

Exposed! Secretive annual talks influence Australian foreign policy

By Robert Barwick

As a nation that “guards” its sovereignty, Australians would be aghast to learn of a foreign influence operation that brings together leading politicians, government officials, journalists, and business executives from Australia and China for secretive annual talks. Most Australians would be instinctively suspicious of a forum that, while the event itself is not secret, attracts scant publicity, and the discussions *are* secret—participants strictly observe rules that prevent them from disclosing the contents of any comments made at the event, even without identifying speaker; they are only permitted to disclose their own comments. It would enrage Australians to learn that regular participants in this forum publicly sneer at an Australian journalist imprisoned in China, and that the forum was used to plant a fake “spy” story in the Australian media to undermine Australia’s most beneficial international relationship. Australians can be confident that the politicians in Canberra who are strident in their public defence of Australian sovereignty and have made it their mission to combat foreign interference would use the full power of Parliament and foreign interference laws to scrutinise the working of this operation and expose its agenda.

Australians would indeed have such reactions, if this scenario were about a foreign interference operation by China. Except it’s not a scenario, and it’s not about Australia and China. It’s a very real, 30-year operation influencing Australia and the United States, called the Australian American Leadership Dialogue (AALD). The “dialogue” occurs during an annual junket alternating between the USA and Australia, the latest of which has just wrapped up in Washington DC. If you were wondering why Australia’s bombastic new opposition leader Peter Dutton has been quiet lately, and why he gave an interview to Sky News on Sunday morning with the Washington Capitol building in the background, it’s because he has been on the latest AALD junket to the USA. Underscoring its political importance, the new CEO of the AALD is Tony Smith, the just-retired former Speaker of Australia’s House of Representatives, and its Advisory Board includes Professor Glynn Davis, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, i.e. the head of Australia’s Commonwealth public service.

The above description of how the AALD operates is entirely accurate:

- It involves leading politicians from both countries’ two major parties, government officials, journalists, and business executives, who attend by invitation only;
- It receives little publicity in proportion to the political firepower it attracts, and its attendees strictly observe its non-disclosures rules, as evidenced by the fact there has been very few leaks in its 30-year history;
- A journalist who is a regular AALD attendee didn’t sneer at an Australian journalist imprisoned by China, but at Julian Assange imprisoned by the UK at the demand of the USA—ABC News Breakfast co-presenter Michael Rowland tweeted “A big gold star to Ecuador” when Assange was forcibly removed from Ecuador’s London embassy in 2018, and doubled down by tweeting that people who call Assange a journalist are in “a VERY small camp”;
- Liberal MP Andrew Hastie revealed he was contacted by an intermediary of a self-proclaimed Chinese spy while at the 2019 Australian American Leadership Dialogue event, which led to a sensational 60 Minutes story about a

defecting Chinese spy exposing Chinese espionage in Australia, before the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) confirmed the claims were fake.

The AALD is the brainchild of then Coca-Cola Amatil CEO Phil Scanlan, an Australian business executive with an American wife, who also had a background in politics as advisor to leading Liberal Party identity Peter Coleman (a Cold War ideological warrior and the father-in-law of Peter Costello). In his 2019 book *The US Lobby and Australian Defence Policy*, author Vince Scappatura reports that Scanlan confessed to a deep-seated fear that following the end of the Cold War, he “would wake up one morning and find that the US has declared independence from Australia”. Scanlan proposed his idea to US President George H.W. Bush during Bush’s 1991 visit to Australia, and Bush backed it. Scanlan’s goal for AALD was to strengthen the alliance between the two nations, or, more specifically, to strengthen the alliance as the foundation of Australia’s foreign policy, through “relationship management between current and likely future leaders from both countries”, according to the AALD website. The attendees of the very first dialogue in 1993, held in Washington DC, included future PM Kevin Rudd, journalist Greg Sheridan, Nick Greiner, and then-US Defence Secretary Dick Cheney and his Under Secretary Paul Wolfowitz—the criminal conspirators behind the Iraq war—who the previous year had enunciated the strategic doctrine that America’s post-Cold War foreign and defence policies would focus on stopping the rise of any rival military or economic power, i.e. China. The AALD is committed to supporting this doctrine, by acting as a channel to communicate to Washington decision-makers a supposedly homogeneous Australian desire that America remain “engaged” in the Asia-Pacific.

In a 10 November 2016 ABC 7.30 interview, former Australian PM Paul Keating blamed the AALD for making Australian politicians of both parties subservient to the US alliance:

“We’ve got into this almost sort of crazy position now where the American alliance, instead of simply being a treaty, where the United States is obliged to consult with us in the event of adverse strategic circumstances, it has now taken on a reverential, sacramental quality”, Keating said. “It’s like a sacrament. I’m not talking about simply the government; I’m talking about some people on the Labor side as well.

“There’s a view, there was a thing called the Australian-American dialogue, which by the way I never attended, *which is a sort of a cult thing* that’s gone on for years and I don’t know what the Americans put in the drinking water, but whenever the Australians come back, they’re all bowing and scraping and going on.”

What Keating describes goes a long way towards explaining why new PM Anthony Albanese, one of many Labor participants in the AALD, is barely different from his predecessor. Meanwhile, nothing China has been accused of in terms of foreign interference comes close to the influence the AALD has over Australian foreign policy.



US Vice President Dick Cheney speaking at the 2002 AALD, watched on by AALD founder Phil Scanlan. Photo: AALD