

ASIO: Australia’s foreign influence peddlers

At the 20 October 2020 Senate Estimates hearing of the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Senators questioned Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Director-General Mike Burgess, illustrating growing concerns over ASIO’s undue influence in Australian media and the veracity of its claims of “unprecedented” foreign interference in Australia.



China Daily’s footage of Labor Senator Kim Carr attacking ASPI in Parliament, which ASIO used in the media to create an impression of undue Chinese influence.

Labor Senator Kim Carr referenced a 14 October 2020 *China Daily* video, which criticised Australian politicians and media (identifying the ABC and China-hawk think tank the Australian Strategic Policy Institute) driving a “wave of anti-China sentiment” across the globe. The *China Daily* video showed an 11 February 2020 parliamentary speech by Carr, where he denounced the “hawks intent on fighting a new cold war” and criticised ASPI, exposing its US government influence and funding.

Under questioning from Carr, Burgess revealed that on the same day the *China Daily* exposé was published, Burgess had invited Australian journalists, including Nine political editor Chris Uhlmann, to an ASIO briefing.

While at a press meeting in Queensland on the same day, Prime Minister Scott Morrison answered a journalist’s vague question with a surprisingly pointed response. When asked, “Do you think that Australian politicians should be going out of their way to help state media organisations bag this country’s think tanks and its media?”, Morrison answered: “I’m going to have to interpret that question a little bit. But I think you might be referring to the fact that Kim Carr has made his way into some stateowned media in China, is that right?” (Emphasis added.) Morrison then claimed he did not pay much attention to such issues. If so, why did he leap to sensationally “interpret” the journalist’s broad question, and state further that he suspected Carr was “pretty happy” about appearing in Chinese state-owned media?

Later that evening, a sensational Nine segment by Uhlmann featured Morrison’s comment from earlier that day that “it was a bit surprising that Kim Carr found himself in a stateowned media Communist Party promotional video”. Morrison’s statement was misleading—Carr’s parliamentary speech is on the public record, and *China Daily*’s critical report was hardly a “promotional video”.



Channel Nine’s political correspondent Chris Uhlmann was briefed by ASIO to target Kim Carr over China.

At the 20 October 2020 Estimates, Carr aggressively questioned Burgess over the matter of ASIO “briefing” journalists and the question put to the Prime Minister, which was pointedly “interpreted” and conveniently timed to provide material for Uhlmann’s segment later that evening. Burgess’s responses were not clear-cut—he intermittently claimed confusion and provided indirect answers to Carr’s queries about ASIO possibly “wind[ing] up” journalists.

ASIO's 'solutions' to hyped foreign interference threats

Burgess told Senators that ASIO had seen evidence of intelligence services “deceptively cultivating” politicians who will “advance the interests of the foreign countries”. In an announcement seized upon by mainstream press, Burgess stated he would write to all Commonwealth parliamentarians “to warn them that they are attractive targets for those trying to steal our secrets and manipulate our decision-making”.

Labor Senator Kristina Keneally asked Burgess if ASIO thought the risk of foreign interference targeting members of parliament would merit “something more substantial” than a letter, such as “training modules, written advice, regular updates of information, advice to staff or families”. Despite later informing Senators espionage and foreign interference in Australia was “actually at an unprecedented unacceptable level”, Burgess told Keneally ASIO did not “turn [their] minds” to training but instead to policy response. The letter was “an attempt to draw this particular threat to the attention of members of Parliament”.

Keneally asked if ASIO had developed a “substantial document or policy framework” or strategy for countering foreign interference. Burgess replied ASIO had been involved in this work, but he couldn't speak for when this strategy might be released—which is odd, given his dire warnings of the “unprecedented” threat and his claims that ASIO's focus is policy response.

This is a pattern of Burgess and his predecessor. ASIO contributes to foreign-interference hysteria in Australian media, yet it is apparent that ASIO's actions do not reflect its professed alarm.

While reporting in China in 2017, AFR journalist Angus Grigg [recounted an anecdote](#) about being approached by “naïve” employees of a Communist Party-linked security company and asked to share information in exchange for a cut of the employees' “bonuses”. Former ASIO chief Duncan Lewis used Grigg's anecdote to argue journalists should not be exempt from the Turnbull government's foreign influence and espionage laws. Grigg strongly objected to ASIO “[appropriating] the anecdote for its own ends”, noting that despite Lewis's professed alarm, ASIO had never even attempted to contact him about the story.

Nine reporter Nick McKenzie's 23 November 2019 60 Minutes story, “China's Spy Secrets”, announced two alleged Chinese spies in Australia. Although ASIO had been aware of these “spies” for weeks, with ample time to assess their credibility, Burgess released a formal statement responding to McKenzie's sensationalist report, saying ASIO took the allegations “seriously” and had been “actively investigating them”. According to the 27 November 2019 Australian, there was “no overstating the impact” of Burgess's statement, which “guaranteed the stories could not be ignored”. Despite weeks of foreknowledge, ASIO waited until several days after Burgess's explosive speech to admit McKenzie's “spies” had no credibility and reassure the public, allowing days of hysterical media reporting.

ASIO likewise did not approach NSW Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane with concerns that one of his staff allegedly had undisclosed connections to Chinese state organisations. Instead, ASIO and the Australian Federal Police raided Moselmane's home, a nineteen-hour ordeal which included police taking hair samples and deploying sniffer dogs—televised live courtesy of McKenzie. Moselmane was recently exonerated by a parliamentary inquiry, which revealed even the raid warrant documents stated Moselmane's innocence. Instead of ASIO addressing the matter with Moselmane, his family was subjected to a highly publicised raid on their home. Contradicting ASIO's claims of the “unprecedented threat” of foreign interference, Moselmane stated he was never even questioned by either agency.

There is a glaring incoherence between ASIO's highly publicised claims of “foreign interference” threats, and ASIO's apparent lack of proportionate or policy-based responses to them. By its actions, ASIO shows that its rhetoric is mere propaganda. Australians should ask: to what end?

By Melissa Harrison, Australian Alert Service, 28 October 2020