

Australian government places country on frontline of anti-China witch hunt

Mike Head
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Over the past week, Australia's Liberal-National government has taken an increasingly provocative stand against China, lining up behind Washington's desperate bid to falsely blame Beijing for the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government began the week by becoming the first, and initially only, country in the world to call for an international inquiry into origins and handling of the pandemic. While couched in neutral terms, the call was obviously directed against China, feeding into the Trump administration's unsubstantiated claims that the virus was let loose from a Wuhan laboratory.

Any genuine proposal for an inquiry would have required consultation with all the countries affected, including China, as well as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation. Instead, it was launched unilaterally on Australian television by Foreign Minister Marise Payne.

Washington's hand was displayed a few days later when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised the call, urged "all of our partners" to support it, and accused China of applying economic coercion to Australia. Pompeo's intervention came as Trump, backed by the US Democrats, stepped up Washington's aggressive witch hunt against China, threatening massive trade and financial retaliation.

The Trump administration's accusations against China are clearly an attempt to deflect attention from its own criminally negligent response to the virus that has resulted in more than 60,000 deaths in the US so far. Reputable scientific studies have established that COVID-19 was not produced in laboratory but is a result of zoonotic transfer from animals to humans.

Equally, attempts to foist responsibility on Beijing for allegedly covering up the coronavirus fly in the face of

the record. China informed the WHO of the previously unknown disease on January 3 and the US and international media began reporting on the disease, based on medical data rapidly supplied by China.

Canberra's pro-US and anti-China stance has been so strident that it has brought to the surface sharp conflicts within the Australian ruling class, sections of which rely heavily on exports to China, or revenue from Chinese students and tourists. Two Western Australian billionaires, iron ore magnate Andrew Forrest and media mogul Kerry Stokes, have publicly opposed the government's provocative call for an international inquiry.

On Wednesday, Forrest invited a Chinese consul-general, Long Zhou, to address a media conference to announce that Forrest had used his extensive top-level Chinese connections to secure 10 million badly-needed COVID-19 testing kits for Australia. After being denounced and ridiculed by Morrison and other government leaders for doing so, Forrest published a media column today, saying he remained "unapologetic to those who think racism or isolationism is a viable path for Australia."

On Thursday, Stokes used a front-page interview of the *West Australian* newspaper, which he controls, to denounce those who "poke our biggest provider of income in the eye." He predicted the Australian dollar would plunge in value to US25 cents if China cut all trade with Australia.

Regardless of the pair's anxious warnings, however, the political establishment has escalated its offensive, taking to a new level its commitment to the US ruling elite's determination to prevent China from challenging its post-World War II hegemony over the Indo-Pacific and internationally.

Payne and Morrison bluntly accused China of

“economic coercion” after Beijing’s Australian ambassador Cheng Jingye told the *Australian Financial Review* on Monday that the government’s pursuit of an inquiry could spark a Chinese consumer boycott of students and tourists visiting Australia, as well as beef and wine sales.

Cheng’s reference to students pointed to another aspect of the Morrison government’s anti-China offensive. In a bid to end Australian universities’ reliance on foreign students—especially from China—the government has vindictively refused to assist these hundreds of thousands of students now facing the destruction of their part-time jobs, and instead told them to “go home.” As a result, over the next three years alone, the universities collectively face the loss of \$19 billion in revenue.

Cheng’s comments also came after the Trump administration last week provocatively sent US warships, accompanied by an Australian Navy frigate, into the South China Sea near Malaysia, where China and Vietnam also have competing claims.

Throughout the week, the language of the government and sections of the media has become increasingly rabid in its nationalism and anti-Chinese demagoguery. *Sydney Morning Herald* international and political editor Peter Hartcher ratcheted up his previous claims of a Chinese Communist Party conspiracy to take over Australia with the help of local “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows.”

Borrowing a quote from Zack Cooper, a former Pentagon and White House official who is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington neoconservative think tank, Hartcher declared: “Capitulation is Australia’s path to vassaldom.”

Hartcher wrote: “Australia has arrived at its moment of truth.” Denouncing Forrest and Stokes as “craven characters,” he insisted: “It is now presented with the explicit choice between sovereignty and money.”

Hartcher turned reality on its head. He accused Beijing of publicly “bullying” Australian governments, as it had been doing previously “behind closed doors.” The historical record, including the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975 and the removal of Kevin Rudd in 2010, shows that it is the US ruling elite that has intervened repeatedly to enforce its interests, utilising its military might and substantial financial

investment in Australia.

The *Australian* has gone into overdrive, slavishly regurgitating Washington’s line that China is entirely responsible for the pandemic, and accusing Forrest and Stokes of disloyalty to the nation. “Business must not dictate the nation’s foreign policy,” its May 1 editorial stated. Citing warnings by a former Australian intelligence chief, it declared that Forrest “is on dangerous ground” in “wading into the Australia-China relationship.”

The opposition Labor Party, via its shadow foreign affairs minister Penny Wong, not only endorsed the government’s inquiry call. Labor senator Kimberley Kitching said Stokes and Forrest could face legal action under the draconian “foreign interference” legislation pushed through in 2018. “If Mr Stokes or Mr Forrest are going to advocate foreign policy positions that sound very similar to those pushed by foreign governments, they need to be mindful of the Foreign Influence Transparency laws,” she warned.

A schism appeared in the Labor Party, however, with Western Australian (WA) Premier Mark McGowan aligning himself with Forrest and Stokes. He said economic recovery depended on good relations with China and other export markets. “Our trade keeps the national income alive and our company tax revenues keep the federal budget alive,” he asserted.

WA is the world’s biggest producer of iron ore, with BHP, Rio Tinto and Forrest’s Fortescue Metals Group exporting hundreds of millions of tonnes of ore to China each year. This underscores Australian capitalism’s acute vulnerability to the escalating US-China confrontation.

Nonetheless, in the interests of the dominant financial elite, successive governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike—have increasingly placed Australia’s population on the front line of a potentially catastrophic war that would be fought with nuclear weapons. This week marks a sharp intensification of that danger.



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