

Australia's spy agency's latest "foreign interference" scare campaign backfires

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Australia's domestic spy agency chief this week made his most provocative claim yet in a protracted campaign to portray the country as under siege from foreign infiltration, effectively pointing the finger at Russia and China, the two main targets of US war operations.

For the fourth year in a row, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Mike Burgess used his 2024 "threat assessment" speech to try to whip up fears of "foreign interference."

In every such annual speech since 2021, Burgess has raised the spectre of "nests" of foreign spies establishing relations with politicians. This year, he ratcheted up the allegations to a new level, but the effort backfired somewhat.

Without providing any details or naming anyone, the ASIO chief declared that a foreign spy team, which he dubbed the "A-team," had "successfully cultivated and recruited a former Australian politician." This recruit had "sold out their country, party and former colleagues to advance the interests of the foreign regime" and had even proposed bringing a prime minister's family member "into the spies' orbit."

The corporate media dutifully joined the Albanese Labor government in broadcasting this most serious charge. Explosive headlines included: "ASIO has revealed an Australian politician betrayed the nation" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and "'Cover is blown': ASIO reveals foreign spy recruited ex-politician" (Nine Entertainment newspapers).

The ASIO boss did not identify the foreign intelligence organisation running the alleged spy network, but the corporate media did it for him. "Chinese and Russian spies have been the most active in Australia targeting high-value assets across politics, business, public service and Defence," the *Australian's* lead article insisted.

Yet there were obvious questions. If a former politician had "sold out" the country to a foreign power, why weren't they charged with a criminal offence? If evidence existed of such a heinous crime, why wasn't it placed before a court to be tested?

In his speech, Burgess said the betrayal had occurred "several years ago." It remains unclear whether this was before or after the 2018 bipartisan imposition of the "foreign interference" legislation, which sets penalties of up to life imprisonment for

such behaviour. Even before those laws, however, treason and espionage were among the most serious offences in the federal criminal code.

According to media reports, the "bombshell" revelations caused a political storm in Canberra, including inside the parliamentary chambers. By not naming names, Burgess' charges cast doubts about the national loyalty of all members and ex-members of parliament. Moreover, his allegations contained an unmistakeable threat that ASIO and the rest of the US-linked intelligence apparatus could move against anyone deemed to be implicated in such activity.

Initially, opposition Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton demanded that ASIO "out" the "traitor." Dutton insinuated that the person was a Labor Party representative working with China.

That triggered a revealing intervention by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and key ministers, springing to ASIO's defence. Albanese told a media conference: "The idea that any minister in my government will just go out against the wishes of the ASIO director-general I find quite extraordinary. I have confidence in ASIO. I have confidence in the Director General."

Albanese declared the need to "build confidence in our agencies, not engage in short-term politics."

A day later, Dutton dropped his demand for the "traitor" to be named, and likewise voiced confidence in ASIO. For his part, Burgess unconvincingly tried to shut down the affair by saying the former politician's treachery was "an historic matter that was appropriately dealt with at the time" and "the individual is no longer of security concern."

Albanese's comments are telling. He knows that ASIO and Australia's entire intelligence machine are an integral part of the US-led "Five Eyes" global spy network. This top-level network is on the frontline of Washington's aggressive war operations, from Ukraine to Gaza and the Indo-Pacific, against what US imperialism regards as the existential threats to its global hegemony, including Iran, Russia and, above all, China.

The Labor prime minister understands that the sweeping and anti-democratic 2018 "foreign interference" laws, for which Labor voted, can be used against anyone who opposes, or even calls into question, this turn to war, accusing them of acting on

behalf of a foreign power or organisation.

As the leader of Labor's nominal "left" faction, Albanese is also well aware that ASIO, far from enjoying public "confidence," has a notorious 75-year history. Since it was established by the Chifley Labor government in 1949, it has engaged in frame-ups, undercover entrapment, political surveillance, harassment and victimisation of dissent, and lies, such as those concocted to justify the murderous Vietnam War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In keeping with this dirty record, Burgess has issued explosive accusations every year for at least the past four years.

- In his 2023 "threat assessment" speech, he claimed ASIO had disrupted a massive "hive" of spies that was targeting politicians and others. No evidence of this has ever been provided.

- In 2022, Burgess said ASIO had successfully targeted someone he called "the puppeteer," who was cultivating politicians and political candidates on behalf of a foreign government.

- In 2021, Burgess said ASIO had disrupted a "nest of spies" that had "developed targeted relationships with current and former politicians, a foreign embassy and a state police service." As the WSWs warned, ASIO was "drumming up a wartime atmosphere."

All the speeches have featured breathless warnings about foreign interference and vague claims of ASIO successes. Yet, only two highly-dubious criminal charges have been laid, with a sole conviction.

That conviction was of Melbourne businessman and Vietnamese-Chinese community figure Di Sanh Duong. He was declared guilty of a vague charge of "preparing for or planning an act of foreign interference," supposedly on behalf of China.

In a largely closed-door trial, prosecutors argued that Duong planned to secretly gain political influence in 2020 by cultivating a relationship with a then-Coalition government minister Alan Tudge on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party.

This supposed "covert" interference took place in the full glare of publicity, however. Duong allegedly arranged for Tudge to receive a \$37,450 novelty cheque donation raised by community organisations for the Royal Melbourne Hospital in June 2020 amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This week, in the same week that Burgess delivered his latest report, a judge sentenced Duong, 68, to a two-year and nine-month prison term. Despite ailing health, Duong must serve 12 months of that sentence before he can be released on a four-year good behaviour bond, for which he must pay \$3,000.

Duong's prosecution was regarded by the corporate media, in both Australia and the US, as a test case. Washington saw the "anti-influence" legislation as a model for its own laws, which are part of its economic and military offensive against China.

The Albanese government's backing for the "foreign

interference" witch hunt was highlighted last December. Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus approved charges of "reckless foreign interference" against an Australian businessman, Alexander Csergo, whose "crime" appeared to be working in China as a corporate consultant.

One complaint about an aspect of Burgess' latest speech came from the Murdoch media. An *Australian* editorial said his allegations had made a "splash" but overshadowed his other assertion that Sunni Islamic extremism posed the "greatest religiously motivated threat in Australia." The newspaper said ASIO's "top priority" must be "the outbreak of anti-Semitism" in response to Israel's "ground offensive" in Gaza.

This must be a warning of further moves by ASIO and the police, backed by the Albanese government and the media to conflate opposition to the Gaza genocide with antisemitism and terrorism.

For all the agitation about foreign interference, Burgess' speech pointed to the real source of "interference" in shaping the war agenda of Australian imperialism—that of its US and UK partners in the anti-China AUKUS military pact.

Burgess began by welcoming his vetted audience to ASIO's headquarters, named the Ben Chifley Building in honour of the agency's founder. Burgess gave a hint of the ultimatums issued by the US and UK that led Chifley's Labor government to establish ASIO in 1949 as part of the imperialist Cold War against the Soviet Union.

"The United States and United Kingdom were so concerned about Soviet penetrations they turned off the intelligence tap," Burgess emphasised. "Chifley responded to the challenge by setting up ASIO—and I think it's a testament to our success that three quarters of a century later those two countries are now sharing their most sensitive secrets with Australia through AUKUS."

Accordingly, Burgess said he had "embedded ASIO officers" in the AUKUS "nuclear submarine taskforce."

Despite the dissembling of its pivotal accusation, Burgess' speech is another warning sign of the advanced preparations for a catastrophic war against China, and the repressive wartime atmosphere being whipped up to crack down on dissent.



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