

Bipartisan bid to push through Australian “foreign interference” bills

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The Liberal-National government and the opposition Labor Party are working together to urgently pass by Thursday two unprecedented “foreign interference” bills that represent a fundamental attack on free speech.

After closed-door negotiations, the two main parties yesterday signed off on a “fast-track” parliamentary committee report recommending more than 50 changes to the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) Bill.

This bill will establish a public register for political parties and other organisations deemed to have links to international or overseas entities. There will be lengthy jail terms for those who fail to register or comply with complex reporting requirements.

Attorney-General Christian Porter hailed the committee report as “a continuation of the bipartisan approach to national security legislation.” Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull demanded the rapid passage of the bills, declaring: “We should never ever be complacent about protecting Australia’s sovereignty and our democracy.”

Many of the Joint Intelligence and Security Committee’s recommendations have yet to be even drafted as legislative amendments. But the two main parties will use their numbers to try to rush the bill through both houses of parliament in a near-record time of just three days.

Simultaneously, another amended part of the “foreign interference” package, the Espionage and Foreign Interference (EFI) Bill, will be pushed through. It will criminalise a broad range of activity linked to overseas political organisations. In particular, it could be used to outlaw opposition to Australian involvement in any US-led military intervention, particularly a confrontation with China.

In total, the two bills run to 145 pages, even before

the latest amendments, making a mockery of any conception of parliamentary scrutiny. Far from defending “democracy,” the bills constitute a far-reaching assault on basic legal and democratic rights.

The extraordinary bipartisan scramble to ram the bills through before a six-week parliamentary winter recess is, above all, the product of intense pressure from Washington. The US is pressing Canberra to step up Australia’s involvement in the US offensive against alleged Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, and ultimately in a war against China.

The Trump administration’s mounting trade war against Chinese exports and investment is escalating the anti-China “pivot” to Asia launched under the Obama administration.

The Australian government is conducting a diplomatic offensive against China in the Pacific and preparing to ban Huawei, one of the world’s largest telecommunications equipment companies, from participating in Australia’s planned 5G communications network.

This drive to war means suppressing anti-war and other political dissent. The FITS Bill amendments negotiated by the Labor Party underscore this central thrust of the legislation.

Most significantly, the committee recommended amending the definition of “a foreign political organisation,” with which links will have to be recorded on the public register, to specifically include “a foreign political party” and “a foreign organisation that exists primarily to pursue political objectives.”

As a result, a political party with international affiliations must register as an agent of “foreign influence” and supply detailed information about the party and its links. This will extend to any group whose major purpose is to pursue political objectives, not just

parties seeking election.

The sharpened focus on political organisations is in contrast to recommended exemptions for “charities, arts organisations and industrial associations.” These vague exemptions will cover “making routine representations” and “where the relationship with the foreign principal is well known or a matter of public record.”

Various charities had formed an alliance to seek such exemptions, and Oxfam Australia welcomed the recommendation as “sensible.”

However, GetUp!, a reformist lobby group, said it would still be threatened by the bill, for example, in its campaign to protect the Great Barrier Reef. “In working with allies across the globe to save our reef, GetUp! will be classed a ‘foreign agent’ for trying to protect our national heritage,” a spokeswoman said.

The amendments also highlight another key aspect of the bills, which is to demonise Chinese people and companies, and purge the political establishment of those in any way critical of the US-led confrontation with China, Australia’s largest export market.

The committee report recommended that private companies that operate under foreign government laws or regulations, be considered a “foreign government-related entity.” This would cover Huawei and other Chinese-based companies, not just Beijing’s state-owned enterprises.

Likewise, executives of a corporate group who “are accustomed to” following the directions of a foreign government, even if they are not obliged to do so, will have to register.

In a direct attack on former government ministers now working for Chinese companies, the committee recommended harsher registration requirements, saying ex-ministers must remain on the register for life. Former senior advisers will also have to register.

A separate register will be established for existing members of parliament, setting the scene for further witch-hunts against MPs accused of favouring Chinese interests. This follows last year’s forced resignation of Labor Senator Sam Dastyari after he expressed opposition to sending Australian warships to challenge China’s territorial claims in the strategic South China Sea.

The Labor Party’s deputy chair of the intelligence and security committee, Anthony Byrne, last week

underlined Labor’s alignment behind the US offensive. He warned opponents of the bills to “not push back.” It was an obvious attack on China’s ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, who a day earlier rejected allegations that China “interferes” in other countries.

Just as the amended bills were due to be introduced today, two developments further underscored the anti-China campaign and its connections to war plans.

First, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which has been at the centre of an anti-China campaign in the media over the past two years, headlined a report accusing Huawei of being the biggest provider of subsidised overseas trips for MPs.

The claim was issued by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded thinktank with close connections to the US military and intelligence apparatus. ASPI named 12 MPs who visited China with Huawei’s help between 2010 and 2015, but provided no information on similar trips to the US financed by American companies or entities.

Second, Turnbull announced that the government will spend almost \$7 billion on purchasing six large long-range surveillance drones from the US military company Northrop Grumman for joint operations with the US. From northern Australia, the MQ-4C Triton drones will spy on China’s activities across the Indo-China region.

“Australia’s alliance with the US is our most important defence relationship, underpinned by strong co-operation in defence industry and capability development,” the prime minister told Fairfax Media. “This co-operative program will strengthen our ability to develop advanced capability and conduct joint military operations.”

Over the past week, Labor Party leaders have postured, for electoral purposes, as opponents of the government’s proposed multi-billion dollar tax cuts for high-income individuals and large companies. On preparing for war with China, and spending billions of dollars on the military, however, there is complete agreement.



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