

Australian police begin “foreign interference” raids

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24 December 2019

Without providing any details whatsoever, the front-page headline on last Saturday’s *Weekend Australian* declared: “Police launch raids on foreign agents.”

It began: “The Australian Federal Police has frozen the bank accounts of a suspected foreign agent and will move against a range of foreign operatives in the first half of next year as part of a crackdown aimed at curbing unprecedented levels of foreign meddling.”

No indications were provided of the identities of the “suspected foreign agent” or the “foreign operatives.” The article only said the AFP had frozen “several bank accounts,” “seized cash” and “executed search warrants.”

The story had all the hallmarks of an orchestrated leak to the Murdoch media’s national flagship by the federal government and/or the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Both have been under mounting pressure to answer criticisms from Washington and within the security establishment that no prosecutions have yet been instigated under the anti-democratic “foreign interference” laws introduced last year.

These laws are sweeping and vague, going far beyond previous conception of a “foreign agent” as a spy. They feature seven new unprecedented offences of “foreign interference,” punishable by up to 20 years’ imprisonment. These provisions punish cooperation with overseas or international organisations, including by political parties, and even reporting Australian human rights abuses to the UN.

The legislation also contains 38 expanded criminal offences, with penalties of up to life imprisonment, ranging from “treason,” “advocating mutiny” and “sabotage” to “dealing with” (i.e., receiving or publishing) any leaked information that allegedly “harms” Australian “national security”—which includes corporate interests.

In addition, the legislation established a “foreign influence” registration scheme for anyone supposedly undertaking political or communications activity “on behalf” a foreign company, government or “foreign organisation that exists primarily to pursue political objectives.” The term “on behalf of” includes “under an arrangement,” which is defined to include an “understanding” of any kind, whether written or unwritten. There are jail terms of up to five years for failing to register or not supplying detailed financial and internal information to the attorney-general’s department.

The *Weekend Australian* report came just three weeks after the Liberal-National Coalition government announced an \$87.8 million police and intelligence taskforce to launch prosecutions under the legislation. Before that, the government had come under fire in the corporate media, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, for failing to produce “scalps.”

The contrived “exclusive” story in the *Weekend Australian* signals an offensive by the government’s police and intelligence agencies, which have close links to their US counterparts, and which are supervised by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton.

AFP commissioner Reece Kershaw reportedly revealed that a new specialist team of 40 investigators was preparing to move against suspected “foreign agents,” “using disruption tactics including arrest, deportation and asset seizure.” Kershaw, recently appointed to the top federal police post, told the newspaper: “You are going to see that we’ll uncover some very interesting matters.”

The references to “a range of foreign operatives” and “unprecedented levels of foreign meddling” are linked, first and foremost, to wave after wave of unsubstantiated allegations of “Chinese interference”

via business figures, undercover agents, defectors, politicians and university students and research funding.

In all the hysteria, not a word is being said in the media and political establishment about the chief source of foreign “meddling” in Australian politics—the United States. Since World War II, Washington has had a continuous history of intervening, including in the ousting of two prime ministers—Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010. Secret US cables published by WikiLeaks in 2010, as part of its massive “Cablegate” files, revealed that “protected sources” of the US embassy inside the Labor Party helped orchestrate Rudd’s replacement by Julia Gillard.

Moreover, Washington’s hands are all over the “foreign interference crackdown,” which is driven by US President Donald Trump’s escalation of Washington’s confrontation with China, begun under the Obama administration. This is part of a wider attempt by US imperialism to block the emergence of any perceived rivals and maintain the global hegemony it secured via World War II.

Not coincidentally, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson last week cited Australia as a world leader in countering Russian and Chinese “foreign interference.” He said Britain would overhaul its Official Secrets Act, following the Australian and US models. Like its Australian counterpart, the British government has been under pressure from Washington and the US-led “Five Eyes” global surveillance network to publicly pursue alleged Chinese and Russian agents.

While likely to be directed, in the first instance, against people accused of acting in support of China, the Australian legislation goes far further. It is designed to help create a political climate of fear and anxiety in which war preparations and military spending can be ramped up.

Last month, a spokesman for the attorney-general’s department said it had sent out more than 1,500 letters to a “wide variety of stakeholders” suggesting that they might need to register. Additionally, more such letters would be dispatched “where the department becomes aware of circumstances which might be relevant to the scheme.”

Under the legislation, the department has the power to issue compulsory registration notices, forcing individuals or organisations to hand over extensive

details of their activities.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have warned, the legislation could be used to criminalise whistleblowing or publishing material deemed to harm Australian capitalism’s economic interests, as well as many forms of political dissent and anti-war activity.

The outlawed activities could extend to anyone supporting an international campaign, such as to defend WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange against extradition to the US, and people opposing Australian frontline involvement in a US-led military confrontation with China.

These measures have the full support of the Labor Party, which voted for the legislation and this month called for further powers, being considered by a parliamentary inquiry, to counter what it claims is “foreign interference” and “fake news” on social media.

This line-up is occurring under definite conditions. The entire ruling class is nervously seeking means to quash or divert unprecedented levels of social and political distrust and disaffection amid worsening economic conditions, escalating social inequality and the mounting danger of war. As before both world wars, key sections of the political and intelligence elite are trying to channel discontent in the direction of reactionary and nationalist scare campaigns, this time particularly directed against China.

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