

Australian government ministers denounce student newspaper for pulling anti-China story

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9 April 2021

Senior ministers in the federal Liberal-National Coalition government over recent days have taken the unusual step of aggressively intervening in a minor controversy relating to a student newspaper.

Amid the debacle of the coronavirus vaccine rollout, myriad social and economic issues and a broader government crisis, they have found the time to make dire warnings about the free speech implications of a single article being voluntarily withdrawn from a website by the student editors who commissioned and wrote it.

The manufactured outrage was prompted by the decision of editors at the University of Sydney's *Honi Soit* newspaper to take down an article on March 31, several hours after it had been posted. The article had already been placed in the print edition and can still be read on web archives.

The piece detailed the alleged links between two academics at the campus' engineering faculty and several Chinese research institutions. It claimed that these ties were not disclosed on University of Sydney biographies of the staff. The article uncritically cited unsubstantiated warnings by the US and Australian governments, and think tanks funded by them, of the "national security" dangers posed by Chinese government "talent recruitment" programs targeting academics.

The article did not allege any wrongdoing on the part of the academics named or the university administration. The rather lame and tepid conclusion of the *Honi Soit* investigation was that "the lack of transparency surrounding the conduct of individual staff members and the results of due diligence checks make evaluating both individual and University behaviour difficult."

In a Facebook post announcing the withdrawal of the article, the editors wrote: "We unreservedly apologise to the academics mentioned in the article and for the harm caused to them, the Chinese community, and to our readers. *Honi* acknowledges that directly naming those academics was negligent, particularly in the face of escalating sinophobia

and racism at the University of Sydney and in wider society."

The post referenced the hostile treatment of Chinese academics in Australia, declared that the editors would in future be critical of the sources upon which they rely and said they recognised their "duty as student journalists to actively combat Western imperialist and xenophobic biases presented in mainstream media."

In most circumstances, the matter would have ended there. The retraction of a poorly-conceived article is hardly an unprecedented development at a university newspaper staffed by volunteer student journalists and editors.

But in this instance, it was all too much for the federal government. After stating that he had not read the article in question, Education Minister Alan Tudge declared that, "Left activists have forgotten what freedom of speech means in an era of woke culture. Certainly any claims that it was taken down to appease the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] are deeply concerning."

He was joined by Liberal Senator James Paterson, chair of the federal parliament's intelligence and security committee, who, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* "said the editors were giving into the CCP's favoured tactic of 'weaponising claims of racism to shut down legitimate scrutiny.'"

Liberal MP Dave Sharma said that "such self-censorship from a student publication, and one with a reputation for free-thinking and straight-talking, is deeply concerning," while his colleague Tim Wilson crudely declared that "the progressive left would rather side with authoritarians by pandering to the CCP's line than stand up for free discussion."

The professions of concern were bipartisan. Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching, chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade References Committee, declared that academic talent recruitment projects had been "uncovered at most of our top educational institutions. In order to combat

this effectively, we need to shine a light on this issue, not cover it up.”

Kitching expressed her “hope” that the editors did “not feel obliged to comply with inappropriate internal and external pressures—whether that be by foreign regimes or local politicians.” The clear implication was that the long arm of the Chinese Communist Party had been brought down on the student editors.

The deranged insinuations were refuted by the editors themselves. Responding to the various politicians’ statements, they told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that they had not been pressured to remove the article by the university, any group or individuals.

In other words, Kitching and the federal ministers were doing exactly what she had warned against, joining a pile-on against a group of students to push a political line.

The seemingly bizarre episode underscores the acute sensitivity of the federal government and the Labor opposition over any pushback, however limited, to an anti-Chinese campaign that they have aggressively promoted.

For the past five years, Labor, the Coalition and the corporate press have hysterically alleged pervasive “Chinese interference” in virtually every sphere of political, social and economic life, including at the universities. Chinese international students have been depicted as a potential fifth column, Chinese student associations have been subjected to intense scrutiny and aspersions have been cast against academics, faculties and even entire campuses, over research ties to Chinese universities and institutions.

The torrent of xenophobic filth has two chief purposes: to legitimise Australia’s participation in the advanced, US-led preparations for war against China and to establish an anti-democratic framework that can be mobilised against anyone who is deemed not to be adequately committed to these catastrophic military plans.

The controversy over the *Honi Soit* article was latched onto by the government and Labor amid a dramatic ratcheting up of the war drive.

Since his inauguration, US President Joseph Biden has escalated an anti-China campaign that was initiated by Obama and further intensified under Trump. Biden is inflaming regional flashpoints, especially Taiwan, waging a hypocritical campaign over Chinese human rights violations and engaging in “alliance building” aimed at furthering the encirclement of China.

All of these provocative moves have enjoyed the full support of the Australian government, which also recently announced its own missile building program.

The accompanying attacks on democratic rights are also continuing apace. Media reports in February revealed that late last year, the federal government secretly blocked five

university research grants because they allegedly represented a China-linked “national security threat,” and subjected 18 others to stepped-up scrutiny. The decisions were taken on the basis of undisclosed assessments by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency.

Academics and university departments, in other words, are being subjected to grand inquisitions over their research and work activities. This dovetails with “foreign interference” laws, passed by Labor and the Coalition in 2018, which provide sweeping grounds for criminal prosecutions and potentially illegalise internationally-coordinated political and other activities.

The fear of any critical discussion over the “foreign interference” campaign, expressed in the response to the *Honi Soit* controversy, is because it is built on a foundation of quicksand. The immense media and political resources devoted to uncovering evidence of some sort of Chinese conspiracy have come up empty. The campaign has consisted solely of insinuations, unsubstantiated claims, and attempts to depict standard practices, such as international research collaboration, in the most sinister terms.

The *Honi Soit* editors’ reference to a more “critical” attitude towards sources, likely also touched a nerve. In addition to promoting the pronouncements of the US and Australian governments, the article heavily promoted “research” by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) think tank.

Promoted to the centre stage of public discussion, ASPI functions as a clearinghouse for the most belligerent sections of the military and intelligence apparatus. Ironically, given its great concern over undisclosed ties between academics and Chinese universities, ASPI functionaries frequently appear in the media without revealing that they are funded by the US and Australian governments and American arms dealers.

Such ironies can also be found in the fears of the political establishment over potential Chinese influence at the University of Sydney. No such influence has yet been uncovered. But the campus does host the United States Studies Centre, a major think tank funded by the American and Australian governments. Founded in 2006, its explicit purpose is to overcome deep seated opposition to Australian involvement in US-led wars and military interventions.



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