

Australian defence minister accuses Labor Party of “appeasing” China

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In an extraordinary outburst in parliament on Thursday, Defence Minister Peter Dutton declared that the opposition Labor Party was guilty of “appeasing” China, which was seeking to “coerce Australia.”

“The Chinese Communist Party has also made a decision about who they’re going to back in the next federal election [due by May],” Dutton asserted. “They have picked this bloke as their candidate,” he shouted, gesturing at Labor leader Anthony Albanese.

Even in the context of a years-long anti-China campaign, waged by the Liberal-National Coalition, Labor and the corporate media, Dutton’s statements were unprecedented. One of most senior government leaders effectively accused the opposition party of treason.

Dutton’s comments, quickly backed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, were a clear attempt to whip up a wartime atmosphere. Such statements recall nothing so much as the government roundups and authoritarian measures directed against “enemy” residents and anti-war dissenters that accompanied Australian participation in the world wars of the 20th century.

The immediate targets of Dutton’s statement, in the Labor leadership, are fully committed to Australia’s frontline position in the US war preparations against China, as they have re-emphasised over the past two days. His comments are thus a particular warning of the anti-democratic measures that the government and the ruling class intend to deploy against opponents of imperialist war and the working class as whole.

Two elements of the political situation underlay Dutton’s hysterical intervention.

The first is the crisis of the government, which is in meltdown in the lead-up to the election. Not only are its polling results the worst in years, but factional warfare threatens Morrison’s leadership and the very survival of the Coalition.

The unravelling is being driven by popular anger over

the “let it rip” policies that have resulted in an explosion of COVID infections over the past two months, as well as deep-going hostility to the decades-long pro-business policies implemented by both major parties.

Amid the factional infighting, Dutton is coming to ever-greater prominence. He is the government figure most closely identified with authoritarian measures, having headed the powerful Home Affairs ministry before becoming defence minister. He has adopted the image of a “soldier’s man,” downplaying war crimes in Afghanistan, and insisting, in the words of his assistant minister Andrew Hastie, that the military’s “core business” is the “application of lethal force.”

This “core business” is now being readied, not against Afghan villagers as before, but some of the world’s largest states, as Australia plays a key role in the US confrontation with China, and backs its provocations against Russia. Dutton’s comments coincided with a three-day visit by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Australia. Yesterday Blinken presided over a meeting of the Quad, a de facto military alliance of Australia, the US, Japan and India.

In an interview with the *Australian*, on the very night of Dutton’s parliamentary outburst, Blinken declared that the US aimed to ready a coalition of states to take on China, which he accused of seeking to “dominate the world” and establish an “illiberal order.” Blinken emphasised the importance of AUKUS, a military pact of the US, Australia and Britain unveiled last September, to these plans for conflict.

Amid expressions of public shock over Dutton’s remarks, he doubled down. On Friday, Dutton insisted that his allegations against Labor were based on “the facts,” as contained in unspecified “open source and other intelligence” that he had seen. “Open source” means publicly available, but Dutton did not specify what he was referring to.

Dutton was also hinting at the annual report released by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency, on Wednesday.

ASIO director Mike Burgess said it had unveiled a “foreign interference” plot. A wealthy individual, dubbed “the puppeteer,” had hired another individual and provided them with funds to “secretly shap[e] the political landscape” in Australia, including through some sort of interference in an election. But Burgess reported that ASIO had saved the day, foiling the mysterious plan before it had accomplished a single thing.

Burgess’s story would have been given a fail were it a primary school homework assignment. The spy chief neglected such essential plot elements as “who, what and when.” The “why and how” were exceedingly sketchy too. It was not even clear whether the election referenced was the forthcoming federal ballot, or some other poll.

Such minor details as the identity and nationality of the participants were not stated. Nor was it explained why, if they had engaged in the conduct alluded to, they were not in custody or facing criminal charges.

In 2018, Labor and the Coalition joined hands to pass sweeping “foreign interference” laws, in line with a McCarthyite campaign targeting China. The legislation potentially criminalises a wide gamut of activities, including anti-war activism conducted alongside an international organisation.

Despite the far-reaching provisions, intended to illegalise activities that fall short of spying, they have not been used in a single successful prosecution. Supposed cases of “foreign interference,” announced with blaring media headlines, have generally not met the basic legal threshold. For the past several years, ASIO’s annual report has contained similar tales of thwarted operations.

Uninterested in essential facts, and anxious to align with the war drive, the media joined Dutton in trumpeting Burgess’s vague story.

In a breathless report on Thursday, the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed that the “puppeteer” was likely a Russian with “close links to President Vladimir Putin’s regime.” The information was “confirmed” because unnamed “intelligence sources” had told the ABC that it was so.

But on Friday, the ABC and Nine Media declared that the culprit was actually Chinese. An ABC headline announced “China behind failed attempt to bankroll Labor candidates in federal election.” This new version of the story, contradicting that of the previous day, was also “confirmed.”

In a court of law, providing multiple conflicting accounts of an event would amount to perjury. For the intelligence agencies and their media mouthpieces, it is all in a day’s work.

Conveniently for Dutton, the ironed-out version of the ASIO tale conformed directly to the allegations he had made in parliament the previous day.

To describe Labor’s response to the accusations of treason as spineless would be a gross understatement. Albanese lamented that Dutton’s comments were “not in the national interest,” while insisting on his party’s full alignment with the US military build-up and provocations against China.

In a private meeting with Blinken, Albanese demonstrated his commitment to the Australian alliance with the US by giving his full backing the new AUKUS pact that also involves the UK, as well as the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. Other Labor figures sought to outdo Dutton in a perverse witch-hunting competition, pointing to Chinese donors to the Liberal Party.

The entire political establishment is on board with the war drive. A minority faction of the ruling elite occasionally has voiced concern over the economic implications of Australia participating in a war against its largest trading partner, China. But this layer increasingly has been sidelined.

That faction’s statements are always framed from the standpoint of defending Australian capitalism. They frequently go in the direction of advocating an even greater expansion of the Australian military, to buttress a supposedly more “independent” foreign policy within the framework of the US alliance.

Workers and youth must reject the attempts of both the Coalition and Labor to whip up a wartime atmosphere. A political struggle must be waged to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, to prevent a catastrophic war. Such a movement must be international, independent of all the official parties and based on a socialist program directed against the source of conflict, the capitalist system.



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