

# We Need to Separate Views of China From Ethnicity

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Australia and Canada are Western middle-power democracies and US allies that struggle to manage relations with an increasingly assertive and powerful PRC. This is causing unnecessary hardship for Chinese Australians and Canadians.

There are over 1.2 million Australians of Chinese heritage living in Australia, making up 5.6 percent of the population. Similarly, there are over 1.7 million Canadians of Chinese heritage living in Canada, making up 5.1 percent of the population. Reports from [Human Rights Watch](#) in Australia and [Amnesty International](#) in Canada show how people of Chinese heritage in both countries are subject to foreign interference from state and party officials, as well as passionately nationalistic citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Not to be mistaken with legitimate foreign influence – the aim of diplomacy of all countries – foreign interference is the use of illegal or coercive measures to interfere in another country's society, or the intimidation or harassment of another country's citizens.

Unfavourable views of the PRC and fear of Communist Party interference in society has reached [historic highs](#) in countries around the world. Negative views of the PRC have increased the most in Australia. Some Canadian parliamentarians regard Australia as a [case study](#) of how to deal with foreign interference from Beijing. But is Australia an example to follow or a cautionary tale?

Although any genuine threat of foreign interference [should be taken seriously](#), the McCarthyism that has resulted from Australia's broadening of its national security legislation in 2018 is not to be desired. The Australian Espionage and Foreign Interference Act and the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act scrutinise connections as well as improper conduct. Today, 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.

No matter the extent of the threat of foreign interference, drawing a link between a dislike of the PRC to people of Chinese heritage should not be tolerated. Research interviews with experts in both countries revealed that a stronger public awareness and political sensitivity of the need to separate views of the PRC with ethnicity prevails in Canada compared with Australia.

In Ottawa, the PRC is not viewed across the political establishment in a one-dimensional negative light, as it is increasingly in Canberra. Canadians who interact with China have not yet been subjected to the same [political scrutiny](#) as their Australian counterparts. Canadian Senator Yuen Pau Woo, who has [spoken out](#) about the risks of following Australia's legislative example, told me that although "pressure to demonstrate more toughness on China is mounting... there is still a vigorous debate going on." Paul Evans, HSBC Professor of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia said, "we've lost the media and much of parliament but not yet the senior bureaucracy and the cabinet."

Last October during a senate hearing on issues facing diaspora communities, Australian Senator Eric Abetz singled out three Australians of Chinese heritage and [demanded](#) they condemn the Communist Party of China. In the days that followed, no cabinet minister, no member of parliament from the governing parties, and no senior opposition party leader condemned Abetz by name. Paul Evans told me, "If Abetz did what he did in Canada he would have been cut off at the knees by his own party."

However, just a few weeks later, evidence of changing perceptions in Ottawa emerged. Hearing public evidence at the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations, Canadian MP Garnett Genuis [demanded](#) that the director of the Confucius Institute at Carleton University, a man of Chinese heritage, condemn the Communist Party over the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown before being taken seriously by the committee.

While Australia prides itself on being a successful multicultural country, nearly [four in ten people of Chinese heritage](#) said they had been treated less favourably because of their ethnicity. Australians of Chinese heritage make up only 1.3 percent of federal parliament. In Canada, Canadians of Chinese heritage represent three percent of federal parliament.

Canada is way ahead of Australia in its anti-racism efforts. Canada's national Anti-Racism Strategy (2019-2022) is an \$47.9 million initiative. The Australian government has not funded a national anti-racism strategy since 2015. In March, the Australian Human Rights Commission launched a proposal to develop a new National Anti-Racism Framework. 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.

Let Australia's mistakes be a warning to Canada. In responding to the threat of a more powerful and assertive Communist Party, we must separate our views of the PRC with individuals' ethnicity.

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