

Australian establishment up-in-arms after Beijing bans visit by two MPs

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Australian politicians have come together to express outrage over Beijing's refusal to allow two well-known anti-China hawks in the parliament, Andrew Hastie and James Paterson, to take part in a "study tour" planned for December. The organiser, Australian think tank China Matters, announced the postponement of the tour on November 15 after the Chinese embassy in Canberra notified it that Hastie and Paterson were "not welcome."

Hastie, 37, is a former special forces' officer who served in Afghanistan and is part of the "right" of the governing Liberal Party. He has emerged as one of the most prominent pro-US and anti-China figures in the Australian parliament since he was elected in 2015. He is at the forefront of condemning Chinese "interference" in Australian affairs and advocating the closest strategic and military alignment with the US against the purported threat of Chinese "expansionism" and "totalitarianism."

Since 2017, Hastie has been the chair of the influential Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. He played a significant role in agitating for the sweeping new laws enacted in 2018 that criminalise "foreign interference" and require Australian organisations and individuals to register as agents of a "foreign principal." The legislation is the by-product of a hysterical campaign against Chinese "influence" in Australian politics, business and academia.

In August, Hastie authored an opinion column in the *Australian* that asserted "there is more to be done" against foreign—that is, Chinese—interference and compared the alleged danger posed by China with France's failure to prepare for the "German advance in 1940."

Hastie's false comparison of China with Nazi Germany and its campaign of military conquest across Europe was commented on widely in Australia and internationally. The Chinese embassy issued a formal condemnation, stating that China "strongly deplored" his language and accused him of a "Cold War mentality and ideological

bias" that was "detrimental to China-Australian relations."

James Paterson, a 32-year-old Liberal Party upper house senator and another member of its "right" faction, has also positioned himself as a public critic of China, echoing the propaganda emanating from Washington. In recent months, he has met at parliament with advocates of Tibetan independence and representatives of the Hong Kong student groups that appeal for US and other great power intervention. He regularly raises the Chinese government's human rights' abuses of religious minorities and ethnic Uighurs in its western province of Xinjiang to aggravate tensions with Beijing. He has spoken out in support of the ban on Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from operating in Australia's 5G network due to "national security" concerns.

Given their public statements, Beijing's rejection of visas for Hastie and Paterson was hardly surprising. Governments around the world regularly deny entry to critics of their policies. Last year, for example, the Australian government outrageously refused to allow Chelsea Manning, the renowned American whistleblower and defender of democratic rights, to travel to the country on the grounds she failed a "character test."

The Australia ruling elite seized on comments by the Chinese embassy that the two MPs should "repent and redress their mistakes" to ratchet up the anti-China rhetoric.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale denounced the decision and the embassy statement as "shocking." He declared: "We hope this doesn't stop other members of our government from speaking up against escalating human rights abuses in China. If this chilling effect is allowed to work, we will see even less resistance to Beijing's totalitarian grip on the Chinese people."

Labor Party spokesperson Penny Wong labelled the ban

as contrary to Australia's purported values of "freedom of speech, open dialogue and the exchange of ideas." Centre Alliance spokesperson Rex Patrick claimed it was a "deliberate attempt to influence the dialogue here in Australia."

Speaking for the government, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the remarks were "disappointing" and asserted Australia was an "open democracy, we speak our minds as individuals and certainly James [Paterson] and Andrew [Hastie] have always been known for that."

James Paterson responded with a gloating Facebook post: "What unites politicians from the Liberal Party, Labor, the Greens and the crossbench? A ham-fisted attempt from the Chinese Communist Party to stifle legitimate debate."

The outpouring from the political establishment is hypocritical in the extreme. As well as banning Chelsea Manning, successive Australian governments have fully participated in the US-led vendetta against WikiLeaks and its publisher, Australian citizen Julian Assange, who faces extradition to the US to stand trial for espionage.

The cases of Assange and Manning underscore how the Australian ruling class will suppress freedom of speech and "legitimate debate" whenever it deems it in its interests. In June, Federal Police raided the home of journalist Annika Smethurst for exposing proposed new domestic spying powers for the Australian Signals Directorate, and the Sydney offices of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in retaliation for the publication of leaks revealing Australian military war crimes in Afghanistan.

The claims that Australia upholds "human rights" are utterly cynical. Australian governments, in defiance of international law, have refused to acknowledge the right of asylum of refugees and have condemned anyone who arrives in the country via sea to prison camps on remote Pacific Islands. The current government has either endorsed or remained silent on the brutal suppression of ethnic-religious minorities in the Papuan provinces of Indonesia, the Muslim areas of Thailand, the Tamil region of Sri Lanka and Kashmir in India, to name only a few. Australia has deployed troops to take part in the illegal US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The invitation extended by China Matters to Hastie and Paterson to take part in its tour of China is provocative. The think tank's directors and advisors consist of former career diplomats, military commanders and business executives whose views have generally been far less bellicose than those of the two Liberal politicians. In most

cases, their standpoint had been that Australian capitalism, due to its massive trade relationship with China, should be cautious about aligning too closely with the United States as it has embarked on open strategic competition and conflict.

As strategic and military tensions have heightened, however, they have shifted to a far more aggressive stance, advocating that Australia must step up its own "independent" foreign policy response to the alleged threat posed by China's increasing economic and political weight.

One of China Matters' most cited advisors is Professor Hugh White, a former intelligence analyst and defence diplomat and a leading Australian strategic commentator. His central theme over a number of years has been that Australian imperialism cannot rely exclusively on its alliance with the US to defend its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. His most recent book, *How To Defend Australia*, called for a public discussion on acquiring a nuclear weapons' arsenal, with US assistance, as a "deterrent" against China.

Peter Leahy, a former chief of the Australian Army and now chair of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra, also advises the think tank. Like White, he had previously urged greater "independence" from the US. In 2018 though, he told the *Australian Financial Review*: "No matter how much it might hurt, under Donald Trump as president, we must maintain a close relationship with the United States."

The outcome of China Matters inviting Hastie and Paterson, under conditions in which Beijing was always likely to reject their visas, has been yet another bout of anti-China hysteria in the Australian political and media establishment.



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