling elite retains the predominant financial, intelligence and military influence over the country, as it has since World War II, and is determined to prevent any wavering as the Trump administration ramps up trade war measures and military preparations against China.

While claiming to uphold “democracy” against Chinese “authoritarianism,” a blunt message is being sent: It is no longer possible for the Australian capitalist class to maintain the stance of “constructive engagement” with Beijing that it adopted over the past two decades in order to extract billions of dollars in profits from commodity exports to China’s rapidly growing economy.

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That stance, initiated by the previous 1996–2007 Coalition government of John Howard, sought to benefit from a China-driven "mining boom" while still adhering closely to Washington, including by sending troops to help invade Afghanistan and Iraq. Such a balancing act is no longer possible because the US ruling class, as specified in the Pentagon's 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, has accused China of seeking to displace the US as the hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region and outlined preparations for war.

There is no doubt about Labor's adherence to the post-World War II US alliance, which has served the economic and strategic interests of both Washington and the Australian capitalist class. Labor leader Bill Shorten himself was a key player in Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's removal in 2010, after Rudd suggested that the US should accommodate itself to the rise of China.

Leaked US diplomatic cables published by Julian Assange's WikiLeaks revealed that key coup plotters in the Labor Party and trade unions secretly provided the US embassy with regular updates on internal government discussions during the conspiracy to replace Rudd with Julia Gillard, who quickly aligned herself with US President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia to confront China.

However, Labor's "in-principle" support for the "interference" bills has been complicated by the objections of the media companies. A corporate media alliance, including News Limited, controlled by Rupert Murdoch, a US citizen, called for the scrapping of the FITS Bill. That was because it could require media and other transnational companies to register as foreign agents and curtail their ability to agitate on behalf of their own interests.

Sections of the Australian ruling establishment have also raised concerns about the anti-China propaganda associated with the bills, to which the Chinese government has sharply objected. The fear in these circles is damage to Australian capitalism's lucrative connections with China, on which entire industries depend. Among these voices have been iron ore magnates Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest, Australia-China trade consultant Geoff Raby and former Foreign Minister Bob Carr.

This resistance has provoked an orchestrated escalation of the anti-China witch hunt conducted in the Australian media over the past two years, which has branded leading business and political figures as "rats" or "panda huggers."

Last week, Hamilton, fresh from testifying in Washington, accused Forrest, Carr and Raby of aiding Beijing. "They want Australia to play nice with the increasingly authoritarian and belligerent regime," he declared in a Fairfax Media column. Hamilton's *Silent Invasion* book, published earlier this year, claims China is trying to take over Australia, and declares that a US-led war may be the only way to stop it.

Then came a June 5 article in the *Strategist*, a publication of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-sponsored think tank with close links to the US military and intelligence machine. Ross Babbage declared: "China has been conducting political warfare-type operations against Australia for over a decade. So it's time for Australians to understand that it's not a question of whether we want to fight such battles. The communist regime in Beijing is already doing so against us."

Babbage's intervention underlined Washington's hand. He was the co-author of a report along those lines, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, published last week in Washington by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Pentagon- and corporate-financed institution. The report urged joint action by the US and its allies, including Australia, to fight back against China's "authoritarian political warfare."

While seeking to silence objections within the corporate and political establishment, there is an even more critical purpose to this anti-China offensive. That is to poison public opinion, stifle popular anti-war sentiment and prepare for a potentially devastating military conflagration that would likely mean the use of US and Chinese nuclear weapons. In preparation for wartime conditions, the bills constitute a far-reaching assault on freedom of speech and other basic legal and democratic rights. Whatever amendments are made, that is their central aim.

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