

There's one logical reason why ambitious young Liberal backbencher Andrew Hastie didn't tell Malcolm Turnbull he was about to drop a bombshell, with a parliamentary speech accusing a Chinese-Australian figure of involvement in the bribery of a United Nations official.

If he had forewarned Turnbull, Hastie – who is head of the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security - would have been firmly ordered to button his lips.

Remember, Turnbull was angry when a backbencher defiantly produced a private member's bill on the live sheep trade. That was a tame gesture of independence compared with Hastie's action.

The fact that Tuesday night's [speech](#) was delivered has shocked the government, and it will add to China's ongoing angst towards Australia.

The speech contained much context and detail but in summary, Hastie told parliament that Chau Chak Wing, an Australian citizen whom he described as having "extensive contacts in the Chinese Communist Party", had "co-conspired to bribe the president of the United Nations General Assembly, John Ashe" in 2013.

"For reasons that are best undisclosed, the United States government did not seek to charge [Chau] for his involvement in the bribery of John Ashe," Hastie said.

Chau had "been a very significant donor to both of our major political parties. He has given more than \$4 million since 2004. He has also donated \$45 million to universities in Australia," Hastie said.

The claims against Chau had previously been reported in the Australian media; there are now defamation proceedings underway.

For his speech, Hastie drew on a briefing he received when he recently led a delegation to the United States to discuss the federal government's espionage and foreign interference legislation – legislation that has particularly aggravated China. In the course of his speech Hastie tabled US documents.

In explaining his motives, Hastie cited national interest and democratic traditions, including press freedom. He said that “in Australia it is clear that the Chinese Communist Party is working to covertly interfere with our media and universities and also to influence our political processes and public debates.”

Turnbull, saying he only heard about the speech after it was delivered, told parliament that the US briefing - which he said was attended by at least one Labor MP - wasn't classified. Asked whether he had “sought information from our intelligence agencies about the implications of publicly sharing the details of an FBI investigation which has been provided by our ally,” Turnbull said he had.

Labor is critical of Hastie. Frontbencher Anthony Albanese accused him of “probably rogue actions” and questioned his release of information received in the US briefing.

The speech flushed out Chau. His lawyer on Wednesday issued a statement saying Chau was “very disappointed that an elected representative would use the cover of parliamentary privilege to repeat old claims and attack his reputation just weeks before some of these matters are tested in court.

“Mr Hastie purports to be acting in the interest of Australians. It seems he has forgotten or disregarded the right all Australian citizens have to a presumption of innocence unless proven otherwise. Our client has not been charged with any offence which makes Mr Hastie's attack all the more extraordinary,” the statement said.

Hastie's action was highly unusual as well as controversial. Members, and especially the chair, of this bipartisan parliamentary committee, which considers legislation relating to security and receives a good deal of confidential information, have usually been very discreet in their public comments.

Even apart from the Hastie affair, this has been a testing week in the Australia-China relationship.

After Foreign Minister Julie Bishop met China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the margins of a G20 gathering in Argentina (they actually had two sessions, one informal, the other formal) the tone from the two sides was very different.

Bishop's take was all about how "very warm and candid and constructive" the discussions had been. The Chinese [version](#) was blunter: Wang Yi had said Australia needed to "take off its tinted glasses to look at China's development from a more positive angle."

An extreme version of China's state of mind came in an [editorial](#) in the Global Times, a state-owned fiercely nationalistic publication.

It was a rant, suggesting actions against Australia on the trade front, and indicating Turnbull could usefully stay away from visiting China for "a few years".

"Since the beginning of this year, Australia has revealed a friendly attitude on a few occasions in apparent attempts to soothe China relations. However, it is necessary for China to leave Australia hanging for a while, instead of being too quick to bury the hatchet whenever China tries to put a smile on its face," the editorial said.

That was written before the Hastie speech.

In an address on Wednesday titled "Australia's Deepening Economic Relationship with China: Opportunities and Risks", Reserve Bank Governor Philip Lowe had a message about getting on.

Lowe reiterated that the deepening of our economic relationship with China had greatly benefited Australia – and also benefited China. "This means that both countries have a strong interest in managing this important relationship well. It is in our mutual interests to do this.

View from The Hill: Hastie and Turnbull – what you don't know, you can't stop

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

"Together, we can also be a strong voice for the importance of an open international trading system and for effective regional cooperation," Lowe told the Australia-China Relations Institute in Sydney.

"We will, of course, have differences from time to time, but we will surely be better placed to deal with these if we understand one another well.

"Building strong connections across business, finance, politics, academia and the community more generally is important to deepening this understanding," he said.

But in an increasingly complex relationship, understanding one another well can involve all sorts of challenges.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/view-from-the-hill-hastie-and-turnbull-what-you-dont-know-you-cant-stop-97102>