

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media
Department of the Senate
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AUSTRALIA

Australian Citizens Party submission re: “Foreign Interference through Social Media”

The Australian Citizens Party considers the “risk posed to Australia’s democracy by foreign interference through social media” to be minimal, and certainly not to warrant the extreme policy responses that have been proposed to mitigate against it, either in Australia or internationally.

Whilst all Australia’s mainstream media, national broadcaster the ABC as much as any, have at one time or another produced numerous lurid stories of foreign (principally Chinese) interference in our domestic politics, without exception these have been poorly sourced, and neither they nor the government have ever presented any solid evidence that such campaigns have taken place, let alone succeeded in their aims. The same is true of the “cyber-enabled foreign interference and misinformation” in other countries mentioned in this enquiry’s terms of reference, the two most prominent allegations of which—Russia’s supposed meddling in the US presidential election and UK “Brexit” referendum, both in 2016—are themselves based mainly upon misinformation, along with supposition, prejudice, and those countries’ need for a scapegoat on which to blame their own political dysfunction.

The true threat to democracy in Australia comes from the radical expansion of police and security-agency powers over the past two decades which in June 2018 led the former Office of National Assessment intelligence analyst turned whistleblower, now independent Member for Clark Mr Andrew Wilkie to describe Australia as a “pre-Police State”, which the present government is accelerating using the spectre of “foreign interference” as its pretext.

‘Brexit’

Allegations of Russian influence, including via social media, have been used by UK officials to explain retrospectively the unexpected result of the 23 June 2016 “Brexit” referendum, in which the majority of Britons voted to withdraw from the European Union (EU). On 23 November 2017, for example, then-Prime Minister Theresa May, in her keynote address to the Lord Mayor’s Banquet held at Guildhall in the heart of the City of London, accused Russia of “seeking to weaponise information [by] deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.”

The day after May’s speech, the *Guardian* reported that University of Edinburgh researchers had identified 419 social media accounts operating from the Internet Research Agency (IRA)—a privately owned online marketing company based in St. Petersburg, Russia that is alleged to be a Kremlin-run propaganda unit—that had been “attempting to influence UK politics” by “sowing discord among Britons over the [Brexit] referendum”. Conservative MP Damian Collins, chairman of the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee, had demanded that Twitter supply him examples of IRA posts about British politics, the *Guardian* reported. “What is at stake is whether Russia has constructed an architecture which means they have thousands of accounts with

which they can bombard [us] with fake news and hyper-partisan content”, he said. “We need to understand how widespread it is and what the impact is on the democratic process.”

As it happens, the answers to those questions appear just a few paragraphs later: according to the University of Edinburgh’s Prof. Laura Cram, the 419 accounts had tweeted about Brexit 3,468 times—about 78 per cent of them after the Brexit vote. Separately, Oxford Internet Institute researcher Yin Yin Lu told Sky News that she had cross-referenced 2,752 accounts identified by the US Senate as creations of the IRA with her own database of 22.6 million tweets posted between March and July 2016, and found a grand total of 416 matches. “That is a very infinitesimal fraction”, Ms Lu told Sky. “So the word interference is perhaps a bit exaggerated.”

2016 US presidential election

Similar accusations regarding Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States in November 2016 likewise do not stand up to analysis. The social media-based element thereof, again by the IRA, consisted of a very small-time advertising campaign, on which it spent a mere US\$46,000 on Facebook ads—compared to US\$81 million by the Trump and Clinton campaigns combined, and US\$4,700 across various Google platforms.

Its most-liked Facebook post was a gun-toting image of Yosemite Sam; its most shared Instagram post instructed viewers to “Click here if you like Jesus”. Another favoured meme featured Jesus counselling a young man on how to stop masturbating. Otherwise, the IRA’s efforts were mainly devoted to selling themed t-shirts and, ironically, sex toys.¹ Facebook itself reported on 6 October 2017 that only 10 million people (out of a population of some 323.5 million) ever saw even one of the IRA’s ads; that 56 per cent of those views occurred after Trump’s election on 8 November 2016; and that “roughly 25 per cent were *never shown to anyone* ... because advertising auctions are designed so that ads reach people based on relevance” (emphasis added), and therefore cannot possibly have had any influence on America full stop, let alone on the election outcome.² As for the IRA’s “influence” in general, Facebook general counsel Colin Stretch testified to the US Congress in October 2017 that accounts linked to the company had made a total of only around 80,000 posts in the entire preceding two-year period, i.e. a year *either side* of the election campaign.

As American investigative reporter Gareth Porter noted 2 November 2018 in *Consortium News*, Facebook’s statistics show that 33 *trillion* total posts were “served” to account holders in the USA over the same timeframe, “413 million times more than the 80,000 posts from the Russian company”. Put another way, the IRA’s posts constituted 0.000000024 per cent of total Facebook content in that time, of which—again according to Facebook officers’ testimony to Congress—as little as 10 per cent *might* have been viewed even once by anyone in the USA. All of which led Porter rightly to describe the attempt to paint the IRA as a decisive influence on the 2016 election “one of the most spectacularly misleading uses of statistics of all time”.³

Meanwhile in Australia ...?

