

# ACRI Opinion

Australia - China Relations Institute 澳大利亚-中国关系研究院

## ASIO and the China scare

Bob Carr

August 14 2018

**THE AUSTRALIAN** 

This article appeared in *The Australian* on August 14 2018.

Australia was ‘unimaginable’ without the dynamic presence of Chinese-Australians. Those were the words of Malcolm Turnbull last week, resetting the rhetoric of Australia-China relations.

The new language is welcome, especially to someone such as Kun Huang, who might be wondering if it had been a mistake to have been born in China 27 years ago. At nine, he had arrived as a migrant. He worked at McDonald’s while getting a degree in finance and went on to become a staff member to a Labor senator. Last year he was elected to Cumberland council, Sydney, with a 17 percent swing. Any Australian party would want to claim this poster child of multiculturalism.

But in January he was ‘fingere’d’ by Clive Hamilton in his submission to federal parliament because at university Huang had been a member of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, although he says his role was organising speed dating and harbour cruises.

Australia’s new McCarthyism declares guilt by association. After the Hamilton submission, Huang resigned from his job with the senator rather than risk embarrassing her and is looking for a new one while still a local councillor.

NSW upper house member Ernest Wong is also a victim of the troubled air. The ALP apparently had decided to retire Wong from the party’s ticket. But a sinister article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on June 27 may have put paid to any post-politics career as well.

The article said: ‘It is understood Australian agencies have evidence of direct dealings between suspected Chinese government intelligence agents and Mr Wong.’ It added sinuously: ‘However, there is no suggestion that Mr Wong has ever acted inappropriately’ or that he ‘ever knew he was being cultivated or targeted by Beijing’s agents, although sources aware of sensitive information gathered by national security agencies said he appeared to be the target of a long-term operation’.

In *The Weekend Australian* last month, Noel Pearson settled on the Wong case and concluded we’re entering the territory of Salem, Massachusetts, dramatised in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. Or, Pearson

suggested, the new McCarthyism, with Liberal backbencher Andrew Hastie cast as the notorious Wisconsin senator who branded General George Marshall, the nation's greatest soldier, a pro-red traitor.

Wrote Pearson: 'Anyone doing yum cha with Chinese down the wrong end of Sydney's Sussex Street will soon come under suspicion.' Sorry, Noel, the excitable Professor Hamilton has already seized the argument. On page 95 of his *Silent Invasion*, he feels obliged to point out the University of Technology Sydney 'abuts Chinatown'. This implies, one guesses, that wafting odours of Cantonese cuisine must warp the judgment of scholars on anything related to China.

In similar spirit, he observes on page 66 that the NSW branch of the Labor Party is 'located in Sussex Street, in Sydney's Chinatown as it happens'.

Not even the anti-reds of the Cold War era drew a link between the location of the Sydney Trades Hall and the nearby Green Jade or Old Tai Yuen and their treason-tainted smells of soy sauce.

The Dastyari affair was the pint-sized scandal behind months of China panic. Yes, it was a mistake of the backbench senator to give a speech saying the South China Sea historically belonged to China. It was worse given that he'd declared two donations from Chinese sources.

But it appears Australia's domestic intelligence agency slipped the media information gleaned from taps of Dastyari's conversation with one Chinese donor. Should ASIO be able to prosecute a domestic agenda using media?

In 1983, ASIO surveillance suggested former national Labor Party secretary David Combe had been cosy with a Soviet diplomat. The ASIO director-general at the time, Harvey Barnett, briefed the prime minister, Bob Hawke. He didn't offer the story to a newspaper. For an intelligence chief, this would appear to be the more professional course.

ABC's *Four Corners* in June last year reported ASIO advice that an Australian public servant had been investigated because he'd allegedly kept government files at his Canberra flat. It was the only suggestion of Chinese espionage although all know nations spy on one another. The investigation took place three years ago and there's no prosecution.

Other counterintelligence agencies, such as the FBI and MI6, will prosecute or expel a wrongdoer, not slyly shunt to the media a case they find hard to resolve.

ASIO may have been behind another newspaper article, this time in *The Australian* on September 23, last year, that 'fingered' four Chinese-background candidates in NSW local government elections: two ALP, one a Liberal, one an independent. Apart from the liability of their Chinese heritage, they were members of the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China.

Its critics say the council is linked to the Chinese Communist Party. I'm on record saying the mere suggestion of such a link should be enough for Chinese-Australians to set up their own association of which that cannot be said. But in the meantime the council stands for a principle that Australian and US diplomacy embraces: Taiwan is recognised as a province of China. These local councillors can only guess how their careers may be compromised now by a briefing slipped to media by ASIO, if, in fact, that's how their memberships came to the newspaper's attention.

None of the local government candidates, to my knowledge, has any record of agitation on foreign policy. Australians from other ethnic backgrounds routinely seek to influence Australian foreign policy in a way sympathetic to their former or favoured countries. That includes citizens from Jewish, Arabic, Greek, Cypriot, Macedonian, Tamil and Vietnamese backgrounds.

Hamilton alleges on page 280 of his book that we can expect some of Australia's 1.2 million Chinese-Australians 'to take to the streets to express their loyalty to Beijing; in other words, to Australia's enemy'.

This stands totally at odds with the Prime Minister's declaration this week that Chinese-Australians are a 'vital thread in the fabric of Australian society'.

But take to the streets? Support the enemy? No Australian government has ever categorised China as our enemy, nor endorsed his next outrage — that up to 40 percent of Chinese-born Australians are ready to rise in support of China, again totally at odds with the Prime Minister. The evidence? An estimate provided by a 'Chinese-Australian friend'.

With the same inclination to levitate beyond any evidentiary base Hamilton writes (on page 22) that China has territorial designs on Australia: 'China is using fake history to position itself to make a future claim over Australia.'

Professors are one thing. But our domestic security agency should cleave to the evidence. Its statutory mission is to counter spies, not feed stories damaging the reputation of Australians who it admits have done nothing wrong and whose contribution inspires the praise of the country's Prime Minister.

*Bob Carr is Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney. He is a former foreign minister and was the longest serving premier of New South Wales.*