

Bipartisan Consensus as Myth: The Manchurian Candidate in Australian Politics

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A few dragons have been breathing fire of late, and these need to be slayed. One is the notion that Australia has had some miraculous sense of bipartisan understanding about national security, its politicians well briefed, cooperative and objective on the subject. The second is that politicising intelligence and national security are aberrations.

The Morrison government has made its own modest contribution to sinking these assumptions. It is, after all, an election year. There is a schoolboy simplicity to the effort: scream various words such as “appeasement” often enough, and it will take hold. Reiterate the term “Manchurian Candidate”, and hope it cakes opponents.

In the Australian Parliament, **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** demonstrated this month that accusation as politics without evidence governs his operating rationale. As he has done previously in attempting to paint the Labor opposition as stacked with pro-China stooges, he [told the chamber](#) that the Labor Deputy Opposition leader **Richard Marles** was a “Manchurian Candidate”.

Ever helpful, the **Defence Minister Peter Dutton** went one position higher [with his claim](#) that the Labor leader, **Anthony Albanese**, was well favoured in Beijing. “We now see evidence that the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese government has also made a decision about who they will back in the next federal election, and that is open and obvious.”

Not exactly a masterpiece of literary narrative (a “wild, vigorous, curiously readable melange,” was a description offered by Frederic Morton), the [1959 novel](#) by Richard Condon of that same name captured the Cold War zeitgeist of paranoia. It features the deeds of a sleeper agent, one Sergeant Raymond Shaw, who returns from service in the Korean War. With ten other men, Shaw served in an Intelligence and Reconnaissance patrol subsequently captured and brainwashed by the Chinese. On their release, they are convinced that Shaw saved them, bare two. The seed is laid.

The brainwashed Shaw becomes, in effect, a manipulable assassin, his mind able to be triggered by a game of solitaire and the queen of diamonds. The chief brainwasher explains the reason for picking this stepson of a US Senator. “Although the paranoiacs make the great leaders, it is the resenterers who make their best instruments because the resenterers, those men with cancer of the psyche, make the great assassins.”

Shaw also has the misfortune of being controlled by his devilishly scheming mother Eleanor Iselin, intent on seeing the US morph into an authoritarian state even as she pushes the vice-presidential aspirations of her husband, Shaw’s lacklustre stepfather.

John Frankenheimer’s 1962 film adaptation of the book, featuring Lawrence Harvey as Shaw, Frank Sinatra as Major Bennett Marco, with Angela Lansbury in the role of Eleanor Iselin, [has been considered a classic](#) despite [failing at the box office](#). A preposterous plotline is rendered seductive through aesthetic sequences and visualisation. Film historian David Thomson [saw the link](#) between pulp and celluloid; Condon’s book was “written so that an idiot could film it.”

Even if most Australian politicians would have only a nodding acquaintance with the work and its filmography, the cultural, denigrative baggage of the term remains. Morrison’s resort to it even smoked out the chief of ASIO, the Australian domestic intelligence service. “I’ll leave the politics to the politicians,” Mike Burgess [observed in his interview](#) with the *7.30 Report*, “but I am very clear with everyone that I need to be, that that is not helpful for us.”

Former senior diplomat and head of the Office of National Assessments, Allan Gyngell, [is dismissive](#) about any significant differences between the Labor opposition and the governing Coalition on China. “An effective wedge has to be made out of something more than wishful thinking,” he surmises. “The language will differ person to person, but on the key policy issues, which is what matters – the Quad, foreign interference, 5G – I think it’s clear.”

Gyngell arcs up at the use of the word “appeasement” in current debates, given that “it has a very specific meaning in international relations, and none in which it is being used here seem applicable.”

Former ASIO director-general Dennis Richardson, in reproaching any effort to create “artificial” differences between the Coalition and Labor on the issue of China, [proceeds to claim](#) an artificial construction of his own. “The tradition in Australia has been that governments seek to promote bipartisanship on critical national security issues.”

Constant airing of the view that Australian politics remains, at its centre, in agreement about security threats has been repeatedly shown to be fable and nonsense. Australia’s history of politicising intelligence and security threats is extensive and disturbingly remarkable. As Justin McPhee shows in his landmark study [Spinning the Secrets of State](#), Australian politicians have been habitually addicted to politicising matters regarding intelligence to undermine causes and adversaries since the origins of the Commonwealth.

The number of instances McPhee notes are too numerous to mention here, but it is worth recalling the use of intelligence by the ruthlessly wily Prime Minister Billy Hughes during the conscription debates of 1916 and 1917 and the close links between ASIO and Conservative Coalition governments that kept progressive politics at bay for a generation. Hardly

bipartisan.

And who can ever forget the glacial relationship between the intelligence services and the Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, culminating [in the police raid](#) of ASIO headquarters on orders by the Attorney General Lionel Murphy? Murphy had suspected ASIO of being less than frank about a possible security threat to the invited Yugoslav Prime Minister Džemal Bijedić from disgruntled Croatian nationalists. Right wing nationalist movements were less interesting to ASIO than godless Soviet communism.

This inglorious record existed prior to the sexed-up dossiers of dubious intelligence that were the hallmark of justifying the unlawful invasion of Iraq in 2003. Such monstrously cooked accounts were based on the dubious premise that Saddam Hussein constituted a mortally grave threat to the interests of Canberra, Washington and London, and had intimate links with al-Qaeda. Yet Saddam is dead, and the likes of George W. Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard live with shameless vigour. To the politicising cadres go the electoral spoils, and Morrison is trying to down to that noxious legacy.

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