Australian Labor Party (ALP) Senators Penny Wong of South Australia, Leader of the Opposition in the Senate; the Hon. Don Farrell, also of SA, the shadow Special Minister of State; and Jenny McAllister of New South Wales, now Chair of this Committee, stated in their joint press release announcing the establishment of this Select Committee at their initiative: “The rise of ‘fake news’

¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/russiagate-elections-interference/>

² <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/10/hard-questions-russian-ads-delivered-to-congress/>

³ <https://consortiumnews.com/2018/11/02/33-trillion-more-reasons-why-the-new-york-times-gets-it-wrong-on-russia-gate/>

and misinformation campaigns present a very real and present danger to democracy not only in Australia, but across the globe. We must protect our democracy from malicious foreign actors. ... We all must continue to manage these threats and maintain confidence in our democracy and institutions.”⁴ The Senators did not however mention any specific threat; and nor, so far as the Citizens Party has been able to determine, has anyone else. Rather the supposed threat appears to have been inferred from the alleged instances cited above—which, as has been shown, are in fact arrant nonsense—with “China” substituted for “Russia” as the chief antagonist. We note that this view is not universal within the ALP; Sen. Kim Carr of Victoria, for instance, recently excoriated the “hawks within the defence and security establishment ... and those in the media who uncritically report their remarks” for peddling Sinophobia without any evidentiary basis, the “factual record ... [being] something that those intent on whipping up a new cold war against the PRC [People’s Republic of China] prefer to ignore”.⁵

The ALP’s currently prevailing policy direction, however, continues to reflect the outlook of the “hawks”. To defend against this ephemeral “foreign interference” bogeyman, the Abbot-Turnbull-Morrison Liberal/National Coalition government, with ALP support, has since 2014 passed a slew of “national security” legislation that has eroded Australians’ civil liberties in a manner unacceptable to a “democracy” even had they yielded any demonstrable benefit.

As noted above, in a 26 June 2018 speech in Parliament Andrew Wilkie MP—by far the most qualified member of either House of Parliament to speak on such matters—stated on the basis only of laws already in place at the time, “I will go so far as to say that Australia is a pre police state”. Two days thereafter the ALP waved through the government’s *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018*, which passed the federal parliament on 28 June, and established an unprecedented state-secrecy regime smothering freedom of speech, association and political communication.

In the meantime London’s 27 June 2018 *Financial Times* had reported under the headline “Australia leads ‘Five Eyes’ charge against foreign interference” that the push for foreign interference laws was occurring under the rubric of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA, in which the latter two are (by far) the dominant partners. We remind the Committee that whereas the public is yet to see any evidence of interference by Russia, China or anyone else, let alone of a nature that would “threaten our democracy”, the official documents and communications released in 2013 by US National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden—whose veracity has never been questioned—proved beyond a shred of doubt that the NSA and its sister Five Eyes signals-intelligence agencies had fundamentally undermined democracy by their illegal mass surveillance of their own and each other’s citizens’ communications, movements, electronic transactions, and even private conversations illegally recorded via covert remote activation of mobile phones and webcams.

More recently, the *Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Act 2019* was rushed through Parliament on 4 April last year and received royal assent the following day. As it has done with other recent draconian “national security” laws, Labor ignored the warnings of experts—such as the Law Council of Australia’s then-president Arthur Moses SC, who cautioned in a 4 April

⁴ <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-releases/labor-establishes-inquiry-into-foreign-interference-through-social-media/>

⁵ K. Carr, “An Academic Iron Curtain?”, *The Tocsin*, Issue 8, Oct. 2019; see also Sen. Carr’s 11 Feb. 2020 speech in the Senate, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansards/c220a265-e5aa-42c9-8cd9-19390fabb066/&sid=0000

statement that “Laws formulated as a kneejerk reaction to a tragic event ... can have myriad unintended consequences. Whistleblowers may no longer be able to deploy social media to shine a light on atrocities committed around the world”—and waved the bill through with no debate.

In light of the foregoing, the Australian public and their elected representatives—the members of this Committee in particular—would be foolish to take the word of the government and the defence/security “hawks” that our democracy is threatened by “foreign interference”, unless and until they present the public with real, verifiable evidence. Handing them even more powers over Australians’ lives to combat this apparently non-existent threat, as Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Secretary Michael Pezzullo continue to demand—such as Dutton’s call, from a Five Eyes ministerial meeting in Washington, DC early this month, for the virtual abolition of encrypted messaging via social media (implausibly framed as a way to fight child sexual abuse⁶)—is not a way to defend Australia’s democracy, but to nail shut its coffin. We urge this Committee not to pass them the hammer.

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⁶ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/five-eyes-closes-on-tech-child-sex-deal/news-story/0464b5e9e4681db8c57be0c011192830>