

ASPI in damage control as its credibility crumbles

One could almost—almost—feel sorry for Justin Bassi, the new executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. When he took up the job in April 2022, having been hand-picked by the then-Morrison Liberal government from amongst its own senior staff the previous December, ASPI had for the past decade been Australia's premier purveyor of anti-China war propaganda. Almost uniformly, mainstream media and politicians from across the political spectrum treated its every assertion (however ridiculous) as Gospel. A year later, ASPI is being mocked by some of the media that once exalted it; attacked by influential Labor Party elders; and most recently, its analysts have been forced to denounce as "misrepresentation" a typically baseless propaganda screed for which they were the principal sources, after it sparked derision rather than the outrage intended.

Like his predecessor, former defence official, Prime Ministerial advisor and unrepentant Iraq War criminal Peter Jennings,¹ who headed ASPI in 2012-22 and is still a "senior fellow" there, Bassi is deeply connected both to the Liberal Party and to Canberra's Anglo-American-controlled intelligence establishment. He came to ASPI from the office of then-Foreign Minister Marise Payne, to whom he had been chief of staff since 2019, where he reportedly played a major role in getting "Magnitsky" sanctions on individual foreign officials incorporated into Australia's existing autonomous sanctions regime; and also in crafting the *Foreign Relations Act 2020*, which lets the Commonwealth veto state and local governments' education, trade and other partnerships with foreign counterparts. Both laws, of course, primarily target China. According to the 24 June 2019 *Sydney Morning Herald*, which described him as "the closest thing to a *bona fide* Antipodean 007", prior to joining Payne's office Bassi had held a senior role in cyber intelligence at Australia's peak intelligence agency the Office of National Intelligence (ONI). In 2015-18 he was national security advisor to then-PM Malcolm Turnbull, where according to his ASPI biography he had "responsibility for all areas of security legislation, policy and operations". Before that he was cyber security advisor in the office of Attorney-General George Brandis, where in addition to becoming notorious for wearing US Central Intelligence Agency cufflinks to work, he was also reportedly a key architect of Brandis's "data retention" laws to give the government virtual carte blanche to spy electronically on its own citizens.

Propaganda shop

Presumably Bassi was appointed head of ASPI to take charge of cooking up pretexts upon which to invoke the police-state laws he helped create. But it is turning out a harder job than he perhaps foresaw. Seemingly all of a sudden, but actually as the result of a years-long process for which the Australian Citizens Party (ACP) is pleased to be able to claim part of the credit, ASPI now finds both its character and its claims about China increasingly challenged.

ASPI was established in 2001 by the Australian government as an ostensibly "independent, non-partisan think tank" attached to the Defence Department. As the Australian Alert Service reported already back in 2015,² however, its chief task since Jennings took charge has been to justify Australia's unquestioning support for Anglo-American militarism the world over, including by trying to make Australia the future staging point for WWII by picking a fight with China on the USA's behalf. (This is not conjecture: ASPI is officially registered as a US agent under the federal Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, and many of its reports attacking China have been commissioned by the US and allied governments.) The AAS has been debunking ASPI's propaganda ever since, including its demand in June 2016 that Australia prepare to make war on nuclear-armed Russia in the name of "democracy" and the "rules-based global order";³ Jennings' false assertion that China had "hacked" the Australian Bureau of Statistics' national census web portal in August 2016 (in fact it crashed because of a hardware failure);⁴ and sundry allegations of spying and "foreign interference" that were actually completely normal economic, academic and cultural exchanges. More recently, the AAS has spent much effort on refuting the Hitleresque "big lie" that the Chinese government was committing a "genocide" of the Uyghur ethnic group who reside in the country's northwestern Xinjiang region—both through our own work explaining the true situation in Xinjiang,⁵ and by helping to publicise Australian socio-legal scholar and propaganda analyst Jaqueline James's comprehensive debunking of ASPI's specific claims.⁶

With the ACP having thus helped undermine ASPI's propaganda edifice, former Labor PM Paul Keating blasted it wide open during his bombshell National Press Club appearance on 15 March. (Whilst it may or may not have reached Keating himself, AAS is aware that some of the aforementioned ACP material has been read by senior Labor Party figures opposed to the present anti-China war drive.) In the context of the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) nuclear submarine



deal recently signed by PM Anthony Albanese, which Keating rightly denounced as a cession of sovereignty to our AngloAmerican “allies”, he accused Albanese of having “picked up [Liberal-appointed ONI director Andrew] Shearer’s neocon proclivities and those of ASPI, a pro-US cell led by a recent former [Liberal] chief of staff”.

Keating at the National Press Club.

