Labor Party leads Australian attack on British government over Huawei

Mike Head
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Extraordinary events in recent days have highlighted the intense pressure being applied to the Australian political establishment by US authorities to step up its commitment to Washington's economic and military confrontation with China.

They also shed further light on the opposition Labor Party's key role in backing the US drive, and its continued support for the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has done so much to expose the war crimes, regime-change operations and mass surveillance by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The *Australian* reported this week that US intelligence officials had contacted Labor Party MP Anthony Byrne, the deputy chair of the Australian parliament's intelligence committee, and praised him for taking a stand against the British government's decision to allow Huawei, the world's biggest telecommunications equipment manufacturer, to take a limited part in the UK's 5G network.

The newspaper presented this US interference in Australian politics as something to be welcomed. "Members of the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security said US officials had reached out to the committee's co-chair," it reported.

Byrne had stridently attacked Britain's decision during a meeting last week of the committee's leaders in Canberra with UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab. According to a leaked account, Byrne echoed the US witch-hunting of both China and Russia, telling Raab: "How would you feel if the Russians laid down infrastructure in your own networks? That's how we feel about Huawei."

So blunt was the criticism that it triggered a public diplomatic row. The British High Commissioner to Australia, Vicki Treadell, complained to parliamentary leaders in writing, demanding an explanation for the leaking of the remarks. A planned visit by intelligence committee members to London for talks with their British counterparts was suddenly cancelled. Instead, Byrne and committee chairman Andrew Hastie, a member of the Liberal-National Coalition government, will go to Washington to discuss the future of the US-led Five Eyes global spying network, which includes the UK, Canada and New Zealand.

Asked by the *Australian* about his conversations with US intelligence officials, Byrne declined to answer, but was unapologetic. He reiterated Labor's strong support for the US military and intelligence alliance. "Our closest ally is the US," he said. Hastie, a former Special Forces officer—to whom the US representatives had also spoken—made similar comments, underscoring the bipartisan character of the stance.

Byrne's diatribe against Raab echoed the attack by the Trump administration, backed by the US Democratic Party leadership, against British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government at last week's Munich Security Conference. There, US Defence Secretary Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were joined by the Democratic Party's House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff in accusing China of using Huawei to implement a "nefarious strategy" of digital "authoritarianism."

Byrne won praise in other quarters as well. Greg Sheridan, the *Australian's* foreign editor, who has close links with the military-intelligence establishment in Canberra and Washington, wrote that Byrne deserved "a gold star with oak leaf cluster" for confronting Raab.

Answering a question in parliament, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, the leader of the most right-wing elements within the ruling Liberal Party, declared that

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both Byrne and Hastie should “be commended for the leadership you provide.”

Dutton’s praise for Byrne underscores Labor’s pivotal part in shoring up the bipartisan alignment behind the Trump administration’s “America First” anti-China aggression.

It was the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard that first banned Huawei from supplying equipment to the National Broadband Network in 2012. Her government spearheaded a commitment to the Obama administration’s military and economic “pivot to Asia” to combat China.

That was taken further in 2018, when then Coalition Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, under pressure from the Trump White House, banned Huawei from taking part in Australia’s proposed 5G rollout, supposedly acting on “security advice.”

Beneath the veil of the “spying” allegations against China, the US bid to block Huawei’s access to telecommunications networks is driven by a determination to prevent the Chinese capitalist class from overtaking US corporations in 5G and artificial intelligence technology.

Confronted by this offensive, the Chinese regime is intent on achieving that superiority via its nationalist “Made in China 2025” program to develop the most advanced techno-strategic industries.

China’s Ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, responded to the Huawei controversy this week by accusing the Australian government of “politically-motivated discrimination” against a Chinese company. He warned that this had become a “sour point” in relations with Australia, which depends heavily on China for revenue from raw material exports, tourism and students.

To reinforce Washington’s demand for unwavering Australian support, one of the Pentagon’s senior military commanders used a visit to Sydney last week to accuse Beijing of “pernicious” and “malign” behaviour in the Indo-Pacific.

In a public speech, Admiral Philip Davidson, the head of the US Indo-Pacific command, declared that China was using “coercion, influence operations, and military and diplomatic threats to bully other states into accommodating [its] ... interests.”

At the same time, Davidson foreshadowed new demands on Canberra, declaring: “I want to be clear that the alliance between the US and Australia will be even more critical.” His visit featured meetings with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds.

Dutton’s parliamentary question time tribute to Byrne and Hastie, two of the most pro-US hawks in parliament, was particularly striking, given the political crisis engulfing the Coalition government and the parliamentary elite as a whole.

Levels of public trust in this establishment had already fallen to historic lows before the hostility generated by the contemptuous official response to this summer’s bushfire catastrophe, followed by the “sports rorts” scandals about the government’s pork-barrelling operations to buy votes at last May’s federal election.

Labor, led by Anthony Albanese, has so far propped up the government, refusing to demand Morrison’s resignation, let alone call for the government’s removal. The interventions of Byrne and Dutton point to the hand of Washington in seeking to ensure that its interests prevail, whatever the fate of Morrison’s government.

The bipartisan line-up behind the US confrontation with China underpins the refusal of both the Coalition government and the Labor Party to defend Julian Assange, a prize-winning investigative journalist and publisher, and Australian citizen, from the Trump administration’s operation to extradite him from a British prison to be locked away for life on US “espionage” charges.

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