

Anti-Chinese racism hinders efforts to counter foreign interference: Paterson



Senator James Paterson is the chairman of the intelligence and security committee

By Anthony Galloway
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Liberal senator James Paterson says he is concerned about the rise in anti-Chinese racism in the wake of COVID-19, warning it is hampering efforts to counter foreign interference within Australia.

The chairman of Parliament's powerful security and intelligence committee, an outspoken critic of Chinese Communist Party influence, said politicians needed to be careful not to stoke anti-Chinese or anti-Asian sentiment, adding it was something he thinks "deeply about".

Chinese Australians have reported a significant rise in racist attacks over the past 12 months, with research showing one in five has been physically threatened or attacked because of their Chinese heritage.

Senator Paterson said "anti-Chinese racism" and "anti-Asian racism" had increased during the global pandemic, "and that's the last thing I want to see".

“Because I think it’s abhorrent and immoral, and because I also think it’s counterproductive,” he told the Australian National University’s *National Security Podcast*, to be released on Wednesday.

“We want to work with and support the 1.2 million Chinese descendants who live in Australia and make them feel fully and equally participants of our democracy. And I want to see more of their voices in our public debate, not less.

“If they feel ostracised and excluded and singled out, then that is totally counter to our aims ... we have to wrap our arms around the Chinese community.”

Senator Paterson said the Chinese people have had no say in who leads them for the last 70 years so it was “morally abhorrent to make them morally culpable for the actions of the Chinese Communist Party”.

“We really do need to make it very clear that we have no quarrel with the Chinese people, certainly not those living in Australia, and that our disagreement and dispute is with the Chinese Communist Party,” he said.

“I’m particularly conscious that, as parliamentarians, we have to be very careful with our choice of language and very precise in what we mean. And we have to be very conscious not to stoke broader anti-Chinese or anti-Asian sentiment in our contributions to the public debate. That’s something I think very deeply about.”

He cautioned he would never allow a “false accusation of racism to silence my criticism of the Chinese Communist Party”.

Senator Paterson, who was blocked from visiting China in 2019 over his criticism of the government, is a member of the “Wolverines”, a bipartisan group established to speak up against China’s growing assertiveness, as well as co-chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

He said the name of the Wolverines - a reference to the 1984 movie *Red Dawn*, starring Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen as high school football stars who thwart a Soviet invasion of the United States - was a “tongue-in-cheek label”. But he said it was needed as the MPs faced a “communication challenge” in explaining to Australians why they needed to stand up to the CCP’s growing coercion.

“You don’t get a double-page spread in [Melbourne tabloid] the *Herald Sun* on Chinese foreign interference issues without a marketing spin to it. And that’s what it was designed to do.”

“It’s since morphed into the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, which is now a grouping of 20 parliaments from around the world.”

Osmond Chiu, a research fellow at the Per Capita think tank, was one of three witnesses with Chinese-Australian heritage asked last year by Liberal senator Eric Abetz to “unequivocally condemn” the Chinese Communist Party during a Senate inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia.

Mr Chiu said he welcomed Senator Paterson's acknowledgement of a spike in racism and his comments about the need for politicians to be very conscious not to encourage racist sentiments.

"We do need to be careful and precise with our language. However, we cannot assume this alone will have a significant impact. Most people do not pay close attention to the nuances in language used, let alone these debates," he said.

"False accusations of racism should not be tolerated but we also need to acknowledge that individuals who raise genuine concerns about racist tropes or discriminatory proposals get unfairly accused of being apologists or repeating 'weaponised narratives'. Both are counterproductive to any constructive way forward."