

Australia: “Four Corners” program promotes anti-China witch-hunt

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“Red Flags,” an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” program which aired on Monday night, can only be described as an exercise in state propaganda. It was aimed at inciting anti-Chinese sentiment to justify Australia’s rapidly expanding role in the US confrontation with Beijing.

Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, a “Four Corners” presenter, dispensed with any pretence of objectivity. He breathlessly opened the program by declaring that it would “investigate the infiltration of Australia’s universities by the Chinese Communist Party through questionable funding deals, student activism and research collaborations that are raising red flags. We reveal why our government and intelligence agencies are intervening...”

The ensuing 45 minutes did not live up to the hype. In keeping with the modus operandi of a three-year anti-China campaign waged by the political and media establishment, the program presented the unsubstantiated claims and insinuations of the intelligence agencies as the unquestionable truth.

Except for two Chinese academics, none of those who appeared on the program were challenged. Individuals such as Professor Clive Hamilton and Ross Babbage, a “security advisor” to the Australian government, were introduced without any reference to their central role in whipping up hysteria over supposed “Chinese interference” in Australian politics, or their advocacy of an ever-greater alignment with US imperialism.

The tone was set with “Four Corners” claiming that Chinese hackers were responsible for a major attack on computer databases containing hundreds of thousands of student records at the Australian National University earlier this year.

In their reckless accusations, the ABC reporters went further than the intelligence officials they were

promoting. Alastair MacGibbon, former head of the Australian Cyber Security Centre, was compelled to note that the government may not have publicly blamed China for the hack because it did not have a “smoking gun.”

Rubinsztein-Dunlop simply declared: “We understand that behind closed doors intelligence agencies say the evidence points to the culprit being China.” The program resorted to McCarthyite sensationalism, using a voice actor with a heavy Chinese accent read out the malicious email that the hackers had allegedly used to gain access to the ANU database.

Without having any evidence to present for their claims, the “Four Corners” reporters simply moved on to their next beat-up. The pattern was repeated throughout the program.

A particular focus was the growing reliance of universities on Chinese international students, amid funding cuts and stepped-up competition in the completely corporatised education sector. Proponents of the anti-China campaign, including Hamilton, have darkly warned in the past that Chinese students and student associations are a potential “fifth column” of the CCP regime.

“Four Corners” highlighted the victory of a Chinese student group, Panda, in Student Representative Council elections last year at the University of Sydney. The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper has also drawn attention to the result, implying that it is a threat.

“Four Corners” interviewed Jacky He, a student who belongs to the Pandas. It also played excerpts of a speech he had delivered, calling for co-operation between China and Australia. In an effort to portray the young man in the most sinister way, Rubinsztein-Dunlop stated: He “filmed a segment for a Chinese

state TV show called the ‘China Dream’ named after President Xi Jinping’s trademark political slogan.”

The ABC reporter then declared: “The rise of pro-Beijing student groups is fuelling fears the lucrative international student industry is a gateway for Chinese Communist Party influence on campus.”

Throughout the program, Rubinsztein-Dunlop presented the views of the most hawkish sections of the Australian military-intelligence apparatus as though they were merely common sense. As with the claims about ANU, however, no justification for these “fears” was provided.

The reporter claimed that some student groups had ties to the Chinese embassy. This is undoubtedly the case, but the same could be said of student associations from virtually every other country, particularly the US and Israel.

The program made much of isolated clashes between Chinese students and supporters of the mass demonstrations for democratic rights in Hong Kong. The clear implication was that it was illegitimate for Chinese students to express their political opinions, through demonstrations and rallies.

Drew Pavlou, a student at the University of Queensland, recounted a scuffle that he was involved in at one such protest, presenting it as a major “attack.” Pavlou is one of a group of right-wing students who have exploited the Hong Kong protests to legitimise anti-Chinese activism that is essentially xenophobic.

The protests that Pavlou has been involved in organising have overwhelmingly involved fellow right-wing domestic students. They have been primarily directed against the presence of a Chinese-government funded Confucius Institute at the University of Queensland.

Pavlou and his colleagues have claimed that they are under “Chinese communist occupation” at the university, because of the presence of the institute, which primarily provides language and cultural programs.

Pavlou, despite being an undergraduate student at a small Queensland university, has been elevated by the media as a supposed authority on “Chinese interference.” Others interviewed on the program similarly sought to present the Confucius Institutes as centres of “Chinese government propaganda” without any proof.

“Four Corners” also dwelt on co-operation between Australian and Chinese research institutions. Underscoring the thin character of the claims, this section of the program primarily consisted of a listing of various research projects.

Particular attention was paid to Chinese involvement in projects relating to artificial intelligence. It was asserted that these would aid internal Chinese surveillance programs, especially directed against minority ethnic populations, such as in Xinjiang and Tibet. To the extent that there is any truth to these unproven claims, it only demonstrates how developments in technology are being subordinated to military-intelligence operations, including those conducted by the US and Australia.

Virtually every campus across the country hosts research institutions directly controlled or subsidised by the US and Australian militaries. Private contractors, such as Lockheed Martin, a US arms dealer with close ties to the Pentagon, are establishing facilities which are used to develop drone warfare, artificial intelligence and other military-related technologies.

The program underscores “Four Corners” role as a mouthpiece of the Australian political establishment and the intelligence agencies. The renewed anti-China campaign coincides with Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s recent tour to the United States, where he identified himself fully with the Trump administration’s military and economic confrontation with China.

This is a continuation of Australia’s central role in an aggressive US “pivot” and military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific which was launched by the Obama administration in 2011 with the full support of the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard.



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