

Australian government targets China in new “foreign influence” register

Mike Head
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Knowing it has the bipartisan backing of the Labor Party, Australia’s Liberal-National Coalition government last week launched the full force of a new “foreign agent” registration scheme by leveling unsubstantiated accusations against China-linked institutes and political figures.

Entities and individuals with alleged connections to Beijing are the initial, and most vulnerable targets, of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS), because of the deepening US-China conflict. But the registration regime is a direct, and far wider, threat to basic democratic rights, including free speech.

Attorney-General Christian Porter told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that more than 700 political parties, universities, lobbying firms, media companies and politicians had been warned they could face serious legal consequences if they failed to register.

Porter said officials were ready to chase down people who chose to “run the gauntlet.” He declared: “They would be very, very unwise indeed if they engaged in lobbying or influencing activity with government and determined not to register themselves.”

Porter singled out the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the institute’s director, former Foreign Minister Bob Carr.

Nine Network outlets, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported that 13 university-based Confucius Institute cultural and language education centres had received warning letters from the Attorney-General’s Department.

“A government source” said Confucius Institutes were among the logical first targets. The department would request further information from them, and they could face severe penalties for failing to comply with the legislation.

As of Monday, a three-month “grace” period expired for registration under the “foreign interference” laws that were pushed through parliament last year with the Labor Party’s support.

The FITS Act requires registration by anyone deemed to have an “arrangement” with overseas entities in a political activity. There is up to five years’ jail for those who fail to

register or comply with complex and ongoing reporting requirements.

Anyone who fails to register can be compelled to do so by a “transparency notice” issued by the Attorney-General’s Department. The register’s secretary can require “any information or documents.” It is a criminal offence not to comply, or to provide “false or misleading” information.

This affects the essential political, legal and democratic rights of millions of Australians, especially members or supporters of political parties, lobby groups or other organisations opposing official policies, including the US-led drive to war against China and other designated threats to US global hegemony.

The FITS Act and its companion, the Espionage and Foreign Interference (EFI) Act, constitute the most extensive, anti-democratic legislation in Australia since World War II, when governments ruled by wartime regulations.

For failing to register under the FITS Act, organisations and individuals also could be prosecuted under the EFI Act, which contains unprecedented “foreign interference” offences. One offence, punishable by up to 20 years’ jail, is “covertly” collaborating with an overseas group or individual to seek political change.

The EFI Act contains a further array of criminal offences, with penalties up to life imprisonment, ranging from “treason” to “advocating mutiny,” “sabotage” and “dealing” with leaked information that “harms” Australian “national security.”

Porter boasted that the register was already “changing behaviour and contractual arrangements between individuals in the Australian political system.” As an example, he accused Carr of resigning from the Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) to avoid registration, a claim that Carr vehemently denied.

A spokesman for UTS also refuted Porter’s charge, saying the university “does not consider any of its activities, including those of ACRI, to be registrable under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, but will continue to

monitor this over time.”

As of last Friday, the FITS registration list contained only 23 names, but its breadth gave a glimpse of the far-reaching and reactionary implications. The Australian Academy of Science, a non-profit organisation whose purpose is to “facilitate access to global science and technology,” felt obliged to register for “general political lobbying” because it has agreements with 10 fellow bodies in other countries, including China, to “promote bilateral, regional and global research collaborations.”

Prominent on the FITS list, alongside some oil companies and corporate lobbyists, are two interconnected entities funded by the US State Department—the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and the Perth USAsia Centre at the University of Western Australia—to conduct activities to support the military alliance with the US.

According to the register, the US Studies Centre’s contract requires it to host a conference this year on “Indo-Pacific Strategic Futures.” Its aims include to promote “support for the rules-based order” and “a commitment to countering malign influence.” These are code words for supporting the US economic and military offensive against China.

The conference is meant to “create a small but well-informed cohort of ‘next generation leaders’ who will amplify the lessons learned from the conference and become leading voices within the [US military] alliance and partner network.”

The US State Department is acutely aware of the mounting discontent globally over social inequality and the drive to war. In Australia, as elsewhere, this disaffection has been compounded by the barbaric US-led wars in the Middle East and the exposures provided by Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden of US and allied war atrocities, political plots and mass surveillance.

By supposedly laying out some of the most overt US political interference in Australia, these registrations are evidently intended to clear the way for ramping up the witch hunt against alleged Chinese “meddling.”

In reality, the passage of the foreign interference” legislation itself was demanded by Washington, and that marks an escalation of decades of US intervention to ensure there is not the slightest deviation from the Australian political establishment’s commitment to the US alliance.

To reinforce that message, on his first day in the job, the newly-arrived US ambassador to Australia, Arthur B. Culvahouse Jr., launched an extraordinary public broadside against China, accusing Beijing of conducting “payday-loan diplomacy” to trap South Pacific countries in debt.

Addressing the media after presenting his credentials to Australia’s governor-general, Culvahouse was asked about US Vice President Mike Pence’s denunciation of China’s

loans to Pacific nations as “debt trap diplomacy.” Fresh from White House briefings, Culvahouse went further, saying: “I would use stronger language.”

The US ambassador conveyed an implied threat that Australian capitalism’s lucrative export markets in China could be sacrificed in the intensifying US economic war against China unless Washington was satisfied. He said he had his “fingers crossed” that the White House considered the interests of its allies when finalising a trade deal with China.

Culvahouse is a highly-connected member of the US political-intelligence establishment, with a long record of involvement in the secretive machinations of governments, from Richard Nixon’s Watergate crisis to the Iran-Contra affair under Ronald Reagan and the upgrading of nuclear weaponry under Vice President Dick Cheney.

Culvahouse noted that he had arrived just in time for a federal election, due by May. The election is being engulfed by political turmoil, rooted in the deep-going popular discontent.

Previous US ambassadors have played a central role in Australian political crises, including the 1975 “Canberra Coup,” in which the Whitlam Labor government was dismissed after it began to lose control over the industrial and social movement in the working class.

In mid-2010, Labor and trade union powerbrokers who were “protected sources” of the US embassy ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister in favour of Julia Gillard. Rudd had suggested that the Obama administration should make some accommodation to China’s rise. Gillard and her backers, including the current Labor leader Bill Shorten, quickly committed to the US “pivot” to the Indo-Pacific to combat China, including the stationing of US marines in Darwin.



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