

Australian government accelerates anti-democratic “foreign influence” register

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Without any prior notice, the Liberal-National Coalition government last Friday abruptly announced that the draconian Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) would commence on December 10, months earlier than previously indicated.

On the pretext of protecting the next federal election from Russian and Chinese “interference,” Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s administration is bringing forward the imposition of far-reaching, anti-democratic laws that were pushed through parliament in July.

In July, the government and the Labor Party joined hands to ram the legislation through both houses of parliament in several days, claiming it was urgently needed to prevent “foreign meddling” in five July 28 by-elections. Without any evidence of such activity, a similar story has been concocted to insist that amendments to the FITS Act must be passed within two weeks so it can be activated immediately.

As of December 10, any political party, business or individual that allegedly works with a “foreign” group or government, including international organisations, would be compelled to register with the FITS authorities, who would hand the information over to the intelligence and prosecution agencies.

Such is the government’s rush that extensive FITS rules, which could force political organisations to hand over private information, such as members’ details, have not been finalised. Instead, incomplete draft versions were hastily posted on the Attorney-General’s web site on Friday.

Attorney-General Christian Porter told journalists that prosecutions could happen “very quickly.” When questioned, however, he declined to provide any evidence of what the government claims is “unprecedented” foreign interference in Australia.

As the Socialist Equality Party warned in a series of public meetings during July, the FITS Act and the

accompanying Espionage and Foreign Interference Act, which contains an array of new or expanded criminal offences, have vast implications.

This legislation is aimed at criminalising growing opposition to Australia’s central role in the US-led preparations for war with China, illegalising the activities of publishers and whistleblowers exposing war crimes and government wrongdoing, and cracking down on the emerging struggles of the working class (see video of Sydney meeting).

Not accidentally, the FITS Act is being activated as the US ramps up trade war and military tensions. Friday’s announcement came after US Vice President Mike Pence provocatively denounced China at this month’s Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Papua New Guinea (PNG). At the same meeting, the Morrison government committed Australia to be on the frontline of any military conflict with China, including by establishing a joint US-Australian naval base on PNG’s strategically-located Manus Island.

Porter said as-yet unseen amendments to accelerate the operation of the FITS Act must be pushed through parliament during its final two-week session for the year, starting today—no doubt with the Labor Party’s backing once again.

Under the FITS Act, anyone accused of existing links to a “foreign principal” had six months in which to register, but the amendments reportedly would reduce that to three months. In addition, any new links would have to be registered within 14 days, or within seven days after writs are issued for an election.

This is just one aspect of a new barrage of police-state measures. During the same brief parliamentary session, the government is demanding the passage of two other major bills. One would allow the police and spy agencies to crack open mobile phone and social media encryption codes, violating the privacy of millions of people.

The other would strip citizenship from, and deport, anyone convicted of a terrorist-related offence, even a minor one, whom the government alleges is entitled to residency in another country. Prime Minister Morrison last week declared that such people would be detained indefinitely, potentially for life, if no other country would accept them.

These measures are part of a desperate scare campaign in the lead up to the federal election, which must be held by May. Australia is being depicted as under siege from terrorists, immigrants and the Chinese Communist Party regime. At the same time, the laws constitute an historic assault on fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of speech and association.

The entire ruling establishment, in which the Labor Party plays a pivotal role, is preparing to suppress rising social and political discontent amid worsening economic conditions, escalating social inequality and the mounting danger of war. It is also seeking to divert this disaffection in reactionary nationalist directions, particularly directed against China.

The US-linked intelligence agencies, government-funded strategic thinktanks and media outlets are pumping out hysterical reports accusing China of employing hackers, university researchers and even prominent business and political figures to obtain Australian commercial and military secrets. The *Australian Financial Review* this month published a lengthy article by a semi-retired academic labeling former Foreign Minister Bob Carr a sycophantic “pawn” of China.

Carr, like some others within the ruling class, advocates that the US should accommodate itself to the rise of China, Australian capitalism’s largest export market. He could well become an early victim of the FITS measures because he heads an Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology in Sydney that is partly funded by an Australian-Chinese business tycoon.

The FITS dragnet will extend far further, however, threatening many aspects of political life. “Registrable activities” include “communications activity for the purpose of political or governmental influence.” This covers virtually every political activity and any publication, in print or online, deemed to have a political purpose.

People must register if they undertake such an activity “on behalf of” a “foreign principal.” In typically vague language, “on behalf of” includes “under an arrangement.” Likewise, “foreign principal” includes a “foreign political party” and a “foreign organisation that

exists primarily to pursue political objectives.”

This will affect the basic democratic rights of millions of people, especially supporters of political parties, lobby groups or other organisations opposing official policies, including the drive to war itself.

The forbidden activities could extend to elucidating a foreign country’s position on a contested issue, such as China’s on the disputed South China Sea territories, or opposing involvement in a US-led military confrontation with China.

Penalties include up to five years’ jail for failing to register or comply with ongoing reporting requirements. This extends to “recklessly” failing to register, that is, deciding that registration is not necessary. Anyone who fails to register, even inadvertently, can be compelled to do so by a “transparency notice” issued by the Attorney-General’s Department.

The FITS Act hands intrusive powers to the register’s secretary to require “any information or documents.” It is a criminal offence not to comply. Criminal offences also apply for providing “false or misleading” information.

In addition, someone who failed to register could be charged with an offence under the new Espionage and Foreign Interference Act, punishable by up to 20 years’ jail, for “covertly” collaborating with an overseas group or individual to seek political change.

These provisions have ramifications beyond Australia. Their implementation is being closely followed in US and UK ruling circles which regard Australia as a testing ground. Within days of the legislation originally being passed in July, Attorney-General Porter flew to London and Washington for what the *Australian* described as “high-level talks with his counterparts.”



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