

Australian government launches anti-China inquiry in universities

Mike Head
3 September 2020

In line with the Trump administration's escalating anti-China offensive, the Liberal-National government this week announced a federal parliamentary inquiry into alleged "foreign interference" in Australian universities.

Immediately backed by the Labor Party opposition, the inquiry is another direct threat to free speech and also international academic collaboration, which is one of the lifebloods of global research and the development of human knowledge.

It signals a further intensification of the anti-China witch-hunt that has been underway for several years, spearheaded by the US-integrated intelligence apparatus and the corporate media.

The move came just days after Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government announced—also with Labor's bipartisan support—an unprecedented Foreign Relations Bill, essentially designed to tear up or prohibit all agreements with Chinese entities by universities, as well as state, territory and municipal governments.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton last Sunday outlined the terms of reference for McCarthyite-style parliamentary hearings into "foreign interference in the university sector" in a letter to the chair of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Liberal Party MP Andrew Hastie.

Dutton commissioned the committee to examine "the nature and extent to which foreign actors are interfering in Australian universities, including staff and student bodies, publicly funded research agencies and competitive research grant agencies."

Alongside "foreign actors," the inquiry's targets include university managements and workers. Dutton said the inquiry will "examine whether the current oversight and reporting requirements in response to these issues are appropriate."

Hastie, a US-connected former military commander, earlier wrote to Morrison publicly requesting such an inquiry. The deputy chair of the committee, Labor's Anthony Byrne, supported Hastie's call.

Byrne told the *Australian* media's appear that Australian universities have turned a blind eye to their own academics selling their knowledge to a foreign power through a program that the FBI have identified as a national and economic espionage threat."

According to the *Australian*, which has played a key role in fomenting the anti-China hysteria, the inquiry, "will examine how other countries such as the US are dealing with the threat of foreign interference." And it "is expected to hear testimony from senior figures" in the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and "security analysts."

Last week, an "investigation" by the *Australian* set out to blacken the names of 30 Australian academics who had supposedly participated in a Chinese government "Thousand Talents" plan to share research activities with Chinese universities.

The real source of this "investigation" was indicated when the newspaper reported: "In the US, the FBI has launched more than 1,000 investigations into the actual or attempted theft of American technology by foreign powers." Among the recent cases was said to be a scientist "with access to NASA's secrets" who was a participant in "China's Talent programs."

The inquiry comes on top of a web of investigations, "guidelines" and legislation in which university managements are already working hand-in-glove with the spy agencies and federal police, monitoring academics.

The *Australian* said the Morrison government "has already launched an investigation into some cases exposed by" the newspaper, with "Education Minister Dan Tehan saying the matters were now operational." It added: "ASIO has repeatedly briefed universities about the potential risk of programs like the Thousand Talents plan this year."

While expressing concern, university employers pledged to cooperate with the inquiry. Vicki Thomson, the chief executive of the "Group of Eight" wealthiest public universities, said her universities looked forward to appearing before the inquiry to defend their research

partnerships.

Since last August, the university managements have been members of the government's University Foreign Interference Taskforce, which is working to "identify and analyse emerging threats" and ensure "research integrity" and "cyber security."

The taskforce steering group is led by "National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator" Chris Teal, along with a senior ASIO officer, backed by representatives from the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Signals Directorate (the electronic surveillance agency), the Office of National Intelligence, the Australian Geospatial Intelligence Organisation (the satellite spy agency) and the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre, which monitors financial transactions.

The deputy chair is RMIT University Vice-Chancellor Martin Bean, and the members include his counterparts from La Trobe, Newcastle and Queensland universities, plus Thomson and Universities Australia CEO Catriona Jackson.

This taskforce produced 47-page "foreign interference" guidelines for universities last November. The guidelines require universities to pursue "due diligence activities" and ensure "engagement with relevant Commonwealth agencies on legislative compliance and foreign interference."

Among the questions posed to universities by the guidelines are: "Does the activity or partnership proposed need to be registered under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme?" and "Do contracts provide for the primacy of Australian laws?"

These guidelines raise the spectre of prosecutions. "Some activities are covered by specific legislation, regulation and codes of conduct such as the DTCA [the Defence Trade Controls Act] and Autonomous Sanctions legislation and the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018* [FITS Act]," the guidelines state.

The DTCA, legislated by the last Greens-backed Labor government in 2012, specifically outlaws any publication or sharing of research findings that could affect the US military alliance. People face up to 10 years' imprisonment for "publishing or otherwise disseminating" research that relates to items covered by the Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty (DTCT) between Australia and the US.

The FITS Act is part of the "foreign interference" legislation introduced in 2018, also with Labor's support, particularly to target any political activity regarded as pro-Chinese. Under the deliberately vague wording of the FITS Act, anyone who supposedly cooperates with a "foreign" group, including international organisations, must register with the government. For failing to register, a person can be charged with an offence under the parallel Espionage and Foreign Interference Act, punishable by up to 20 years' jail,

for "covertly" collaborating with an overseas organisation or individual.

Behind the sensationalised claims of "Chinese interference," Australian universities are centrally involved in Washington and Canberra's military and ideological preparations for war against China.

In 2007, the United States Studies Centre was established at the University of Sydney with US and Australian government funding. Its explicit purpose is to overcome the widespread post-Iraq War opposition to Australian involvement in US-led invasions and military preparations.

Many other universities host "think tanks" and "dialogues" which work closely with representatives of Australian and US military and intelligence forces. In 2016, for example, Lockheed Martin, the biggest US arms contractor, with close ties to the US government, established a new Australian government-sponsored research centre at the University of Melbourne to develop advanced military technologies.

By 2018, 32 universities were partners in the Defence Science Partnerships program, launched by the Department of Defence in 2014 to promote and fund university military research projects.

The latest inquiry marks another step to integrating the universities into the war drive and silencing opposition to Australia's increasing involvement in the US confrontation with China.

As a result of the bipartisan Liberal-National and Labor commitment to Washington's anti-China offensive, Australia's people have been placed in the frontlines of the conflict with Beijing. But concerns remain in Washington about deep anti-war sentiment, and the dependence of sections of Australia's wealthy elite on exports to China. That is why the witch-hunt is being ratcheted up.

As in the US too, the nationalist agitation against Chinese and other "foreigners" is an attempt to divert the rising unrest being generated by the disastrous, corporate profit-driven response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the soaring levels of unemployment and social inequality.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact