

Australian government to use “foreign interference” laws against China-linked targets

Mike Head
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Through calculated leaks to the corporate media, the Liberal-National Coalition government last week signalled its intent to hound and prosecute groups and people linked to China, via the “foreign interference” laws passed in 2018 with the Labor Party’s support.

Attorney-General Christian Porter told Nine network newspapers that potential “agents” of foreign powers, including those acting on behalf of embassies, would be ordered to hand over documents in coming months, unless they declared their activities on the government’s foreign influence register.

These moves, directed against supposed “agents” associated with China’s embassy, as well as Chinese language and cultural institutes at universities, are in response to pressure from the Trump administration. Washington is intensifying a US economic and military confrontation with China, begun under the Obama administration.

Amid an escalating anti-China propaganda campaign in the media, frustration has been expressed by Australia’s US-linked spy and military apparatus that no prosecutions have yet been launched under the legislation.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government is also seeking to divert, in a reactionary nationalist and anti-Chinese direction, the popular hostility it faces over its contemptuous responses to the bushfire and Covid-19 disasters, on top of falling living standards and deepening social inequality.

At the same time, the government is making Chinese-linked targets the initial victims of the foreign interference laws to help create the conditions to use the measures more broadly to outlaw anti-war and anti-government political activity that allegedly aids “foreign” powers or is conducted in collaboration with international co-thinkers.

In “exclusives” provided to them by the government and the intelligence agencies, the Nine Entertainment platforms, led by the Melbourne *Sunday Age* and the Sydney *Sun*

Herald, reported: “The Attorney-General’s Department is working with domestic spy agency ASIO [the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] and the AFP [Australian Federal Police] in its revamped bid to enforce the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme.”

According to the newspapers, the \$90 million police and intelligence task force launched to prosecute alleged foreign agents, which the Morrison government announced in December, “will focus on Confucius Institutes operating at some Australian universities and groups linked to Beijing’s United Front Work Department.”

It was “also expected” that “foreign” companies and organisations would be served with notices requesting them to hand over documents.

Those in the immediate line of fire include Chinese business people, lobbyists and those politicians who have concerns about the potential damage to Australian capitalism’s lucrative exports to China. More broadly, academics, Chinese students and some 1.2 million citizens or residents of Chinese descent are being placed under suspicion.

The newspapers reported, for the first time, that “a Chinese company suspected of engaging in influencing activity” was ordered to hand over documents in recent weeks. Asked in an interview whether more notices would be served in coming months, Porter said: “The short answer is yes.”

Porter said his department was now in the “second round” of administering the scheme. “And where an entity looks like they may have some of the features of a foreign government enterprise, we will be enquiring of them about their structure, their constituent nature, who makes up leadership and director positions inside the entity.”

Citing unnamed “senior government sources,” the newspapers said they “can reveal the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China will be a target of the dedicated new unit” and “another target will

be the 13 Confucius Institutes operating at Australian universities.”

Universities will be subjected to a wider witch hunt. Porter said individuals who were employed through a university that connected back to a foreign power could be captured by the scheme if they were “trying to affect democratic outcomes or influence government.”

Furthermore, “universities need to obviously be very live themselves to ... who is seeking to influence their decision-making, their structure, their expenditure, their outcomes, and those people who are seeking to influence universities.”

In a provocative threat, Porter said diplomats registered at foreign embassies would “unlikely” be captured by the scheme, but agents being directed by ambassadors or an embassy could be subjected to it.

Porter said another key focus would be cracking down on “foreign agents” trying to influence decisions about Australia’s “critical infrastructure.” This would include “big ticket” items like “foreign ownership of infrastructure” and “decisions around the sale of infrastructure.”

The government can declare many things to be “critical infrastructure,” including ports, transport systems, energy networks and telecommunications, where Labor and Coalition governments alike have banned Huawei, the world’s largest tech equipment supplier.

Last year, Porter criticised his own department for sending its first “transparency” notice to Andrew Cooper, from the right-wing thinktank LibertyWorks, and for asking former Prime Minister Tony Abbott to sign up to the foreign influence register after the pair participated in a global Conservative Political Action Conference in Sydney.

Those moves, although soon rescinded, demonstrated the potential of the laws to prohibit any political activity connected to an international campaign. They confirmed that the legislation, while initially targeting China-linked entities, goes far further in attacking basic democratic rights.

In a “threat assessment” address late last month, ASIO chief Mike Burgess, while saying right-wing extremists could conduct large-scale violent attacks in Australia, spent most of his speech claiming that Australia faced an unprecedented level of threat from “espionage and foreign interference.”

Without providing any evidence to substantiate his declaration, Burgess insisted that foreign agents were working to “engineer fundamental shifts in Australia’s position in the world,” as well as to “us as a potential ‘back-door’ into our allies and partners.”

The ASIO chief did not refer to China as the threat or the US as the “partner” but the message was unmistakable.

Burgess vowed to step up ASIO’s operations, including by “actively supporting” prosecutions under the foreign

interference laws, which would have a “chilling effect.”

As the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have warned, these laws contain sweeping offences, ranging from treason to breaching official secrecy and collaborating with a “foreign” organisation. These provisions could be used to criminalise whistle-blowing, anti-war activity and other political dissent, including opposing Australian involvement in a US-led military conflict with China.

Unsubstantiated accusations about alleged “Chinese spies” are being regurgitated in the corporate media, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, to paint a picture of a bid by Beijing to actually take over Australia.

The Labor Party, which is committed to the US military alliance, has aligned itself with the anti-China crusade, accusing the government of not cracking down enough on Chinese social media platforms, such as Tiktok.

The media and political establishment remains silent about the chief source of foreign interference in Australian politics—the United States. As whistle-blower documents published by Julian Assange on WikiLeaks and earlier disclosures by Christopher Boyce have proven, Washington has a record of interventions, including in the ousting of two Labor prime ministers—Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010.

Today, the Trump administration is insisting that the Australian government step up its involvement in the US conflict with China, including by providing greater access to military bases and strengthening the US-led “Five Eyes” worldwide surveillance and cyber-warfare network. This is the greatest threat to people in Australia and all their democratic rights.



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