

# Former Australian PM denounces anti-China witch-hunt of intelligence agencies

Oscar Grenfell: SEP candidate for Parramatta  
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Australia's central role in the US-led preparations for conflict with China has been one of the great unmentionables in the federal election campaign.

Amid escalating US threats against Beijing, ramped-up trade war measures and the deliberate heating up of dangerous flashpoints around the world, Labor, the Liberal-Nationals, the Greens and the media have sought to suppress any discussion of foreign policy and war.

Despite these concerted efforts to keep the population in the dark, Australia's involvement in Washington's confrontation with China erupted to the surface of the campaign this week.

On Sunday afternoon, after the Labor Party's formal election launch in Brisbane, former Prime Minister Paul Keating approached the media to declare that Australia's intelligence chiefs were "nutters" who had gone "berko" in their approach to Beijing.

Keating said that the intelligence agencies had "lost their bearings" and called upon Labor leader Bill Shorten to "clean them out" if he forms government after the election.

Indicating the concerns animating his statements, Keating declared that China had "always been a great state and now has the second-largest economy." He then added: "If we have a foreign policy that does not take that into account, we are fools."

The comments were Keating's most explicit denunciation of a protracted anti-China campaign in Australia by the dominant sections of the media and political establishment. The former prime minister is widely presented as an elder statesman of Australian politics for his role in decimating workers' jobs, wages and conditions and expanding Australian imperialism's influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

His comments reflect fears within a section of the

ruling elite that Australia's involvement in the US drive to war with China threatens lucrative trade and business relationships.

This layer is not opposed to militarism or to the US-Australia alliance. However, it has issued plaintive appeals for the US to make some accommodation to China's rise in the region in order to forestall all-out conflict between the nuclear-armed powers.

Figures such as Keating are also terrified that war scares and military confrontations will result in mass anti-war sentiment coalescing into a political movement of the working class against militarism and war.

Indicating that Keating was not speaking for himself alone, prominent Labor MP Anthony Albanese, who has previously contested for the party's leadership against Shorten, said that the statements reflected "broader concerns." Albanese's comments pointed to deep rifts within Labor over foreign policy.

Shorten immediately repudiated Keating's statements and pledged his fealty to the intelligence agencies. "We've worked very well with the national security agencies—they know that and we know that—and of course we will continue that," Shorten said.

Government-funded think tanks with close ties to the US and Australian intelligence agencies, along with the Murdoch press, have published a stream of articles and comments condemning Keating. Many have implied that any criticism of the intelligence agencies is impermissible.

The furious response to Keating's remarks is in line with the bipartisan commitment to participating in Washington's military build-up against China throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

In June 2010, a tiny cabal of MPs and trade union leaders, including Shorten, deposed then Labor Prime

Minister Kevin Rudd, installing Julia Gillard. Rudd had voiced concerns over the implications of the US confrontation with China. Those involved in his ouster were later revealed in diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks to have been “protected sources” of the US embassy.

The Greens-backed Gillard government proceeded to lay out the red carpet for US President Barack Obama in 2011. He announced, from the floor of the Australian parliament, a US “pivot to Asia,” including plans to station 60 percent of the US navy and airforce in the region by 2020.

Gillard signed a military agreement with Obama providing for the expansion of US bases and the closer integration of the Australian army into the US war machine. This military-build up, which has proceeded behind the backs of the population, has been deepened by every government since.

A major escalation took place in June last year, with the bipartisan passage of “foreign interference” laws—the most draconian since the Second World War. It potentially illegalises any internationally-coordinated political activity, cracks down on whistleblower rights and is aimed at intimidating widespread anti-war sentiment among workers, students and young people.

The “foreign interference” laws were rushed through parliament after a hysterical campaign spearheaded by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Fairfax Media. A host of articles, based on the unsubstantiated claims of unnamed intelligence officials, claimed that there was a widespread Chinese Communist Party plot to intervene in Australian politics, business and virtually every aspect of social life.

The media campaign, which continues, has implied that Chinese businessmen, academics, cultural associations and student groups are stalking horses for the Chinese regime. The sweeping foreign interference laws lay the basis for a McCarthyite witch-hunt and the prosecution of anyone accused of having acted on behalf of a “foreign principal.”

The legislation could also be directed against the wing of the Australian political establishment that has expressed concerns over mounting US provocations against China.

Articles in the press have denounced prominent figures, such as former Labor foreign minister Bob Carr over their ties to Chinese interests. The press has also

condemned Keating for his involvement with a Chinese development bank.

The prosecution of a prominent political figure under the laws would be a prelude to their broader use, including against anti-war organisations and individuals.

This is in line with the dramatic build-up of police powers by Labor and Liberal-National governments under the banner of the bogus “war on terror,” and a deepening turn to authoritarian forms of rule around the world.

Keating’s remarks pointed to the increasingly political role of the Australian intelligence agencies, which collaborate closely with their US counterparts. “When you have the ASIO chief knocking on MPs’ doors, you know something’s wrong,” he warned.

The revelation of the active influence of unelected and secretive intelligence organisations over elected officials has passed without comment in the media. All of the parliamentary parties, including the Greens, have joined with ASIO in the anti-China witch-hunt, signalling their support for war and political repression.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone has sought to warn the working class of Australia’s central involvement in the advanced US preparations for war. The SEP is the only party to have exposed the anti-democratic character of the “foreign interference” laws and to have campaigned against them.

In this election, the SEP is deepening its fight to build an anti-war movement of the working class. Such a movement must be international, completely independent from the pro-war capitalist parties, and based on a socialist program aimed at abolishing the source of conflict, the capitalist system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.

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