



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Why is a US government-funded Canberra think tank attacking the campaign against bank closures in regional Australia?

The US-funded Canberra defence think tank that former Prime Minister Paul Keating called out as “a US cell” in its promotion of war with China is now smearing the campaign against bank branch closures in regional Australia as a “covert influence operation” of the Chinese government.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) is funded by the US State Department and the world’s biggest arms manufacturers to promote the China “threat” narrative in Australia, which has forced successive Australian governments to fall into line with Washington’s plans for war against China and ramp up military spending that is massively profiting those same companies.

ASPI’s work created the justification for the AUKUS alliance against Australia’s biggest trading partner, and Australia signing up to spend \$368 billion on US and British nuclear submarines.

In its typical style of inciting 1950s-style McCarthyite paranoia, a 24 July 2023 article in ASPI’s publication *The Strategist* by Albert Zhang and Danielle Cave has included the campaign to stop Australia’s Big Four banks from closing regional branches in a list of issues on which it claims the “Chinese Communist Party” is running a “covert influence operation” in Australia.

ASPI claimed that social media “bots”, which it calls “coordinated inauthentic accounts”, are “likely involved”—i.e. it has no proof—“in an ongoing Chinese Communist Party influence and disinformation campaign targeting Australian domestic and foreign policies”.

According to ASPI, this campaign includes “amplifying division” over the Aboriginal “voice” debate, and “sustained targeting” of “the big four banks”.

“Major Australian banks are a key focus for many accounts in the campaign, including the Commonwealth Bank, the National Australia Bank, ANZ and Westpac”, ASPI asserted. “This includes claims that Australian banks aren’t serving regional Australia and First Nations customers. Concurrently, the campaign promotes the views of certain individuals (such as former prime minister Paul Keating) and organisations (*especially the Australian Citizens Party*).” (Emphasis added.)

ASPI called for this activity to be included in the government’s bill to censor social media: “If the new ACMA powers to combat misinformation and disinformation, or a variation of the bill, are passed, then as a first step ACMA should mandate that digital platforms, including social media platforms, disclose all state-backed influence operations publicly....”

Robert Barwick, Research Director of the Australian Citizens Party which is the target of ASPI’s smear campaign, today hit back at ASPI and the US government, which he accused of interfering in domestic Australian politics.

“ASPI is attacking the ACP because we are the only political party that calls out their lies about China that have conned Australian politicians into sacrificing our national interest, which is a good relationship with our biggest trading partner, to America’s war agenda”, he said.

“The careful language of this article shows that yet again, ASPI has no proof of its claims, and it is just an attempt to smear.”

Barwick said that through ASPI, the US government is doing what it accuses China of doing—operating a covert influence campaign.

“What’s ASPI saying—that Beijing is opposed to banks closing branches in regional Australia?”

“Why is the US State Department paying ASPI to pump out such ludicrous claims?”

“It isn’t just smearing the ACP; it’s now smearing the campaign to save essential banking services in regional towns.

“And on top of that, ASPI is calling for our campaign to be included in the government’s Orwellian

social media censorship law, so we can be censored online!

“Isn’t it ironic? ASPI attacks China as authoritarian, but now it’s trying to shut down political debate.

“This is blatant foreign interference in domestic politics”, Barwick declared.