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BUREAUCRACY TARGETS CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCE ORGANISER, FORMER PM OVER INFLUENCE FEARS

Abbott: I'm no foreign agent

EXCLUSIVE

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Tony Abbott has been asked to register as an agent of foreign influence under controversial national security laws, for addressing the Conservative Political Action Conference in August.

In the first action of its kind under the foreign-influence laws, the event's Australian organiser, Andrew Cooper, whose small not-

for-profit organisation LibertyWorks co-hosted CPAC in Sydney with the American Conservative Union (ACU), was ordered to hand over documents and threatened with jail time.

The revelations challenge the integrity of the Coalition's foreign influence registry, which came into effect last December. Attorney-General Christian Porter conceded the actions taken by his department did not represent an effective enforcement of the legislation.

The Weekend Australian can reveal that Mr Abbott was asked to register as an agent of foreign influence one day before he addressed CPAC. The conference was held in Australia for the first time in August and included prominent international speakers including Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage and British political activist Raheem Kassam.

The former prime minister refused the request, labelling it "absurd" and saying "senior officials of the commonwealth have better things to do with their time".

Mr Cooper received an October 21 letter from the Attorney-General's Department demanding the production of documents under the government's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme.

Like Mr Abbott, he has refused to comply and challenged the department about why it was not focused on more pressing "stories of Chinese Communist Party agents influencing university campuses or bankrolling political candidates".

The decision by the department to target Mr Abbott and Mr Cooper comes amid a national debate over Chinese influence at Australian universities and research organisations. It coincided with a damning ICAC inquiry that has heard allegations the NSW ALP received a \$100,000 donation in an Aldi shopping bag from a banned donor, billionaire property developer Huang Xiangmo.

The government's crackdown on foreign influence has been attacked by legal experts including Sydney University's Anne Twomey, who warned it could force thousands of people, including authors, academics and publishers, to register as agents of other countries.

The letter to Mr Cooper, sent by Sarah Chidgey, the deputy secretary of the Integrity and International Group, advised him to provide all documents "detailing any understanding or arrangement between LibertyWorks and the ACU". She asked for invitations to the event, correspondence with speakers as well as the transcripts and recordings of the addresses. It noted that failure to comply with the order within 14 days carried a maximum penalty of six months' jail.

In his reply, Mr Cooper said the department "appears less like the defender of freedom and more like that of the old East German Stasi".

"You hold a gun to our head and demand information that we do not have," he wrote.

He told The Weekend Australian: "I will not be complying with this notice despite the threat of

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Abbott declares: I'm not an agent of foreign influence

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criminal prosecution and jail time. I established LibertyWorks to argue against this type of government control over speech and citizens.

"I will not sell out our speakers and delegates by kowtowing to government overlords."

CPAC was aimed at developing ideas for the centre-right of politics and included addresses from conservatives and libertarians. It was heavily attacked by Labor's home affairs spokeswoman, Kristina Keneally, who warned of an "alt-right" takeover and rising white supremacism in Australia.

The first CPAC was held in the US in 1974 with then California governor and future president Ronald Reagan the first headline speaker.

Speakers at the August event included Mr Abbott, former deputy prime minister John Anderson, Liberal senator Amanda Stoker, Liberal MP Craig Kelly, former Labor leader Mark Latham and US Republican congressman Mark Meadows.

Mr Cooper said he "just wanted to run a conference".

The department has sent about 500 letters to a range of individuals asking them to consider whether they need to register under the foreign influence transparency scheme.

Mr Abbott was informed that, as a former cabinet minister, he had "a lifetime obligation to register any activity you undertake on behalf of a foreign principal".

In a follow-up email, sent by the department last month, Mr Abbott's CPAC address and a September speech to a summit in Budapest, Hungary, were identified as potentially problematic.

In a sharply worded response, sent on Wednesday and obtained

by The Weekend Australian, Mr Abbott said: "Neither speech of mine was given 'on behalf' of a foreign principal. I spoke for myself, that's all.

"Any suggestion that I was speaking on behalf of a foreign entity is absurd ... I decline to register and suggest that you rethink the making of such misplaced and impertinent requests in the future.

"Surely senior officials of the commonwealth have better things to do with their time."

The department's handling of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme angered Mr Porter. "I have made it clear to my department that I expect it to demonstrate a focus on the most serious instances of noncompliance," the Attorney-General said.

"I'm not persuaded this focus has been perfectly demonstrated to date."

Mr Abbott said it was easy for the bureaucracy to turn "well-intentioned government policy into something which turns out to be radically different to what their ministers and staff intended".

The letter to Mr Cooper was the first and only order for the production of documents issued under section 45(2) of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, which was introduced by Malcolm Turnbull to help counter the "serious threat posed to Australia and our interests by covert interference and espionage".

Mr Cooper told the department on Friday that LibertyWorks "cannot, and will not, comply with this notice". He informed the department that it was impossible to produce the thousands of documents requested within the 14-day timeline.

"The breadth and scope of the requirements in your notice betray a lack of specific concerns and you do not 'reasonably sus-

pect' we are required to register with the scheme," he wrote.

The department sent the letter to Mr Cooper, asking him to pass on the request by the close of business on Friday, August 9.

"So they threaten me with jail, and then expect me to be their agent so they can go after someone else?" Mr Cooper told The Weekend Australian.

"They can go and get stuffed."

The department also wrote to former Liberal politician Ross Cameron in August for speaking at CPAC, asking him to consider registering as an agent of foreign influence.

'Any suggestion that I was speaking on behalf of a foreign entity is absurd'

TONY ABBOTT
FORMER PRIME MINISTER