

# As war tensions rise, Australia's ASIO spy chief ramps up “espionage” scare campaign

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Backed by the Albanese Labor government, Australia's surveillance chief, Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Director-General Mike Burgess made a speech last Thursday declaring that because of “strategic competition,” the country faced “unprecedented” dangers of “foreign interference” and “espionage.”

It was an obvious, and unsubstantiated, effort to drum up a scare campaign and demand an “all-of-nation” offensive to counter alleged plots by other countries—specifically China, Russia and Iran—to gain access to US-linked military information.

Burgess said Australians would be “shocked” by the number of other, unnamed, countries that were also trying similar tactics.

Global tensions were driving a “relentless hunger for strategic advantage and an insatiable appetite for inside information,” Burgess declared. He warned of public and corporate complacency against the “real, present and costly danger” that required all Australians to take action.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke went public as well, supporting Burgess's claims, including that “espionage activities against Australia” cost the government and major companies \$12.5 billion in the 2023–2024 financial year.

The media went into overdrive, uncritically promoting Burgess's boast that ASIO had disrupted 24 “major” threats over the past three years, “more than the previous eight years combined.”

Burgess directly linked his claims to the AUKUS military pact to acquire nuclear-powered submarines and other long-range weaponry for use against China. He declared that foreign spies had a “very unhealthy interest” in the sharing of nuclear technology with the US and UK.

“And with AUKUS, we are not just defending our sovereign capability,” he said. “We are also defending critical capability shared by and with our partners.” That indicates coordination and close collaboration with the US and UK intelligence agencies and the governments of Donald Trump and Keir Starmer.

Burgess's assertions were clearly designed to further boost

the role and powers of ASIO, Australia's primary domestic spy agency. His speech became headline news. That was a sharp contrast to the almost total blackout on Labor's sudden and previously unannounced introduction of legislation, on the first full parliamentary day since the May 3 election, to extend and expand ASIO's compulsory interrogation powers.

ASIO was first handed unprecedented powers to forcibly question people in 2003, supposedly to protect the population against terrorism, as part of the “war on terrorism.” Under Labor's new legislation, these powers will be extended indefinitely and broadened to cover four new war-related fields: “sabotage,” “promoting communal violence,” “attacking defence facilities” and “threatening border security.”

These headings have the potential to cover anti-genocide, anti-war and other political dissent. According to ASIO, “communal violence” refers to “activities that are directed to incite violence between different groups... so as to endanger the peace, order or good government of the Commonwealth.”

This police-state legislation overturns the right to silence and the presumption of innocence. If anyone fails to comply or hand over material, or provides “misleading” information, they face up to five years' imprisonment. Those interrogated also face five years' jail if they tell anyone, except an ASIO-vetted lawyer, over the next two years what has happened to them, thus helping to keep ASIO's operations shielded from public scrutiny.

Burgess's specific claims, based partly on a “Cost of Espionage” report that ASIO commissioned from the Australian Institute of Criminology, are flimsy. Most of the economic damage he mentioned resulted from corporate cyber security breakdowns or supposed acquisition of intellectual property or trade secrets.

In one case study, Burgess said spies hacked into the computer network of a major Australian exporter, making off with commercially sensitive information. “The theft gave the foreign country a significant advantage in subsequent

contract negotiations, costing Australia hundreds of millions of dollars.”

Another example alleged that a member of an overseas delegation had “entered a restricted area and photographed a rare and valuable variety of fruit tree” and snapped off several branches to smuggle out of Australia. That had “allowed scientists in the other country to reverse engineer and replicate two decades of Australian research and development.”

In a further unspecified instance, a “foreign intelligence service” directed “multiple agents and their family members to apply for Australian government jobs—including with the national security community—to get access to classified information.”

The alleged multi-billion-dollar costs cited by Burgess also included unsubstantiated assertions about the spending undertaken by ASIO and other intelligence and police agencies, governments, universities and companies on technology and other measures to meet security requirements.

Burgess dismissed the lack of prosecutions on espionage and “foreign interference” charges, which would require definite evidence. “Three people are currently before Australian courts on espionage-related charges, and I am confident there could be more if anyone tries to compromise AUKUS,” he said.

“Not every case of espionage can be prosecuted, though—particularly if the perpetrators are offshore. In many circumstances, other tools such as visa cancellations or a knock on the door from the security service can be more effective and efficient than lengthy, costly prosecutions.”

Such “knocks on the door” recall ASIO’s record. Even before the “war on terrorism,” ASIO had a vast array of powers to tap phones, instal listening devices in offices and homes, intercept telecommunications, open people’s mail, monitor on-line discussion, break into computer files and databases, seize computers and use tracking personal devices. Since then, more than 100 pieces of legislation have expanded ASIO’s powers.

ASIO was established by the Chifley Labor government in 1949, at the behest of the US and UK governments. It has a long history of bugging and infiltrating left-wing parties and organisations, working closely with right-wing Labor and trade union leaders.

ASIO and all the other Australian intelligence agencies work closely with their US counterparts, including through the massive US-led “Five Eyes” surveillance and data-swapping system, together with the UK, Canada and New Zealand.

Some indication of these connections appeared last week when Burke held an initially undisclosed meeting with Kash

Patel, Trump’s hand-picked FBI chief, who was on his way to open a new FBI office in New Zealand, adding to the one already in Canberra.

In New Zealand, Patel provocatively declared that the new FBI station was necessary to counter China’s activities across the Pacific and all the way to Antarctica.

Burke kept the meeting, which he described as “really good,” a secret for three days, citing “security reasons.” Patel was a notorious supporter of Trump’s January 2021 attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election and effectively establish a dictatorship.

Burgess’s speech last Thursday was politically pointed. It was delivered in Adelaide as the University of South Australia’s annual lecture in honour of former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

Burgess began by recalling the Combe-Ivanov affair. ASIO confronted Hawke, as soon as Labor took office in 1983, with allegations that a Soviet agent was trying to recruit David Combe, a former Labor Party national secretary.

The then ASIO chief, Harvey Barnett “travelled to Parliament House to deliver the news that Soviet diplomat and suspected KGB operative Valeriy Ivanov was attempting to cultivate” Combe.

Hawke quickly did ASIO’s bidding. He publicly named Combe, then dismissed a key cabinet minister, Mick Young, and called a royal commission inquiry that led to a major strengthening of ASIO’s powers.

Burgess celebrated this as a milestone in ASIO’s development. “While the scandal rocked the government, upended careers and damaged reputations, it also led to a national awakening and a series of reforms that remain consequential today.”

Burgess’s speech amounts to a thinly-veiled warning. There must be no deviation from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s commitment to ever-greater preparations for involvement in a US-led war against China. Burgess declared, with some menace, that the dangers to “national security” were far greater than “when Bob Hawke was in office.”



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