Now, it seems the dam is breaking. The *Sydney Morning Herald’s* hyperbolic “Red Alert” series of 6-9 March frontpage articles, which cited Jennings and other ASPI-linked “experts” that Australia would be at war with China within three years, was ridiculed as “hysterical” on 14 March by ABC’s [Media Watch](#), which criticised the *SMH* for failing to canvas any contrary opinions. The program included a clip from Nine’s *Today* show in which political reporter Chris O’Keefe pointed out ASPI’s inherent bias, given it is “funded by the Australian Defence Force, [and arms manufacturers] Lockheed Martin, Thales and Boeing”. Former Labor Premier of NSW and federal Foreign Minister Bob Carr was more pointed, tweeting 25 March that “ASPI is a prowar Austral-American think tank headed by a political appointment out of the Morrison government receiving funds from armaments companies. These facts should be alluded to when it is quoted in the media.”

Panic stations

The crowning hilarity however came with the publication, and subsequent disavowal and eventual retraction, of a series of articles titled “China’s queer purge”, by “freelance” sometime SBS journalist Tom Canetti, published in early March by independent news website *Crikey*. Canetti wrote that “Members of China’s LGBTQIA+ community claim they have been sent to government-sanctioned reeducation camps. Some say they spent years in the camps and experienced forced conversion therapy.... Some say they were kidnapped and brought to the camps; others escaped, only to be shunned by their families to live in fear and solitude. Survivors provided testimonials to *Crikey* that when matched with satellite images and government websites linked the camps to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [*sic*].” (The correct name is the Communist Party of China, CPC.) Aside from the unnamed “survivors”, whose stories cannot be verified and who may well not even exist, Canetti’s only sources were ASPI analysts Nathan Ruser, who provided the satellite images; and Daria Impiombato, who “linked” them to the Chinese government.

Ruser told Canetti that the two alleged “camps” which the latter identified by name in the articles were “highly securitised campuses that have features similar to internment and re-education facilities in Xinjiang”. The trouble being that many of those “facilities in Xinjiang” can be clearly seen even on Google Maps’ “street view” tool to be schools, shopping centres, municipal government compounds and other innocuous buildings. As for Impiombato, the contention attributed to her that these “camps” were “linked” to the “CCP” is based upon the people who operate them being credentialed, and in some cases employed, by their respective regions’ education departments; and that they “share other traits, such as similar website setups, using the same pictures, with children wearing the same uniforms ... [which] suggest a large, centralised network of government-sanctioned” facilities. Which, of course, they do—because they turn out to be mostly ordinary schools, plus one “boot camp”-style operation to which parents send teens to be weaned off their addiction to online video games.

After five days of *Crikey’s* comments section and Twitter replies being flooded with comments and pictorial proof that gay and transsexual persons are absolutely not persecuted in China—including that one of the country’s biggest TV stars, Jin Xing, is a transwoman—Impiombato suddenly took to Twitter to claim she had been misrepresented and that she was “100 per cent against calling these schools re-education camps.... I advised against this several times, but was not heard.” Ruser likewise distanced himself from the article, after three days. On 31 March *Crikey* announced that it had decided to “unpublish” Canetti’s articles “after experts quoted in the series contacted *Crikey* with concerns they had been quoted on the record without their consent or their quotes had been mischaracterised or taken out of context”, and apologised to its readers.

For a man once touted as Australia’s answer to James Bond, Bassi is not handling things well. Instead of doing the wise thing and keeping quiet, he lashed out on Twitter at both Carr for his description of ASPI as “pro-war”; and at ACP Research Director Robert Barwick, whom he accused of “constant online bullying” of Impiombato, of whose “superb track record” he was “proud”, after Barwick called her out for publicly denying at a Canberra function last year that China had ever had a terrorism problem to deal with in Xinjiang—despite US Military Intelligence and CIA admissions that it had. The



aphorism “better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt” is apparently unknown to him. From the perspective of the growing legion of ASPI debunkers, so much the better.

Footnotes

1. [“ASPI trades Iraq War criminal for new-age techno-spook”](#), AAS, 27 Apr. 2022.
2. [“Neocon strategist demands more fear of China”](#), AAS, 8 July 2015.
3. [“Cold Warrior Paul Dobb demands confrontation with Russia”](#), AAS, 27 July 2016.
4. [“2016 census fail: A case study in China-bashing”](#), AAS, 9 Nov. 2016.
5. [“Xinjiang: China’s western frontier in the heart of Eurasia”](#), AAS, 18 Nov. 2020-24 Mar.2021 (compiled at <https://citizensparty.org.au/specialreport-xinjiang-anglo-americans-sponsor-east-turkistan-campaigns>).
6. [“Independent legal analyst shreds ASPI’s Uyghur ‘forced labour’ claims”](#), AAS, 12 Jan. 2022; see also [“The Aussie woman scaring the Western Propaganda Machine”](#) (video interview), 22 Sept. 2022.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 5 April 2023

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