

Attorney-General Christian Porter has put forward compromise amendments to the government's proposed register of foreign agents that will limit its reach.

The changes are designed to meet criticisms from charities, universities and others, and to get a quick agreement with Labor on the legislation.

The bill for the register is still being considered by the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security, which on Thursday released a bipartisan [report](#) agreeing on 60 amendments to the legislation to counter the threat of foreign interference.

Porter wants to get both bills passed by the end of this month. "Most critically this would allow for Australia's new legal framework designed to address espionage, interference and foreign influence in Australia's democratic processes to be passed before the conduct of five key Australian byelections and be fully operational before the next scheduled general election," he said.

Read more: [Grattan on Friday: Government and Labor unite to erect the barriers against foreign interference](#)

There have been widespread concerns that the scope of the transparency scheme is too wide, and notably the breadth of the definitions in it, including that of "foreign principal".

Arguments have been put by lawyers, the media, the arts, charities, not-for-profit organisations and the academic sector that these definitions will adversely affect them.

Porter said that the government had now given the committee a range of amendments "that

address the most substantive stakeholder issues”.

The bill currently provides that people be required to register if undertaking certain activities on behalf of a foreign government, public enterprise, political organisation, business or individual.

The change would limit the “foreign principals” to foreign governments, foreign government-related entities, foreign political organisations and foreign government-related individuals.

“This ensures that only organisations or individuals ultimately working at the direction of a foreign government or political party are required to register,” Porter said.

The amendment would thus exclude “the vast majority of private international companies”, except where “they are closely related to a foreign government or political organisation”.

To stop some companies or individuals with opaque links to a foreign government falling through the cracks, the secretary of the Attorney-General’s department would have a power to issue notices stating a person or organisation was considered a foreign government-related entity or individual.

“This would allow the government to investigate and declare where it considers companies or individuals are hiding their connections to foreign governments,” Porter said.

Another change would mean broadcasters, carriage service providers and publishers would not have to register “where they are undertaking their ordinary business”.

The definition of “activity for the purpose of political or government influence” would also be changed “so that a substantial purpose of the activity has to be political influence, rather than just ‘a’ purpose of it”.

Turnbull government shrinks Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme register

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Porter said that responding to the university sector and charities, the definition of “undertaking activity on behalf of a foreign principal” would be amended “so a person isn’t deemed to be undertaking an activity merely because they are supervised by, receive funding from or collaborate with a foreign principal”.

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.

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