

Australian government joins Washington's anti-China campaign over pandemic

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In comments to the media on Sunday, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne called for an “independent global inquiry” into the coronavirus, focusing on the Chinese regime’s response to the pandemic and the “genesis” of COVID-19.

Payne’s comments, which were immediately endorsed by the Labor Party opposition, echoed the anti-China attacks by US President Donald Trump and senior members of his administration over the past week.

Her remarks were a clear attempt to whip-up anti-Chinese xenophobia and to scapegoat Beijing for the global crisis of the capitalist system, which has revealed the inability of every government in the world to protect the health and safety of ordinary people.

Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Insiders” program, Payne said that her concerns regarding government “transparency” about the virus had reached a “high point.” She specifically called for “transparency from China” and did not name any other country or government.

Payne was hinting at claims that the Chinese regime covered-up the extent of the pandemic when it began in Wuhan. While Beijing undoubtedly carried out a campaign of damage control, the assertions of senior figures in the US government that its response to the crisis was stymied by a lack of information from China is a sham.

In January, US officials received intelligence briefings warning that the virus would likely develop into a global pandemic. In response they did nothing to improve the inadequate healthcare system, while preparing a multi-trillion dollar bailout of the country’s banks and corporations. Throughout February, Trump downplayed the virus, as did leading Democrats and outlets such as the *New York Times*.

The attitude of Australian governments was the same. Well into February, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was

declaring that mass gatherings were safe, and that Australia would suffer minimal impact from the pandemic. Only when the virus began spreading rapidly and after insistent demands from medical experts did the federal and state governments introduce lockdown measures.

Payne’s reference to the “genesis” of the virus was also drawn from the playbook of the White House. Over the past week, senior figures in the US administration, including Trump, have asserted that the virus may have originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The claim, for which they provided not a shred of evidence, began as a conspiracy theory circulating on extreme right-wing and fascistic websites. It contradicts the assessment of virtually every medical expert and virologist that COVID-19 likely emerged in a Wuhan wet market.

Perhaps most significantly, Payne stated that any inquiry should be conducted independently of the World Health Organisation (WHO). She said this under conditions of a frontal assault on the global body by the US government, which has accused it of being “soft” on China.

Just days earlier, Trump had announced that the US would halt funding to the WHO, in a move the WSWS characterised as a “crime against humanity,” because of its damaging impact on the global response to the pandemic and other health crises. While Trump’s move was broadly condemned, Morrison sympathetically said that there were legitimate “questions” to be raised about the WHO’s handling of coronavirus.

Other government representatives were more explicit, with Liberal MP Tim Wilson accusing the WHO of having been “captured by China” and of “putting politics first.”

In other words, the Australian government is again positioning itself as one of Washington’s chief political

attack dogs in a bellicose campaign against China, and any international organisation viewed as an obstacle to US interests.

This has been the case under successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike since the US began a vast military build-up against China in 2011, which has been escalated into a full-scale trade and economic war by the Trump administration.

As it has done repeatedly, Labor has been a determined advocate of the US line. Its shadow foreign minister Penny Wong responded to Payne's comments by declaring that the government must follow through on its anti-China rhetoric.

Wong called on Payne to launch an international campaign for the US-inspired call for a global inquiry. "We welcome this idea from Senator Payne, but what we would say is we need to move from idea and words to action, and we hope Senator Payne, as Australia's chief diplomat to get out into the international community to gain support for this idea," Wong said.

The US and Australia are cynically seeking to exploit the pandemic to ramp-up pressure on China, isolate it from potential allies throughout the Asia-Pacific and internationally, and legitimise aggressive economic, diplomatic and military measures against Beijing.

That Australian governments are placing the country on the frontlines of a US confrontation with China was underscored by the response of its Canberra embassy. It released a statement yesterday accusing the Australian authorities of "grossly interfering" in China's internal affairs and "misrepresenting facts."

The broader agenda underlying the anti-China campaign has been spelled out by federal government MP Andrew Hastie, who chairs the parliamentary committee on security and intelligence. Although he is a backbencher, Hastie has been elevated to great prominence over the past several years and has functioned as a mouthpiece of the US and Australian intelligence agencies that have spearheaded the ever-more bellicose stance towards Beijing.

Hastie has initiated a petition on his official parliamentary website demanding that governments "take action on Australian sovereignty." It repeats the unsubstantiated assertions of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the main domestic spy outfit, that there has been a Chinese campaign of "foreign interference" targeting virtually every aspect of Australian society.

The petition declares: "The coronavirus pandemic has

exposed the true cost of relying too heavily on an authoritarian regime like China for our economic security and prosperity." It warns that "Australian institutions, universities, and assets are now contested; our sovereignty and independence will be diminished if we don't continue to push back."

Hastie calls for Australia to be "united as a nation" to wage a campaign for "sovereignty in the struggle against authoritarian regimes."

The unsubstantiated claims of "foreign interference" have been aggressively promoted by the entire political and media establishment for more than five years. They served as the ideological justification for draconian "foreign interference" laws, passed with bipartisan support in 2018, which paved the way for the illegalisation of anti-war activities and organisations.

Hastie's petition is a warning that frame-ups and victimisations of Chinese-Australian individuals and of anyone who opposes the preparations for conflict with China will be escalated.

It is also a particularly putrid expression of the attempts by governments to divert attention from their own responsibility for the coronavirus crisis and the deepening social hardship caused by the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Governments are whipping-up nationalism and xenophobia in a bid to blunt mounting social anger from below, and to promote the fraudulent claim that "we are all in this together," as part of what the federal government has dubbed "team Australia."

This campaign has already led to a rise in the number of racial attacks on Chinese- and Asian-Australians. Over the past week, a number of incidents have been reported in which people presumed to have been of Chinese descent have been physically-attacked, spat at and accused of being responsible for the pandemic.

Underscoring the widespread hostility to racism and nationalism among ordinary people, Hastie's petition has been signed by fewer than 3,000 individuals. By contrast, the hashtag #IStandWithAsianAustralians trended on Twitter yesterday in response to reports of the racist assaults.



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