Julian Assange named as threat

Australian “foreign interference” bills seek to protect “US secrets”

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In a radio interview yesterday, Andrew Hastie, who chairs the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, pointed to the real driving forces behind a new bipartisan push for the rapid passage of proposed “foreign interference” laws.

Hastie, a member of the Liberal-National Coalition government and former SAS officer, said Australia’s role in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance made the country a “soft underbelly” for authoritarian regimes “seeking to get secrets from the United States.”

The Five Eyes network links Australia’s spy and electronic surveillance agencies to the US National Security Agency and its counterparts in Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Hastie told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio: “We should consider ourselves a target and it’s really important we build resilience into our political system … It’s really important we have these laws passed, enacted and operational.”

On Thursday, Hastie’s committee handed down a report, with the unanimous support of its opposition Labor Party members, strongly endorsing the Espionage and Foreign Interference (EFI) Bill, a key part of the legislative package. The report suggested 59 amendments, essentially designed to reinforce the bill’s focus on criminalising alleged “Chinese influence” and many forms of political dissent, especially anti-war opposition.

Hastie’s interview was an attempt to back Attorney-General Christian Porter’s demand, issued on Thursday night, for parliament to swiftly rubberstamp that bill and another major provision, the Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme (FITS) Bill. Porter said the EFI bill had to be passed in the week beginning on June 18 and the FITS bill a week later.

Hastie said warnings and private evidence given to the committee by Duncan Lewis, Australia’s director-general of security, made this essential. During his public testimony, Lewis, who heads the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), claimed that Australia faced “unprecedented” levels of foreign meddling.

“Never before in our history have we had so much espionage and foreign interference being conducted on our shores,” Hastie asserted, echoing Porter and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Asked if he could elaborate on the nature of the threat posed, however, Hastie said he could not go into specifics. Instead, he referred to equally unsubstantiated US intelligence allegations of “Russian interference” in Britain’s 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election.

Then Hastie declared: “What we can’t have is radical transparency.” Questioned on what he meant by that, he said: “Radical transparency is Julian Assange dropping a whole bunch of Commonwealth secrets out for public consumption.”

This is probably the first time that a government representative has mentioned Assange, an Australian citizen, for years.

Hastie is an increasingly prominent figure in the Australian political establishment. Two weeks ago, without consulting Turnbull, he dramatically invoked parliamentary privilege to use secret FBI information to accuse an Australian Chinese billionaire of conspiring to bribe a UN official.

The latest remarks by Hastie, who recently received intelligence “briefings” in Washington, are doubly significant. First, they underscore the intense pressure being applied to the Turnbull government by the US military-intelligence establishment to step up its

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commitment to the US military confrontation with China, Australian capitalism's largest export market.

Since World War II, the Australian ruling elite has relied on the US alliance for its own security and predatory operations, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, but Washington's escalation of the conflict with China has provoked rifts, especially among sections of business most dependent on Chinese markets.

Second, Hastie's statement demonstrates the critical importance of the global campaign being conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International and *World Socialist Web Site*, to demand freedom for Assange. The US government is seeking to put the WikiLeaks editor on trial for espionage, which carries the death penalty, because he published leaked files exposing US war crimes and anti-democratic intrigues around the world.

After six years of confinement in Ecuador's London embassy, where he was granted political asylum in 2012, and 10 weeks of being kept incommunicado by the Ecuadorian government, Assange is in grave danger of being forced into the hands of the British and then US authorities.

As part of the international campaign, the Socialist Equality Party in Australia has called a demonstration in Sydney on June 17 to demand that the Turnbull government secure Assange's release, which is his right as an Australian citizen, and guarantee his protection in Australia from US extradition.

Hastie's denunciation of "radical transparency" not only represents a further threat to Assange's situation. It makes clear that the bills target any investigatory journalism that aims to lay bare government war plans, lies and propaganda, as well as political activities that endanger ruling class interests.

Hastie's intervention followed an unsuccessful bid by Attorney-General Porter to insist that it is "utterly critical" to have the laws in place this month to stop "foreign agents" perverting "democratic processes" during the campaign for five by-elections due on July 28. Porter failed to specify any threat.

Yesterday, Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne contradicted Porter, saying there was "no rush" to pass the bills. Pyne told the Nine Network: "These laws and the by-elections are not linked at all.

Nevertheless, Hastie said he was now "very confident" of quickly getting the bills into law because of Labor's bipartisan support for them. His enthusiasm was shared by Labor leader Bill Shorten, who said Labor and the Coalition were "in this together" on national security.

"Our security apparatus is stronger and our nation is safer because of the work Labor has done in partnership with the government," Shorten told Fairfax Media.

The Labor leader spoke of his party's "critical and constructive role" for years in "improving the government's national security legislation." His comments point to the purpose of the amendments that Labor has joined the government in proposing.

As with all the "national security" laws adopted since 2001, initially in the name of fighting terrorism, Labor has crafted amendments to impose draconian measures while claiming to insert "balancing" protections for civil liberties. When in office, it has introduced similar bills itself.

A full review of the proposed EFI Bill amendments to which Labor has agreed is not possible in this article. In general, they are designed to clarify vague definitions of offences such as "sabotage," "espionage," "advocating mutiny" and "foreign interference," in order to better focus them.

Some terms of imprisonment, including for far-reaching new secrecy offences, are to be marginally reduced. Journalists and editorial staff employed by mainstream media outlets can argue a limited "public interest" defence for exposing official crimes, but ordinary citizens will have no such protection.

No details have been released of proposed amendments to the FITS Bill, which will establish a public "foreign agents" register. In response to corporate concerns, however, Porter indicated that executives and lobbyists connected to multinational companies would be spared the requirement.

These modifications only confirm the analysis and warnings made by the WSWS. While nominally directed at combating "improper influence" by any foreign power, the bills are aimed, in particular, against China as part of US preparations for war, and constitute an all-out assault on fundamental political and democratic rights.

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