

Foreign Influence in Australia: Is the China Lobby Edging out U.S.? The Fall of Senator Sam Dastyari

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Gazing at the politics of a vassal state is interesting in one acute, and jarring sense. Voices of presumed independence are often bought; political opinions that seem well informed are, in fact, ventriloquised. The origin is always elsewhere.

Australia's politicians represent this more starkly than most. Supposedly representatives of the people who elect them, they become the servants of different masters once in office. Whether it is the large party machines that often back them, drawing and quartering their individuality, or a powerful lobby that threatens and cajoles them, the Australian politician is at the mercy of various earthly and often nasty powers. The one judge of the matter, the public, is left out.

The fall of Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, who had become a distraction of such proportion as to drive opposition leader Bill Shorten potty, constitutes the first conspicuous casualty of this dilemma: that of the bought politician. But it all seemed so convenient, and easy.

"Today, after much reflection," concluded [Dastyari](#), "I've decided that the best service I can render to the federal parliamentary Labor Party is not to return to the Senate in 2018." His "Labor values" had told him like a high gospel power that his continued presence in the party room had detracted "from the pursuit of Labor's mission".

Dastyari had certainly bumbled and bungled his way into a corner so narrow that no tomfoolery could extricate him. Excuses that had been made in the past (oh, cheeky Sam; or what a lark) had run out of steam.

The list of grievances against him had become a lengthy one. Over a year ago, it was revealed that he permitted a company owned by Huang Xiangmo, with claimed links to the Chinese communist party, to foot a legal bill for his office. Such a donation, as it was termed, saw him resign from the front bench. (It is worth noting that Huang had donated generously to the [Liberal Party](#) as well - a far from negligible \$50,000 to the Victorian branch in November 2014.)

Then came the revelation, scenting of a targeted intelligence leak, that the senator had been cautionary to the billionaire prior to a meeting: leave the phones behind, he suggested, as they were surely surveillance targets.

But of all such detractions and transgressions, an umbrella theme of sorts had emerged. Dastyari was to be crucified for being too close to a power that is both boon and bugbear for Australia. His behaviour had revealed a dark future, one of Chinese influence edging out US suasion. In Australia, this has assumed something of a binary idiocy, the either or of allegiance. If you are to be bought, be bought by a power that is approved by the Canberra

mandarins.

In an age where the snippet and tweet comprise narratives and the basis of whole worlds of presumed knowledge, Dastyari was probably best off coming clean from the start. A mole hill, in time, became a mountain of immense proportion. His flirt with China became an embrace, then a sordid tryst.

The news cycles and social media buffoons did the rest: he had become, according to cartoonish villain and immigration minister Peter Dutton, a double agent. Attorney-General [George Brandis](#) claimed the senator had been “suborned or compromised” by China. He was pro-Chinese, going against the line of his party and that of government policy on the South China Sea.

A reading of his now notorious speech on the subject suggests that he was buying into a heresy Australia’s politicians will never be forgiven for: stepping away from the teat of an approved empire. Rather than coddling a Chinese view in any specific sense, he was, more importantly, insisting that Australia stay out of any future territorial disputes China might have over the territories. But to not have a view on the subject was very much the same as having one.

This would effectively mean a form of what international relations theorists like to term decoupling, a removal from a future US-China confrontation, a distancing from the tight grip of the Washington establishment.

Dastyari might have left it at that. The sin had been committed. Shorten insisted that the Turnbull government stop its relentless haranguing, which included a threat to bring Dastyari before the privileges committee to explain a congenital problem of Australian politics: the influence of foreign donations.

But being the figure that he is, a misjudgement was lurking behind the corner. Dastyari went further, obviously showing that he believes the Chinese case to have legs. Rather than wishing to be a heretic, he began showing signs that he was becoming a devotee.

This devotion came in the form of pressuring colleagues within his party to avoid meeting certain activists in Hong Kong concerned with Beijing increasingly rough hand. According to [Fairfax media](#), he “repeatedly” warned Deputy Opposition Leader Tanya Plibersek that her meetings with pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong in 2015 “would upset figures in the Chinese community in Australia”.

What then, of the other stone throwers in Parliament? There are strong pro-US views held without equivocation, and not even a volatile president in Washington will shake them. There are also firm views, not to mention allegiances, for [Israel](#). Both powers have vast portfolios of purchased, and assured opinion, among the country’s parliamentarians.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has certainly made a degree of hay from this crisis. Hypocrisy has been concealed by legislative acumen. “Foreign powers,” [he explained](#) on announcing new proposals banning foreign donations and making politicians declare their non-Australian loyalties, “are making unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process, both here and abroad.”

The legislation is modelled on the US Foreign Agents Registry, placing the onus on

individuals to declare whether they are in the employ or acting on behalf of, a foreign power. "If you fail to disclose your ties," explained Turnbull, "then you will be liable for a criminal offence."

The case of Dastyari might well have been made a more universally applicable one. Instead, both major parties are now burying it, believing themselves to be high minded and, worst of all, independent. The suggestion by Turnbull that foreign influence and meddling lurk as rising menaces errs in one crucial respect: presuming that the present is exceptional. With a state like Australia, the past, and the future, is in the pockets of other powers, declared or otherwise.

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