

Anti-China “foreign interference” bills rammed through Australian parliament

Mike Head
29 June 2018

Working in lockstep with the Labor Party, the Liberal-National Coalition government last night pushed through the Australian parliament the most extensive, anti-democratic legislation in the country since World War II.

With the two parties using their combined numbers to cut off debate, two massive “foreign interference bills” were passed by both houses of parliament in near-record time—less than three days.

Totalling some 150 pages, the Espionage and Foreign Interference (EFI) and Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) laws constitute a far-reaching assault on fundamental legal and democratic rights.

Drawn up entirely behind the backs of the Australian people, the bills are key parts of a sweeping package of draconian legislation. It has a twin purpose: to prepare for Australian involvement in a US-led war against China, and to create police-state conditions that criminalise opposition to the war drive and the accompanying deepening attack on working class living conditions.

The haste to bulldoze the laws through parliament is bound up with intensifying pressure from Washington, where the legislation is regarded as a precedent-setting model.

The legislation is also seen by the Trump administration and throughout US ruling circles as a test of the Australian political establishment’s commitment to the escalating US trade and military confrontation against China, Australia’s largest export market.

When he first introduced the bills last December, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull cited “disturbing reports about Chinese influence” as justification for the measures.

Those still-secret “reports” were delivered by the Australian intelligence agencies, which are integrated into the US-led global “Five Eyes” spy network, and amplified by constant corporate media scare campaigns demonising China, Chinese Australians and “fifth columnist” political and business figures accused of favouring Chinese interests.

The EFI Bill contains 45 new or expanded offences, with penalties up to life imprisonment, ranging from treason to divulging information that “harms” Australian interests. In

essence, these provisions criminalise political activity regarded as a threat to the existing Australian political and economic order, particularly under wartime conditions.

The FITS Bill establishes a public register for political parties and other organisations deemed to cooperate with international or overseas entities. There will be lengthy jail terms for those who fail to register or comply with complex and intrusive reporting requirements.

There has been virtually no media coverage in Australia of the concerted drive to pass the bills, but media outlets in the US and across the Asia-Pacific region prominently reported them and their anti-China thrust.

Under the headline, “China Put on Notice by Australia’s Anti-Interference Laws,” Bloomberg reported: “Australia is set to become the first developed country to pass sweeping laws against foreign interference, in a move aimed at reducing Chinese meddling in national affairs and seen as the inspiration for legislation introduced in the US Congress.”

So, while every effort has been made to keep Australian working people in the dark about the content and nature of the laws, their implications have been broadcast globally to the ruling elite.

Throughout this year, leading US establishment figures, including former presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and John McCain, urged the passage of the legislation. Members of Australia’s Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Committee were given intelligence briefings in Washington. Proponents of the legislation testified before US congressional committees, depicting Australia as a frontline state in a battle against Chinese “influence.”

The final versions of the bills contained about 280 amendments, negotiated behind closed doors over the past two weeks with the Labor Party. The adoption of the bills in just three days has underscored the fraud of any conception of parliamentary scrutiny.

Moreover, the changes were designed only to sharpen the central focus of the legislation, while providing limited

exemptions, mainly for business and media interests.

Many old offences, not used since World War II, have been “modernised” for a new period of war and political convulsions. For example, the offence of treason is redefined to extend to “materially assisting” any “enemy” engaged in “armed conflict involving” Australia. This could extend to criminalising the sort of mass opposition that developed to the deployment of Australian military forces to the US-led invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Alongside redefined offences, such as “treachery,” “advocating mutiny” and “sabotage,” are vague new ones, such as “foreign interference.” Anyone who conducts an activity to “influence” a political or governmental process, including organising a rally, without revealing that they are coordinating with an international or foreign organisation, could face charges that carry jail terms of 10 to 20 years.

Other provisions could be used to charge and imprison anyone convicted of cooperating with a “foreign political party” to harm Australia’s “national security,” which is defined to include “the country’s political, military or economic relations with another country or other countries.”

That formulation is designed to protect the profit interests and predatory activities of the Australian capitalist class, which, in turn, depend heavily on the US for military and strategic support.

Other new crimes include stealing “trade secrets” on behalf of a foreign company or entity, which will be punishable by 15 years in prison. This provision is connected to the Trump administration’s trade war measures against China. It is directed against Chinese companies that Washington has accused of seeking to develop technological superiority by copying advances made by US firms.

The Greens and a handful of crossbench MPs voted against the bills, after unsuccessfully moving amendments to refer them to further parliamentary inquiries or modify certain provisions.

Some of these MPs referred to chilling examples of how far the laws will criminalise dissent. They raised that people could be imprisoned for hindering access to a new coal mine site (“sabotage”), reporting abuses of detained refugees to a United Nations’ agency (“prejudicing national security”) or revealing Australian spying on neighbouring countries, such as East Timor (“dealing in harmful information”).

Greens Senator Nick McKim warned: “[W]e are shuffling ever more rapidly down the road to a police state, ever more rapidly down the pathway to a surveillance state and ever more rapidly down the road towards authoritarianism, totalitarianism and fascism in this country.”

However, the Greens have organised no public campaign against the laws, nor has any other party. The WSWS has been the only publication to fully report and warn of the

threats posed by the bills.

Moreover, McKim stressed his party’s agreement with the underlying, fraudulent axis of the legislation. He told the Senate: “At the outset, I want to state very clearly that the Australian Greens do acknowledge the need to guard against malicious foreign interference in our democratic processes in Australia.”

The Greens have been in the forefront of fomenting anti-Chinese hysteria, opposing investment projects by Chinese companies and depicting Beijing as a totalitarian threat to the world.

A prominent Greens member, Professor Clive Hamilton, yesterday told the *New York Times*: “The first prosecutions under the new anti-interference laws are now keenly anticipated.”

Hamilton, speaking from Germany, one of several countries he has visited to discuss Chinese interference, stated: “Australia is now leading the world in measures to respond to foreign interference in democratic processes, and our response is being watched closely by other nations.”

Hamilton is the author of a recent book, *Silent Invasion*, which denounced leading Australian political and business figures as “Panda-huggers,” “capitulators,” “appeasers,” “amigos” or “agents of influence” for China. He asserted that only a US-led war against China could possibly prevent it taking over Australia.

As the WSWS has warned: “The ruling capitalist elite, fearful that rising social and working class discontent will intensify as the US-led drive to war escalates, is once again making vast, anti-democratic preparations for wartime-style political repression.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact