A Tale of Two Think Tanks: Canberra Escalates McCarthyism, Defunds Diplomacy

by Richard Bardon

The following article was first published June 17 in the Australian Alert Service, a publication of the Australian Citizens Party. The ASPI think tank, prominently noted here, has been consistently identified in the Chinese press since the summer as a source for anti-China slanders across the "Five Eyes" media outlets.

Signs are mounting that Australia's political establishment is fully committed to a needless Cold War against China. Cheerleading for conflict, as always, is the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), the supposedly independent think tank that speaks for the Anglo-American dominated "Western" military-industrial complex and intelligence apparatus, whose latest policy paper effectively demands an end to Australia-China relations for fear of Communist infiltration and subversion of our "democratic" political institutions.

At the same time, Australia's leading think tank concerned with bilateral business and diplomatic relations, China Matters, looks set not only to lose the federal government grants and commissions that fund much of its research and outreach work, but to have its tax-deductible status revoked to discourage its corporate supporters from filling the gap.

As the *Australian Alert Service* has reported, official relations are in their worst shape ever, federal government ministers are *personae non gratae* in Beijing, and what relationship remains is being kept alive mainly through semi-official diplomacy by state governments, business, and other interest groups.[1] The government and mainstream media's attack on perhaps the leading facilitator of the latter suggests that Canberra has decided to kill that off as well, setting the stage for a shutdown of relations that risks collapsing an Australian economy made over-reliant on China by decades of Canberra's own disastrous policies.

ASPI calls itself "an independent, non-partisan think tank," but it is nothing of the sort. Established in 2001 by the Howard government, ASPI is funded partly by an annual grant from the Australian Department of Defence. It is otherwise sponsored by a Who's Who of multinational weapons-makers, including missile manufacturers Raytheon Australia and MBDA Missile Systems; U.S. aerospace giants Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman; European conglomerates Saab AB and Thales; and shipbuilders Naval Group, the French government-owned company that might eventually get around to building Australia's new submarines, and Western Australia-based Austal, whose main contracts are with the U.S. Navy.

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The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which speaks for the Anglo-American military-industrial complex and intelligence apparatus.

Ironically, thanks to the Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme (FITS) introduced in 2018, for which it was instrumental in (literally) scaring up support,

1. "Canberra's Doublethink on China and 'Sovereignty'," *Australian Alert Service*, June 3, 2020.

ASPI was forced to reveal that it is also funded directly by foreign governments and supranational bodies; its donors in 2019 included the governments of the U.S.A., the UK and Japan, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On June 9, ASPI released its latest anti-China screed, "The party speaks for you: Foreign Interference and Chinese Communist Party's united front system." According to its acknowledgements page, the paper was paid for by an $80,000 grant from the Foreign Ministry of the Kingdom of Netherlands, and published by ASPI's in-house International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC), whose own long list of sponsors includes U.S. tech giants Microsoft, Google and Amazon.

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Alex Joske, an ASPI anti-China analyst, gets his twisted ideas from "former" CIA officer Peter Mattis.

Moreover the report's author, ASPI analyst Alex Joske, credits the concept for the paper to Peter Mattis, the "former" U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officer who in 2018, as a China expert for neoconservative-aligned Washington, D.C. think tank the Jamestown Foundation, praised then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull for the FITS, and mooted that New Zealand be expelled from the Anglo-American "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance for failing to follow suit.[2] In 2019 Mattis was a visiting fellow at ASPI, where he and Joske co-authored several articles casting the Chinese government's every effort at international outreach, whether by diplomats or via business and community organizations, as part of a plot to take over the world. As may be judged by its title, "The party speaks for you" is more of the same.

Conspiracy Theory

Joske claims authority on China on the basis that he is half Chinese (from his mother); speaks and reads Mandarin; and lived in Beijing for seven years in his childhood and teens, including when his father, former Australian Treasury official and Office of National Assessments (ONA) senior China economic analyst Stephen Joske, was senior Treasury representative at the Australian Embassy in 2004-07. It would therefore be reasonable to expect the younger Joske (who is reportedly now 23 years old) to have a better than average grasp of modern Chinese political history, in which light his misrepresentations can only be seen as deliberate.

According to Joske:

> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is strengthening its influence by co-opting representatives of ethnic minority groups, religious movements, and business, science and political groups. It claims the right to speak on behalf of those groups and uses them to claim legitimacy. These efforts are carried out by the united front system, which is a network of party and state agencies responsible for influencing groups outside the party, particularly those claiming to represent civil society. It manages and expands the United Front, a coalition of entities working towards the party's goals. The CCP's role in this system's activities, known as united front work, is often covert or deceptive.

C-SPAN

Peter Mattis, a Visiting Fellow at ASPI.

In a bizarre leap of logic, he then asserts:

> The united front system's reach beyond the bor-

2. "Interfering Foreigners Push Turnbull's Foreign Interference Laws," *Australian Alert Service*, June 13, 2018.

ders of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—such as into foreign political parties, diaspora communities and multinational corporations—is an *exportation of the CCP's political system.* (Emphasis added.)

But Joske gives no examples of it having tried to do so. He then goes on to equivocate that, "Overseas united front work taken to its conclusion would give the CCP *undue influence* over political representation and expression in foreign political systems." (emphasis added) To maintain this impression, Joske misrepresents historical events and institutions, and quotes Chinese revolutionary leaders outside their historical context, in order to paint their invocation by modern-day counterparts as evidence of ill intent.

Historically, the term "united front" (or "patriotic united front") referred to the uneasy alliance between China's rival—indeed, warring—political factions in the face of Japanese invasion and occupation during the Second Sino-Japanese War, from 1937 until Japan's defeat in September 1945, in what by then had become known as the Second World War. China's civil war resumed thereafter, from which the Communist Party emerged victorious in 1949.

Since then, the term has referred to the process by which China's eight other official political parties (whom Joske blithely dismisses as illegitimate because they are "all socialist"); business peak body [business association], the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce; and various religious, ethnic, and other groups participate in what China calls its "socialist consultative democracy."

The body tasked with furthering this process, including via outreach to the global Chinese diaspora (and thence to its host countries), is the United Front Work Department (UFWD). The UFWD is itself a subset of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), which is roughly analogous to the House of Representatives in a Westminster parliamentary system like Australia's; and it reports to the Communist Party's Central Committee, the nation's executive government. In other words, aside from its scale (and the same may be said of most things pertaining to China), international "united front work" differs little if at all from the informal diplomacy every nation conducts.

Joske however insists that the UFWD and every organization with which it can be "linked," in or outside China, comprise a vast international infiltration and subversion operation. To support this contention, he cites Zhou Enlai, "one of the PRC's founding revolutionaries and a pioneer of the CCP's United Front, [who] advocated 'using the legal to mask the illegal; deftly integrating the legal and the illegal' … 'nestling intelligence in the United Front' and 'using the United Front to push forth intelligence'."

And so he did—in 1939, during a desperate war of resistance against a genocidal imperial invader. Similarly, Joske takes President Xi Jinping's invocation during speeches in 2015 and 2017 of Communist Party founding leader Mao Zedong's 1939 description of the United Front as one of three "magic weapons" (the others being "armed struggle" and "party building") that kept China intact and eventually secured victory against Japan, as indicative of a militaristic intent behind present-day efforts to end poverty and resolve political discord at home and abroad. Would Joske also construe Australian politicians' constant invocation of the "ANZAC spirit" as proof of a plot to invade Turkey?

Alex Joske transforms the United Front tactic of Zhou Enlai (left), used against the Japanese invasion of 1937, into a modern plot by Xi Jinping (right) to take over Australia.

Flickr/Paul Kagame

Other sources Joske cites to support his conspiracy theory of an attempted Chinese Communist takeover of Australia include numerous overwrought mainstream media reports from recent years, wherein various Chinese and Chinese-Australian businessmen and organizations are asserted, without evidence, to be fronts for the UFWD; and allegations by various Australian and U.S. politicians and academics. In all, readers of his

paper would be well advised to note the disclaimer inside the front cover:

> This publication … is provided with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering any form of professional or other advice or services. No person should rely on the contents of this publication without first obtaining advice from a qualified professional.

Real China Experts Shunned

Meanwhile, another establishment think tank—one that really is nonpartisan and dedicated to Australia's national interest—has been shut out in the cold. "China Matters, a high-powered body backed by some of Australia's most senior business leaders, diplomats and academics, has fallen out of favor in Canberra," News Corp journalist Ellen Whinnett reported June 14, "with MPs concerned it was using taxpayer funds to boost Beijing's agenda."

Commonwealth of Australia

Christian Porter, Attorney-General of Australia, is reconsidering his department's funding for the non-partisan, pro-Australia think tank, China Matters.

Supposedly a "News Corp special investigation"—for which read, a dossier leaked by the government—revealed that "the group, which has taken $1.86 million from five government agencies since 2015, will get no further grants from three departments—Prime Minister and Cabinet, Defense, and Foreign Affairs—from June 30," while Attorney-General Christian Porter was reconsidering another three years' funding his department had "agreed 'in-principle' " to provide.

"Further, the Government has reversed a decision to grant China Matters 'deductible gift registration' status, making it more difficult for the organization to raise funds from donors." Whinnett also implies that China Matters has defrauded taxpayers by using public money to "[fly] several MPs … on all-expenses-paid study trips to China, where they met with Chinese Communist Party government officials and leaders of … a think tank with links back to Beijing's propaganda outfit United Front."

In fact, this work was *commissioned by the government.* As China Matters' chairman Kevin McCann AO [Officer of the Order of Australia] wrote in a letter of response posted on its website on June 16:

> China Matters does not have an institutional view. It is for this reason that heads of Federal Government Departments have for five years supported its work…. Department heads and other senior public servants have welcomed the diversity of views China Matters brings to its national meetings and briefings, and commended China Matters for including in these meetings representatives of all political parties and factions.
>
> Department heads have also welcomed the expertise about the People's Republic of China (PRC) which China Matters provides, which they have said helps them inform policy deliberations.
>
> China Matters does not, has not, and will not lobby against Australia or the Australian national interest. *Advocacy of ongoing engagement with the PRC does not make one a stooge of the Communist Party of China or an agent of influence.* (Emphasis added.)

It seems that China Matters' real transgression was that it dared pour cold water on the establishment's Cold War hysteria. In November 2019, its then-CEO Alistair Nicholas called for Australia to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing on the Belt and Road Initiative to ease tensions with Beijing; and its director Linda Jakobson urged the Turnbull government in 2018 not to rush the FITS into law without proper debate. But perhaps what sealed the group's fate was that, as Whinnett put it:

> [Jakobson also] called for security and intelligence agencies to provide the public with facts about wrongdoing despite the sensitivity of classified information … [to] enable Australians to develop a sophisticated understanding of the actions of the PRC government in Australian society which are considered to be unlawful foreign interference.

In her News Corp article on China Matters, Ellen Whinnett wrote: "It would be wrong to argue that the Government should only give money to those who support it—that would make Australia no better than China." Yet that's effectively what has happened.