

“The Nutters are in Charge.”

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Inimitable to a fault, former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating had been fairly quiet on his party's policies till an impromptu press intervention last week. Catching two journalists of the ABC off-guard, Keating took little time to land a few blows against Australia's foreign and domestic intelligence security officers. They had, in Keating's view, “lost their strategic bearings”. The security agencies were effectively “running foreign policy”; when such matters eventuate, only one conclusion can be reached: “the nutters are in charge.”



Former Oz PM, Paul Keating

For the former Labor prime minister, the China Syndrome had clotted the grey cells of the security wonks, blocking perception and clarity. Security chiefs were knocking on the doors of Parliamentarians; prejudices were doing the rounds. Australia, the United States and other likeminded powers had been in denial about the Middle Kingdom and its aspirations, seeing them as defence and security threats in various guises. They had to “recognise the legitimacy of China”; it had to be respected for rising from poverty even if that particular story did not sit well with the United States.

Keating took a particularly sharp interest in John Garnaut, foreign correspondent and former national security advisor to former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. That particular China hand written in August 2018 that any spirit of democratisation worth its salt died with the protestors at Tiananmen Square in 1989. “Belatedly, and quite suddenly, political leaders, policy makers and civil society actors in a dozen nations around the world are scrambling to come to terms with a form of China's extraterritorial influence described variously as ‘sharp power’, ‘United Front work’ and ‘influence operations’.” In Garnaut's view, the world's many eyes were upon Australia to set an example.

Keating advocated a cleaning operation, a large broom applied with swiftness removing the likes of Garnaut and the carriers of paranoid whispers. “Once that Garnaut guy came back from China and Turnbull gave him the ticket to go and hop into the security services, they've all gone berko ever since.”

On some level, Keating's comments are bound to be relevant, even if they put the noses of such

types as Peter Jennings at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute out of joint. (No, especially if they do.) Security chiefs and their cronies can get long in the tooth and worn in thinking. Wrinkled and crusted, a clear-out is far from undesirable. A salient reminder from Napoleon comes to mind: move your bureaucrats around once every five years; sedentary practices often result in unhealthy concentrations of power.

Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten was far more diplomatic, suggesting that his party had a good working relationship with the current chiefs, claiming respect and a co-operative working interest. The potential prime minister is mindful who he will have to work with.

“The three Bs are the biggest threat to Bill Shorten once he’s in office: boats, bombs and bytes,” came an opinion from a senior official to the ABC.

A chance of sorts had been presented to the Liberal National government. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, generally quiet in this election, smelled an opportunity to use the Keating intervention.

“Since September 2014, Australia’s law enforcement agencies have disrupted 15 major terrorist attack plots and conducted 41 counter-terrorism operations, with 93 people charged.”

Such a statement reads like the body-count figures from the US effort in Vietnam: they are units of poor measure rather than attributes of effect. But Dutton, like many a plodding police officer, misses the picture in favour of the stabbing daub.

Another effort was made by campaign spokesperson and Trade minister Simon Birmingham, speaking in a debate held in Adelaide. Keating, he claimed, had insulted “the heads of our intelligence services”. He did note that “Labor have distanced themselves from the remarks by Paul Keating” but found it hard to resist the point that the former PM “is not an isolated figure in terms of... Bob Carr and others who sit within the (Labor) ranks.”

Did the Coalition government have a better approach? “We make sure we maintain a firm and consistent approach (towards China) and in doing so make sure we keep Australia’s economic interests strong (and) our national security interests strong too.” Suitably weasel-like, in other words.

Labor’s Senator Penny Wong, also at the same event, expressed a degree of disgust (“really desperate,” she fumed), though it should only be treated in the context of her desire to be Australia’s next foreign affairs minister. The China psychosis in Australian political thinking can be unpredictable, swaying between a “come and buy my coal” to “stay out of my backyard, Huawei”. Seeing the prospect of having to deal with the foot soldiers of the Middle Kingdom in a new government, Wong is attempting to play that Janus-faced game Australian politicians have proven rather bad at, whatever the likes of Garnaut and Jennings might think.

Not wishing to be either pleasing harlots or submissive doormats, yet wishing to keep a hand in the voracious Chinese market (Cathay, I hear you say!), the Australian political class has had to tailor, trim and modify their traditional fears of the Yellow Peril while still shouting from the roof tops about it. Only the likes of mining magnate Clive Palmer can express unvarnished dislike for people he sees as his business competitors and hungry beyond satiation. The rest, notably those wallahs buried in the security establishment, can rest easy that Keating’s eminently sensible suggestion will not come to pass.

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