

Alienating Chinese Australians is just doing Beijing's work for it

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In his latest contribution to Australian multiculturalism, John Howard told a conference in London on the Five Eyes intelligence network that despite being "terrific citizens", Chinese Australians were being used by China "to further her new power and her own interests".

In one breath, he managed to imply that every one of the 1 million or so Australians of Chinese heritage living in Australia, from Kylie Kwong to Lee Lin Chin, were patsies for the China Communist Party.

These remarks are unhelpful and dangerous. Covert foreign interference from any foreign power must be resisted, but it is deeply problematic to attribute guilt by association to a large, important, diverse group of Australians.

Like much other commentary, John Howard's comments fail to appreciate the complexity and diversity of the Australian Chinese community and the diaspora, just as it fails to genuinely respect the contributions and sacrifices Chinese Australians have made and continue make, to the building of our nation.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the first Chinese migrant arriving in Australia in 1818, over a century before the CCP was founded in 1921 and the PRC in 1949. The community includes Chinese people from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as from the 33 difference provinces of the PRC.

These separate sub-groups have widely differing political views and allegiances. Many are mortal enemies of the CCP including Falun Gong activists, a fact that authors of anti-PRC works fail to disclose when they assert that their publications were supported by "Chinese" Australians.

Part of the issue is loose language. I am Chinese in the civilisational sense that I share the Chinese language and culture thanks to my parents who migrated from Hong Kong some 60 years ago. However, I have no relation with the People's Republic of China. I don't even get invited to embassy drinks.

Undermining trust

Most importantly, however, John Howard's remarks are dangerous because they undermine trust in Chinese Australians. In doing so, they attack the foundations of our multicultural society; they legitimise suspicion against an entire segment of the population, simply because of their race.

The socio-political environment confronting Chinese Australians today feels more menacing than during the first rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation two decades ago in 1997-1998. One Nation then was a guileless, racist fringe and their attacks on multiculturalism mobilised the Australian Chinese community (and many other groups) to political action. This time, however, the attacks are mainstream and complex, bolstered by governmental authority, and alarmingly, are profoundly disenfranchising for Chinese Australians.

In this now diabolically polarised debate about "Chinese" political influence, Australian Chinese voices are eerily absent. Nobody wants to say anything for fear of being falsely labelled for exactly what they are accused of being: CCP sympathisers.

Chinese and other Asian Australians are already hopelessly under-represented in our parliaments, our judiciary, our major company boards and senior management and our mainstream media. Yet in saying that we are especially vulnerable to covert CCP influences, this only reinforces the bamboo ceiling.

Recent geopolitics has raised exceedingly challenging domestic questions that go to the heart of who we are and who we can trust. For example, could we trust a former PRC national who has become an Australian citizen but still has family in the PRC, to be a member of the Australian Parliament? Would we vote for them? Would political parties dare even preselect them as candidates?

If a Chinese Australian rose to the most senior levels of the public service, could we trust them with the most confidential of our nation's secrets? Or an Australian company's valuable IP? Or an Australian university's ground-breaking research?

And if we cannot give this trust, what does that mean for our multicultural, liberal democracy? When does somebody stop being Chinese, and start being Australian?

Political voice

These are not academic questions. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported last week that one of the reasons for the dis-endorsement of Ernest Wong from a

winnable position on the ALP's upper house ticket was that he was cultivated by CCP operatives, even though he may not have known he was being cultivated.

Over dinner, a Chinese Australian friend who was a senior public servant spoke of the creeping damp of distrust; the feeling that one had been excluded from a meeting, left off a distribution list, not included in a conversation.

Crucially, if Australia cannot give Chinese Australian citizens a voice in our politics, a part of our history and future, a strong sense of belonging to our nation, that in fact increases the allure of CCP who may say to Chinese Australians, particularly those newly arrived from China, "you have always belonged with us".

What needs to be done?

First, we must be razor sharp in our language. When we mean the CCP or the PRC, let's explicitly say that rather than just using the term "Chinese".

Second, we must be confident in the values we seek to defend. In the imperative to resist covert influence operations for any foreign power, let's not give in to populism, panic and suspicious overreach. These are from the playbook of authoritarian regimes, not confident liberal democracies. While strengthening our ability to deal with foreign influence, let's believe in the strength and resilience of our institutions.

Lastly, in our efforts to fight foreign influence, let's not disenfranchise Chinese Australians but rather empower them in Australia's national interest. Chinese Australians want to have an influential voice in Australian politics and leadership because we are Australians, not because we are Chinese.

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