

Australian parliament joins hands to block new Russian embassy

Oscar Grenfell**18 June 2023**

Last Thursday, the entire Australian parliament joined hands to pass legislation blocking Russia from building a new embassy in Canberra, the national capital. The move underscored the commitment of the Labor government and the entire political establishment to the US-led anti-Russian campaign.

Russia already has an embassy in the Canberra suburb of Griffith, but for some years it has investigated the possibility of building a second embassy site to enhance its diplomatic presence.

The unprecedented parliamentary action was carried out on vague, security grounds that the second embassy would be in close proximity to the parliament. But, as some commentators have noted, the US, China and several other countries have embassy facilities a similar distance from the national parliament.

No concrete explanation was provided for the urgent need to block the construction of the building. Instead, the Labor government cited unspecified advice from unnamed “security agencies” who asserted that the building, which has yet to be constructed, would constitute a threat to “national security.”

The clear implication was that it would be used for electronic espionage—something many countries do. As 2013 leaks by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden made clear, successive American governments have used embassies and diplomatic missions as spying centres, including on allied states such as Germany.

Parliament, however, is a public building. Its main deliberations are publicly available through the publication of Hansards and television broadcasts of important sittings. To the extent that sensitive discussions on “national security” issues take place in the parliamentary building, undoubtedly advanced counter-surveillance measures would be taken.

In other words, the decision to block the embassy was a political decision. It dovetailed with the escalation of the US-NATO war effort in Ukraine which is ever more openly a war between Washington and its allies against Russia.

To legitimise its military actions against Moscow, the US administration of President Joe Biden has continued and intensified a protracted anti-Russian propaganda campaign, waged for some years by segments of the US political establishment, especially the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies. This has included claims of “Russian interference” and spying in American politics and society, never with any substantiation.

The Labor government’s move is entirely in keeping with this narrative and serves to bolster it. Moreover, it is significant that the government, backed by all parties, took the unusual step of resorting to legislation to override a prior ruling of the judiciary, in a clear breach of the separation of powers.

In 2008, the Russian government bought the lease for the site in the Canberra suburb of Yarralumla. In 2011, the National Capital Authority (NCA), a regulatory body responsible for diplomatic zones of the capital, approved the plans for a new embassy to be built on it.

For many years, Russia did nothing with the site. In 2022, the NCA announced that it had terminated the lease, but it did so on the grounds that land for diplomatic missions was in limited supply. An NCA statement complained that the unused Russian lot detracted “from the overall aesthetic, importance and dignity of the area reserved for diplomatic missions and foreign representation in the national capital.”

On the surface at least, the complaint was entirely separate and distinct from the current line about potential Russian spying. The fact that Russia has moved at such a slow pace to develop the embassy,

moreover, demonstrates that it is not a top priority for the Russian government for espionage or other reasons.

A Russian challenge to the termination was successful. A Federal Court found on May 31 that the termination was “invalid and of no effect,” and that the Russian authorities had a right to the “quiet enjoyment of the land” that they had leased.

Little over two weeks after that ruling, parliament moved to overturn it, underscoring the intensely political character of the move.

The parliamentary discussion on the legislation blocking the embassy took just a few minutes. Clare O’Neil, Labor’s Minister for Home Affairs, spoke for a minute or less. She just repeated the vague assertions of the building posing a “national security” threat.

Significantly, O’Neil did comment on the unanimity across parliament, declaring: “There is necessarily a lot of focus on the conflict that goes on in this building; there is not as much reporting and discussion about the moments of goodwill and national unity. I want to thank the opposition, the Greens and the crossbench for the way in which they have worked with the government and the concern they have shown for the national security information that we have been providing them.”

In other words, the legislation involved not simply the government and the Liberal-National opposition, but literally every political tendency in parliament, from the Greens, to far-right populists and so-called “Teal” independents.

That is particularly striking because the very week that the anti-Russian measure was rushed through, parliament was dominated by infighting and mutual recriminations over sexual misconduct scandals. The parties fought bitterly on these issues, but they came together on the question of the Russian embassy, touching, as it did, on the demands of the intelligence agencies and the promotion of militarist aggression and justifications for war.

In a press conference the same day, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese all but acknowledged that what the parliament had done may have breached international laws related to the rights of diplomatic missions. “We don’t expect that Russia’s in a position to talk about international law, given their rejection of it so consistently and so brazenly with their invasion of Ukraine and the atrocities that have occurred, that are

occurring on an ongoing basis,” he stated.

Who is Albanese to speak of international law? Australian governments, Labor and Coalition, have participated in every criminal US-led war over the past 80 years. In the more recent period alone, that has included the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq as well as the decades-long occupation of Afghanistan, during which Australian troops committed documented war crimes, including the murder of civilians and prisoners.

Far from intervening in Ukraine to defend “national sovereignty” and democracy, the US and its allies have stoked and exploited the conflict to further the same American imperialist aims that laid waste to the Middle East and Central Asia. Washington is fighting a proxy war to the last Ukrainian in a bid to inflict a decisive military defeat on Russia, viewed as an obstacle to the prosecution of US geo-political interests. That includes the mounting US-led confrontation with China, which US strategists say is the chief threat to Washington’s global dominance.

Australia fully supports the proxy war in Ukraine. The Labor government, it was revealed this week, has been in discussions about sending Hornet fighter jets to the battlefields in a move that could trigger a world war. At the same time, it has been at the forefront of a diplomatic offensive against China as well as a vast military build-up in preparation for war against it.

The coming together of the parliament against the construction of a new Russian embassy is another demonstration that this program of war is supported by the entire official political establishment.



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