

Lessons on China from Australia and Canada

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Chatham House magazine The World Today, 16 September 2021

Link: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2021-08/lessons-china-australia-and-canada>

Although separated by the world's largest ocean, Australia and Canada have a lot in common.

Both are western middle-power democracies and allies of the United States that struggle to manage relations with an increasingly assertive and powerful China. Both have similar populations of people of Chinese heritage.

And both have been subjected to illegal and coercive foreign interference from China.

In 2018, Australia enacted [controversial](#) national security legislation with the intention of reducing the risk of foreign interference. The legislation was drafted without naming any particular country, although political [commentary](#) made it clear China was a main target.

Last year, Canadian parliamentarians voted to follow Australia's lead to fend off Chinese interference. Yet while Canada's political strategy towards China remains in flux, Australia should act as a cautionary tale rather than as a shining example.

Australia-China relations have reached an all-time low. No Australian government minister has spoken to their Chinese counterpart in more than a year. Australia has suffered severe economic retaliation from China with no end to this in sight. Australia is significantly more vulnerable than Canada to China's pressure being eight times more dependent on trade with China.

Canada, despite continuing to speak out about human rights abuses and arbitrary detention in China and experiencing some trade retaliation, has managed to maintain a diplomatic relationship with China. Hundreds of thousands of tons of Canadian barley have replaced Australian exports to China over the past year.

Australia offers lessons in avoiding overreaching legislation and a public debate that threatens to descend into McCarthyism, while Canada historically has

valued the long-term deliberation of policymaking and the funnelling of public funds into anti-racism efforts.

Whatever the approach, ultimately both countries' experiences demonstrate the need to delink views of China with ethnicity.

The broadening of Australia's national security legislation, scrutinizing connections as well as improper conduct, set in motion a public debate about foreign interference that has resulted in a new kind of McCarthyism.

Australians of Chinese heritage or anyone who expresses a positive view of China, or even just seeks to understand the rising world power, risk being labelled a [communist stooge](#).

The scope of Australia's 2018 foreign interference laws should be narrowed when they are reviewed in December as recommended in [*China Matters Explores May 2021*](#).

Last year, unfavourable views of China reached [historic highs](#) in many countries. Negative views increased the most in Australia.

No matter the extent of the threat of foreign interference, drawing a link between a dislike or distrust of China to people of Chinese heritage should never be tolerated.

Research interviews with experts in both countries revealed that a stronger public awareness and political sensitivity of racist overtones prevails in Canada compared with Australia.

During a 2020 senate hearing on issues facing diaspora communities, Australian Senator Eric Abetz singled out three Australians of Chinese heritage and [demanded](#) that they condemn the Communist Party of China (CCP). No cabinet minister, no member of parliament from the governing parties and no senior opposition party leader condemned Abetz by name.

A month later, 14 opposition parliamentarians signed an open letter demanding that Abetz apologize – he has not – and calling on Prime Minister Scott Morrison to assure Chinese Australians that this kind of a loyalty test is unacceptable – he has not.

'If Abetz did what he did in Canada he would have been cut off at the knees by his own party,' Paul Evans, HSBC Professor in Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, told me in April.

John McCallum, the former Canadian Ambassador to China, agreed that it would be 'extremely unlikely to happen here ... it's not in our culture'.

Where Canberra reacted precipitately to the fear of Communist Party interference, Ottawa has taken time to deliberate issues and solutions. Canadian Senator Yuen Pau Woo – who has [spoken out](#) about the risks of following Australia's legislative example – said, although 'pressure to demonstrate more toughness on China is mounting ... there is still a vigorous debate going on'.

In Ottawa, China is not viewed across the political establishment in a one-dimensional negative light, as it is increasingly in Canberra.

As Paul Evans said: 'We've lost the media and much of parliament but not yet the senior bureaucracy and the cabinet.'

Canadians who interact with China have not yet been subjected to the same [political scrutiny](#) as their Australian counterparts.

'There isn't politicization in Canada of Canada-China relations to the same degree,' said Lynette Ong, of the University of Toronto.

This is [changing](#), however, and signs have emerged of Canada risking its public debate on China more closely mirroring that of Australia's.

In May, hearing public evidence at the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations, Garnett Genuis, a Canadian MP, [demanded](#) that the director of the Confucius Institute at Carleton University, a man of Chinese heritage, condemn the CCP over the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown before being taken seriously by the committee. Genuis has not been condemned by name by any of his parliamentarian colleagues.

While Australia prides itself as a successful multicultural country, nearly [four in ten people](#) of Chinese heritage in Australia this year said they had been treated less favourably because of their ethnicity.

Although constituting more than 5 per cent of the population, Australians of Chinese heritage make up only 1.3 per cent of federal parliament. In Canada, Canadians of Chinese heritage represent 3 per cent of federal parliament.

Canada is way ahead of Australia in its anti-racism efforts. Canada's national Anti-Racism Strategy (2019-2022) is an A\$47.9 million initiative. In the 2021 Budget A\$11.7 million was allocated over two years to the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

The Australian government does not prioritize anti-racism initiatives. It has not funded a national anti-racism strategy since 2015. The Australian Human Rights Commission National Anti-Racism Strategy Phase 1 (2012-2015) was a mere A\$1.7 million initiative. Phase 2 (2015-2018) was entirely self-funded by the commission.

In March, the commission proposed a new National Anti-Racism Framework, including improving data collection on racism and reviewing existing anti-discrimination laws. The proposal still awaits a response for federal funding.

The Australian government should fund the proposal in full.

By subjecting Australians of Chinese heritage to loyalty tests, by not correcting overreaching foreign interference legislation, and by not concretely investing federal funds to deter acts of racism, the Australian government alienates Australians of Chinese heritage from public debate, and risks undermining its own pillars of multiculturalism and democracy.

As Australia continues to openly provoke Beijing despite its wrath and as anti-Chinese racism in Australia and Canada looms large, there has never been a more important time for both countries to reflect on policy choices – and to separate negative views of China with ethnicity.

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