

Australian spy agency raises new alarm about foreign “plot”

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In its annual report, tabled in parliament on October 15, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) declared that “espionage and foreign interference” threatened Australia, while downplaying violent plans by right-wing extremists.

While the report did not name China, the allegations were clearly directed against it, in line with the escalating US conflict with Beijing. The domestic political spy agency claimed, without providing any evidence, that it had foiled a far-reaching operation by a foreign intelligence service.

“ASIO discovered and disrupted a plot to penetrate Australia’s intelligence community,” it stated. “An Australia-based foreign national was working with a team of foreign intelligence officers, who were trying to recruit multiple Australian security clearance holders.”

According to ASIO chief Mike Burgess: “The agents wanted sensitive information about the intelligence community’s operations, particularly those directed against their home country.” No details were provided whatsoever.

This is not the first such lurid allegation by ASIO. Last November, Burgess’s predecessor Duncan Lewis accused Beijing of conspiring to “take over” Australia’s political system.

Burgess confirmed a shift in focus from “terrorism”—the main banner of the vast expansion of ASIO and its powers since 2001. Whereas terrorism was “a threat to life,” espionage and foreign interference were “threats to our way of life.”

Couched in vague language, the ASIO report painted a picture of a country under siege, from top to bottom. “Almost every sector of Australian society is a potential target of foreign interference,” it said.

“In 2019–20, ASIO stepped up its investigations into attempts to secretly co-opt current and future Australian politicians. In all states and territories, at every level of

government, intelligence services are seeking to cultivate politicians who will advance the interests of the foreign country.”

In June, Attorney-General Christian Porter personally authorised ASIO to conduct its first public “foreign interference” raids. ASIO and federal police officers burst into the home and office of New South Wales state Labor Party member of parliament Shaoquett Moselmane before dawn, as well as those of his part-time electoral officer John Zhang.

The raids were conducted in a blaze of media publicity, accusing them of being “Chinese agents,” yet no charges have been laid. Chinese authorities later revealed that four Australian-based Chinese journalists were raided at the same time, and were told not to report the police operation. The journalists later left Australia.

Burgess indicated that such operations could be stepped-up. He told a parliamentary committee he intended to write to all federal politicians to warn they are “attractive targets” for foreign agents trying to steal secrets and manipulate policy-making.

Much less was said by Burgess about the threat posed by right-wing extremists. The ASIO report said they were “more organised, sophisticated, ideological and active than previous years” and now “comprised around one-third of our counter-terrorism investigative subjects.”

These comments point to the danger of fascistic attacks, similar to the massacre of 51 people by an Australian far-right terrorist at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March last year, and to this month’s plot by extreme-right militia members, inspired by US President Donald Trump, to kidnap and assassinate the governor of Michigan.

Yet the ASIO report was noticeably lower-key than Burgess’s release of the agency’s annual threat assessment last February, when he said extreme right-wing groups, capable of large-scale “sophisticated” violence, were increasingly active. “In suburbs around

Australia, small cells regularly meet to salute Nazi flags, inspect weapons, train in combat and share their hateful ideology.”

At that time, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who is in charge of ASIO, publicly contradicted Burgess. Dutton declared that the threat of violence came equally from “left-wing lunatics” and “extreme left-wing ideologies.” It was a menacing move to demonise left-wing groups, identifying them as the main concern of the political and intelligence establishment.

ASIO’s latest claim of major foreign interference threats to “our way of life” is timed to help push through parliament a bill to expand the agency’s power to secretly and compulsorily interrogate people.

When this unprecedented power—effectively detention and interrogation without trial—was first introduced in 2003, it was presented by the Liberal-National government and the Labor Party opposition as an exceptional but essential tool to coercively obtain information from anyone who might know of a potential terrorist act.

But the bill, currently being finessed by parliament’s bipartisan security and intelligence committee, would extend that power to cover “politically-motivated violence” and “foreign interference.” ASIO could also forcibly and secretly question teenagers as young as 14.

As the WSWS warned when the bill was first unveiled in May, the expansion of ASIO’s interrogation powers “is another warning of plans to crack down on any views regarded as a threat to the capitalist political and economic order.”

And as the WSWS has documented and explained, the “foreign interference” laws do not only target China and its alleged local sympathisers. They can be used to outlaw political opposition, anti-war dissent and social unrest by alleging that it is connected to “foreign” or international campaigns.

For the first time, criminal offences, which carry up to 20 years’ imprisonment, now apply to simply undertaking political activity in partnership with an overseas organisation. The outlawed activities could extend to anyone opposing Australian involvement in a US-led military conflict with China.

These warnings were underscored last week by a legal advice prepared by two Sydney barristers, Dominic Villa and Diana Tang, commissioned by the reformist lobby group GetUp. They said the bill could allow ASIO to coercively question journalists and members of civil society organisations, especially those involved in

environmental and human rights advocacy, because of the broad definition of “foreign interference.”

“The phrases ‘affecting political or governmental processes’ and ‘otherwise detrimental to the interests of Australia’ are so broad as to capture any range of matters that may challenge or question government decisions, policies or institutions,” the legal advice says.

Civil society organisations in Australia may “collaborate with or receive support from a foreign political organisation that shares a common interest or objective, in their advocacy campaigns.” Even though “foreign interference” is limited to “clandestine or deceptive” acts, that could cover the political or protest activities of some groups.

Once again, police-state powers that were originally imposed under the cover of the post-2001 “war on terrorism” are being expanded to cover fields far beyond terrorism, essentially to crack down on any views regarded as a threat to big business or the capitalist political order.

ASIO and its partner agencies, such as the Australian Signals Directorate, are members of the global US-led “Five Eyes” mass surveillance network, which is increasingly focussed on Washington’s aggressive confrontation with China. These agencies systematically swap data, especially with their US counterparts.

Not accidentally, the Labor Party has given in-principle backing to the government’s bill. Labor has either agreed to, or itself legislated, every barrage of so-called “national security” laws since 2001.

Labor is just as committed as the government to the alignment behind the US escalation of the economic and military drive to prevent China from challenging Washington’s post-World War II global dominance.

Labor is equally devoted to suppressing political discontent amid the worst economic and social disaster since the 1930s Great Depression, growing social inequality and the worsening danger of involvement in catastrophic US-led wars.



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