

Anti-China witch-hunt against Australian senator reveals extensive US-backed surveillance

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5 December 2017

Escalating accusations of treasonous conduct against Australian Labor Party Senator Sam Dastyari took a new turn on Sunday when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull indicated to Sky News that the senator was being probed by the country's intelligence agencies.

Asked whether Dastyari's conduct should be investigated, Turnbull said: "You shouldn't assume it's not being investigated. This is a political matter and I don't give directions to our police or our security agencies on operational matters ... it is a matter for the relevant agencies to look at."

Turnbull's declaration raises the question: how many other members of parliament are under surveillance by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) or other agencies?

Over the past week, the witch-hunt against Dastyari, ostensibly over his dealings with local Chinese-born property billionaire Huang Xiangmo, has reached hysterical levels. It is part of a far-reaching media and political campaign, under pressure from Washington, to suppress alleged "foreign interference," especially Chinese influence, in Australia.

Dastyari, a right-wing Labor Party factional leader, has long specialised in raising large donations for the party's election campaigns from corporate chiefs, including ethnic Chinese business figures. Labor, like Turnbull's Liberal-National Coalition, has become increasingly reliant on such donations over decades because of the evaporation of popular support for these traditional ruling parties. Since 2012, Huang alone reportedly has donated a total of almost \$3 million to both parties.

Now, however, Dastyari has been declared by the media and Turnbull's government to be "unfit" to sit in parliament because of alleged pro-Chinese statements and a reported discussion with Huang about avoiding being

monitored by the Australian intelligence agencies.

Today's editorial in the *Australian* insisted Dastyari had "forfeited his right to sit in federal parliament" and Labor Party leader Bill Shorten had no choice but to remove Dastyari, as a test of Shorten's own loyalty to Australia and the "national interest."

In his Sky News interview, Turnbull had already ramped-up the anti-China crusade, saying Dastyari had "committed an extraordinary betrayal of Australia's national interests." Turnbull extended the charge to Shorten. "How Shorten can stick with Dastyari and represent himself as a fit and proper person to be prime minister of Australia is utterly beyond me," he said.

Amid all the furore, a crucial aspect of this affair has gone without mention. The orchestrated release to media outlets, notably Fairfax Media and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), of material purportedly recording conversations between Dastyari and Huang points to extensive spying on politicians, as well as leading figures in Australia's sizeable Chinese community.

Shorten, for the second time, demoted Dastyari, a former junior minister, to the parliamentary backbench last week after Fairfax outlets reported that Dastyari had allegedly gone to Huang's Sydney home and suggested they speak outside, so their conversation could not be intercepted via their phones.

The meeting between the pair reportedly occurred more than a year ago, in October 2016. That was several weeks after Dastyari was forced to quit the frontbench for the first time after earlier accusations fed to the media about his relations with Huang. Despite the precautions proposed by Dastyari, the conversation in the grounds of Huang's house was evidently recorded.

Fairfax Media reported: "A Canberra source with

knowledge of the meeting said on background that Mr Dastyari blamed the US government for the scandal that earlier enveloped him and Mr Huang and said he was the subject of surveillance, including by the US government ... Details of the phone tap warning and other dealings involving the pair have been collected by national security officials, Fairfax Media has confirmed.”

Further: “A former intelligence officer told Fairfax Media that the instruction to Mr Huang to talk not within the vicinity of his phone amounts to counter-surveillance advice.”

Seeking to exercise the basic democratic right to freedom of speech and political association, which means freedom from state surveillance and victimisation, is now being depicted as treasonous and an affront to the “national interest,” which is the interest of the ruling capitalist class.

If the conversation was not tapped into by telephone interception, other methods of surveillance were apparently employed. They could include bugging of Huang’s premises or other more sophisticated eavesdropping techniques, all of which points to systematic surveillance by intelligence agencies.

Washington’s hand in the Dastyari affair was indicated in September 2016, a few weeks before the closely monitored Dastyari-Huang meeting. In a blunt intervention, US ambassador John Berry stated publicly that the US was concerned about Chinese government involvement in Australian politics. Under Obama and now Trump, the US has stepped up its operations to combat the growing economic weight and influence of China, which Washington regards as the principal threat to its hegemony over the Indo-Pacific.

A further signal came yesterday when the *Australian Financial Review* splashed over its front page a declaration by a senior former Australian intelligence official, Ross Babbage, now based at a Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, that Dastyari “may have been recruited as an agent of influence” by Beijing. “Dastyari is clearly developing a close relationship,” with Chinese interests, Babbage said.

These developments provide further evidence of an anti-Chinese wartime-like atmosphere being generated in Australia, accompanied by the handing of far reaching powers and resources to ASIO and the rest of the intelligence agencies, which work intimately with their US counterparts, such as the CIA and the National Security Agency. Over the past 16 years, largely under the fraudulent banner of “counter-terrorism,” ASIO has

nearly quadrupled in size and a virtual police-state framework has been erected.

Turnbull’s government, which is wracked by instability and rifts, is seeking to exploit the witch-hunt to push through yet another barrage of legislation, which not only further expands the powers of the security apparatus but criminalises any activity that can be branded as supporting a “foreign power.”

Attorney-General George Brandis yesterday told the Senate that the new laws could punish Dastyari’s conduct. The legislation, to be introduced this week, would include a range of “new offences targeting foreign interference and economic espionage, including offences that criminalise covert and deceptive activities that support the intelligence activities of foreign actors.”

The legislation, to which Labor has already given in-principle bipartisan support, will also toughen measures that outlaw disclosure of classified information, ban “foreign” donations to Australian political parties and introduce a “foreign influence transparency scheme,” modelled on the US foreign agents registration act. Organisations, including media platforms, accused of supporting a foreign power will be compelled to register as “foreign agents.”

The Dastyari witch-hunt coincides with the nationalist political outcry that erupted in June over the entitlement to dual citizenship of a number of federal parliamentarians. This atmosphere, demanding “undivided loyalty” to the Australian nation-state, is aimed at suppressing anti-war sentiment, and diverting intense social and political tensions, created by declining working and living conditions, outward against foreign “enemies”—especially China.

The author also recommends:

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[30 November 2017]



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