

Australian government falsely claims credit for global COVID-19 inquiry

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21 May 2020

Australia's Liberal-National government, backed by the Labor Party opposition, is provocatively claiming a victory after the World Health Assembly passed a resolution on Tuesday proposing an inquiry into the coronavirus pandemic. That is despite the resolution being very different to the original anti-China version proposed by Australia on behalf of the US.

When Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne first publicly called for an investigation, during an appearance on national television on April 19, she declared that it would have to be conducted outside the World Health Organisation (WHO). For the WHO to hold an inquiry, she declared, would be “poacher and gamekeeper.”

This week's outcome repudiates that demand. Buried in the long, multi-faceted resolution is a proposal for an inquiry to be convened by the WHO itself, once the pandemic has passed, alongside a call for increased funding for WHO's operations to combat COVID-19.

Despite a bullying intervention by US President Donald Trump, who again threatened to cut off funding to the WHO, the final resolution, co-sponsored by China, the EU and numerous other countries, was adopted by consensus in the 194-member assembly.

For all the efforts of the Trump administration and its media backers to blame China and the WHO for the pandemic, accompanied by unsubstantiated accusations that the COVID-19 virus was let loose by a Wuhan research laboratory, the resolution does not mention China or Wuhan.

Nor does it include Australia's incendiary demand for investigators to be sent into China with the same powers as weapons inspectors. This recalls the role of weapons inspectors in helping to concoct the fabricated “weapons of mass destruction” claims invoked by the US and its allies to invade Iraq in 2003. Instead, the resolution calls for a “comprehensive” evaluation of the global response, including, but not limited to, WHO's performance.

Any such evaluation, if genuine, would have to lay bare the belated and disastrous response of the major capitalist governments, notably those of the US and UK, which has killed tens of thousands of people and devastated the lives of millions more.

One government dissented from the resolution—that of the United States. The US embassy in Geneva issued a statement that welcomed the inquiry, but “disassociated” itself from the resolution's references to “sexual and reproductive health,” saying this could permit abortions.

The US statement further rejected the provisions on pooling or sharing vaccine developments to the benefit of poorer countries, saying this would “send the wrong message to innovators who will be essential to the solutions the whole world needs.”

In other words, as has been the case throughout the pandemic, the US government's response subordinates lives and public health to the rapacious profit-making requirements of US corporations, not least the pharmaceutical giants.

As the Geneva assembly convened, Trump ramped-up his inflammatory anti-China agitation. He told a White House meeting on Monday that the WHO was “a puppet of China, they're China-centric” and “China should be held responsible, they have hurt the world very badly.”

On Tuesday, Trump tweeted a letter his administration had sent to the WHO threatening to cut off funding again. It accused the WHO of a “failed response to the COVID-19 outbreak” and an “alarming lack of independence from the People's Republic of China”.

The timeline of Australia's role is revealing.

Payne's April 19 attack on the WHO, literally comparing it to a “poacher” seeking to steal and kill at the expense of the world's people, was obviously part of a US push to demonise China and the WHO. Her comments came days after US President Donald Trump first suspended US funding for the WHO.

Asked by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" host David Speers if an investigation could be convened by the WHO "or do you agree they're too beholden to China?" Payne said:

"[W]e share some of the concerns that the United States have identified in relation to the World Health Organisation. That is certainly correct... I'm not sure that you can have the health organisation, which has been responsible for disseminating much of the international communications material, and doing much of the early engagement and investigative work, also as the review mechanism. That strikes me as somewhat poacher and gamekeeper."

However, Payne offered no suggestion as to who would conduct an investigation.

Four days later, on April 23, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stepped up the US-instigated campaign, advocating powers to send investigators into a country to probe a disease outbreak. He likened them to weapon inspectors deployed to countries, supposedly to verify disarmament programs.

Morrison reiterated the call for an unspecified "independent" review of the WHO's performance and also proposed "reform" of WHO's governance to remove the right of individual members to veto proposed health strategies.

He tweeted: "Just got off the phone with US President @realDonaldTrump. We had a very constructive discussion on our health responses to #COVID19 and the need to get our market-led and business centres economies up and running again."

According to media reports, Morrison raised a "three-point plan" in a series of telephone calls with Trump, French President Emanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates.

Morrison's bid drew public praise from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who urged "all of our partners" to support it, and accused China of applying economic coercion to Australia in retaliation.

Australia also insisted that an investigation must commence quickly, even though most countries around the world are still confronting a worsening COVID-19 crisis, with officially-recorded infections soaring toward 5 million and acknowledged deaths toward 320,000.

Four days before Payne's television appearance, however, on April 15, the European Union had issued a draft resolution that ultimately formed the basis of this week's World Health Assembly consensus. This

effectively sidelined the US push and left the Australian government isolated, forcing it to fall in behind the EU motion.

Even so, the Morrison government is claiming a win, boasting that it toughened up the EU draft, so that the final resolution states that the WHO's review should be "impartial, independent and comprehensive."

The resolution also leaves open the possibility of renewed attempts to scapegoat China for the pandemic. On page six, it says the WHO should work to "identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population."

The Australian government not given up on its inspection demands. In his two-minute video address to the World Health Assembly, Australian Health Minister Greg Hunt said the inquiry "could include an examination of whether the WHO's mandate and powers, including around inspection, need to be strengthened."

At every point in this worldwide calamity, the Australian government has been in lockstep with the US administration, trying to spearhead its escalating confrontation with China. It has also enjoyed the bipartisan backing of the Labor Party, whose leader Anthony Albanese and shadow foreign minister Penny Wong have lauded it for pushing for an inquiry, while voicing concern at how clumsily the government lined up with Trump.

This reflects alarm in some ruling class circles over the potential loss of lucrative export markets in China, ranging from iron ore, coal and gas exports to agricultural produce. Nonetheless, the entire political establishment is committed to the US conflict with China, because of Australian capitalism's dependence on US investment and military power, even though it means being on the firing line in a potentially catastrophic nuclear war.



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