

# US FBI officials trained Australian Federal Police “foreign interference” squad

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In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week, Australian Federal Police (AFP) commissioner Reece Kershaw revealed for the first time that a specialist AFP unit established last December to counter “foreign interference” and “espionage” has been trained by officials from the American Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI).

The admission is the latest, and most direct confirmation, that the US government and its intelligence agencies have been centrally involved in a McCarthyite witch hunt targeting supposed “Chinese interference” in Australian politics and virtually every area of society.

This campaign included the passage, by the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor Party opposition, of draconian “foreign interference” laws in 2018 that potentially criminalise any individual or organisation in contact with a “foreign principal.” The legislation, while directed in the first instance against Chinese nationals, creates the conditions for criminal action against anti-war organisations and the illegalisation of internationally-coordinated political activity.

Kershaw’s interview made clear that the AFP squad is actively seeking to manufacture prosecutions under the laws, which have been held up by the US government and media as a model to be emulated internationally. This is in line with the intensification of the Trump administration’s campaign against China, involving trade war measures, diplomatic aggression, attacks on democratic rights and military provocations that threaten war.

The collaboration between the AFP and the FBI has been at the highest levels. Kershaw stated that he had “reached out” to FBI director Chris Wray and “asked him for assistance... around training our people and looking at how we could deliver our own package perhaps modelled on the US...He was great, sent his people out, we did that early on in the piece.”

While his comments were vague on details, the unmistakable conclusion from Kershaw’s statement is that the FBI, one of the main domestic spy and federal policing agencies of the United States, played a central role in the very establishment of the AFP “foreign interference and espionage” unit.

The *Herald* article was a fawning and uncritical piece, commissioned to celebrate Kershaw’s first 12 months as AFP chief. Predictably none of the questions raised by Kershaw’s

statements were even asked, let alone answered.

Chief among them is the obvious irony of a domestic agency of the American government overseeing a supposed struggle against “foreign interference” in Australia. Nor was there any probing of the extent of the ongoing involvement of the FBI and the American state in the activities of the AFP unit.

Very little was written about Chris Wray. He is an anti-China “hawk,” who was handpicked to head the FBI by President Trump, and has played a central role in ratcheting up the anti-China campaign within the US. In July, he declared that China posed the “greatest threat” to US interests in the world.

“We’ve now reached a point where the FBI is now opening a new China-related case every 10 hours,” Mr Wray said. “Of the nearly 5,000 active counterintelligence cases currently under way across the country, almost half are related to China.”

Despite the uncritical character of the *Sydney Morning Herald* interview, Kershaw did point to the scope and resources of the specialist team, revealing that it is currently composed of 65 full-time AFP officers, with a “significant scope to expand” based on the large sums allocated to police and military funding by the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor opposition.

Reference was made in the article to the first public operation of the AFP unit, a raid on the home and parliamentary office of New South Wales state Labor parliamentarian Shaoquett Moselmane last June. The unprecedented action, carried out in collaboration with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency, was greeted by lurid media headlines accusing Moselmane of being an agent of the Chinese Communist Party.

The attack was immediately supported by the state and federal Labor leadership, and Moselmane was forced to take indefinite leave from parliament. The only publicly-released evidence against him, however, was that he had visited China on several occasions, and had made statements praising the Chinese response to the coronavirus and warning against the implications of the US provocations targeting Beijing.

It has since emerged that the “target” of the AFP investigation is John Zhang, who worked as a part-time staffer in Moselmane’s office.

Media reports, based on information provided by AFP and

ASIO, point to the threadbare character of the allegations against Zhang. He has been associated with Chinese community organisations, participated in a private WeChat group of which Moselmane was also a member and has had contacts with the Chinese consulate. Zhang has launched a Supreme Court challenge, maintaining that the accusations against him are an attack on the implied right to freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution.

The subject was not broached in the interview with Kershaw, but it is hard to believe that the FBI was not at least apprised of the first major operation being conducted by the AFP team that it had trained. The likelihood that the FBI was involved in planning a raid on an Australian parliamentarian has major implications for democratic rights. It would be a clear case of “foreign interference,” but one that the Australian political and media establishment has no interest in probing.

The raid against Moselmane was accompanied by wartime measures targeting Chinese nationals. Last month, it was revealed that on the same day that the parliamentarian was raided, so were four journalists employed by Chinese state-media in Australia. Their laptops and devices were taken and ASIO invoked draconian powers to prevent them from reporting the operation. Like Zhang, at least some of the journalists were apparently members of the WeChat grouping.

In addition, court filings by Zhang have claimed that AFP and ASIO officers took correspondence between himself and Chinese consular officials. This would be a violation of protocols under international law which protect the rights of diplomats.

The picture that emerges, from Kershaw’s statement and what has been revealed of the actions against Zhang and Moselmane, is of the FBI’s involvement in targeting political figures, journalists and diplomats who are suspected of not being fully on board with Australia’s central role in the US preparations for war with China.

Kershaw signalled that this will be escalated. He declared that the AFP unit was focusing on “convert[ing] intelligence into evidence. We have a fantastic relationship with ASIO and the intelligence community about how we wash that into a brief of evidence.” This is a warning the further frame-ups and prosecutions are in the offing.

In comments featured in the *Australian*, Kershaw revealed that the AFP is carrying out a “recruitment drive” targeting Mandarin speakers. Attempts are undoubtedly underway to cultivate informants and to pressure Chinese nationals to cooperate, similar to the targeting of the Muslim and Middle Eastern communities as part of the “war on terror.”

Kershaw also made some weasel words about “public concern” over the AFP raids targeting the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the home of Newscorp political editor Annika Smethurst in June, 2019. The operations were over separate stories exposing Australian involvement in alleged war crimes in Afghanistan and plans for

expanded domestic spying.

Kershaw promoted a “notice to produce” scheme, which would allow media organisations to hand over information to the AFP, before having police officers barge through their front door, as the best alternative to further state raids on journalists.

The AFP raids on the journalists were conducted before the establishment of the foreign interference taskforce, and made use of existing legislation criminalising the possession of “classified national security” material. But the revelation of the FBI’s involvement in the foreign interference squad inevitably raises questions about a greater US hand in those raids than has previously been acknowledged.

In the aftermath of the raids, then acting AFP commissioner Neil Gaughan declared their purpose was to protect the information that the Australian police and intelligence agencies receive from their counterparts in the US-led “Five Eyes” spying network.

The obvious question, given the role of the FBI since the ABC and Smethurst raids in the AFP’s “foreign interference” task force is whether the bureau was as heavily involved in planning those actions against Australian journalists.

This would be in line with the US attempts to prosecute WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, for his exposure of American war crimes, human rights abuses and global diplomatic intrigues. The raids against the ABC and Smethurst occurred a month after the Trump administration issued a superseding indictment against Assange, including 17 counts of violating the Espionage Act, punishable by 175 years imprisonment. The indictment was based on the work of an FBI “counter-espionage squad.”

In any event, Kershaw’s statements demonstrate that the drive to war is inevitably accompanied by an onslaught against democratic rights. Like their counterparts in the US, the Australian ruling elite is seeking to divert social tensions outwards, with increasing aggression against Beijing, and a witch hunt against “foreign interference” that is creating the conditions for a far broader assault on social and political opposition from the working class.



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