

View from The Hill: Dutton suffers reflux after tasty Chinese meal

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The fallout from the extraordinary revelations about Peter Dutton's contact with Chinese Communist Party-aligned billionaire Huang Xiangmo is a potent brew, its ingredients the issue of foreign interference and the legacy of last year's leadership challenge.

A tale full of spooky overtones, mates, ironies, and payback.

Monday's Four Corners-Age-Sydney Morning Herald [investigation](#) reported that Dutton, immigration minister at the time, in 2015 approved a private citizenship ceremony for Huang's family, who were due to travel overseas.

Dutton justifies the special treatment as being in response to a request from then-Labor senator Sam Dastyari.

That would be the same Dastyari who in December in 2017 [announced](#) he would resign from the Senate after revelations that he had promoted Chinese interests, including at a notorious news conference where he stood beside Huang.

(Dutton is generous in responding to personal representations - he, it will be remembered, was the minister who provided a quick rescue services for a couple of stranded [au pairs](#) .)

Four Corners reported that in 2016 - when Huang was anxious to get his own citizenship - lobbyist Santo Santoro, a former Howard government minister and close to Dutton, arranged a lunch between the businessman and the minister at Master Ken's (upmarket) restaurant in Sydney's Chinatown.

Dutton denies the lunch was about Huang's citizenship bid. "He didn't make representations to me in relation to these matters," Dutton said on Tuesday, also stressing he'd received no donation (Huang over several years donated, to both sides of politics, between \$2 million and \$3 million.)

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Huang didn't get his citizenship and last year his permanent residency was cancelled. The officials charged with examining his background and activities judged him unsuitable to be one of us.

The Australian Financial Review [reported](#) that, in relation to the cancellation of his residency, ASIO had found he was "amenable to conducting acts of foreign interference". Cancellation of a permanent resident's visa is a decision taken by the immigration minister or a senior official within the Home Affairs department, which is responsible for immigration and citizenship matters. By this time, David Coleman had oversight of immigration.

Scott Morrison, desperate to smother what is on most criteria a damaging story coming almost on the eve of the election being called, insists there is nothing to see in Dutton's conduct.

"I've spoken with Peter Dutton about this and there are no issues here that trouble me at all. I mean there's no suggestion that Peter, in any way, shape or form, has sought or been provided with any benefit here.

"The individual we're talking about had his visa cancelled while he was out of the country, by Peter Dutton's department. So if the object was foreign interference, well, the exact opposite is what has occurred."

But the issue is not whether Dutton himself got a benefit.

The issues are that Huang's family received favourable treatment via the minister's office, and that Huang, in hiring Santoro, "bought" himself valuable access to a minister. That Huang came to grief later is not the point.

"The suggestion that somehow I've provided anything to this individual is just a nonsense," Dutton says. He'd met with him "because he was a significant leader within the Chinese community".

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Dutton underestimates himself. He notes that Huang “was interested obviously in politics and other issues of the day”. Of course he was – and access to a minister over a relaxed and tasty Chinese meal yields information and insights.

Malcolm Turnbull had emerged early on Tuesday declaring Dutton had “a lot to explain” and setting up the challenge for Morrison. “Scott Morrison is the Prime Minister and you can’t wave this off and say it is all part of gossip and the bubble.

"This is the national security of Australia. Remember the furore that arose against Sam Dastyari?

"All the same issues have arisen again and this has to be addressed at the highest level of security, priority, urgency by the Prime Minister,” Turnbull said.

“The buck stops with him. I know what it is like to be Prime Minister and, ultimately, you are responsible. So Scott Morrison has to deal with this Peter Dutton issue”.

Predictably, Turnbull didn’t influence Morrison but he did ensure a bad day became even worse for the government.

Turnbull is not an objective voice when it comes to Dutton, who instigated the events that ended in the political demise of the former PM.

But Turnbull’s credentials on combatting foreign interference are beyond question. His government introduced the legislation to counter what has become a very serious problem.

On Monday Duncan Lewis, head of ASIO, told a Senate estimates hearing “the threat from foreign interference and foreign espionage in Australia is running at [...] an unprecedented level.”

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No doubt if he knew then what he learned later, Dutton would not have given Huang the benefits of valuable face time.

But by 2016 politicians, and especially a minister, should have been alert to foreign interference.

In 2015 Lewis [briefed](#) the top officials of the main parties about the risks from foreign donations, and reportedly named donors ASIO believed were acting on the Chinese government's behalf.

Did Dutton make any effort to check Huang out with ASIO before agreeing to lunch?

Most pertinently, the lunch highlights the insidious power of the lobbying industry in today's Canberra.

Four Corners had Santoro on tape saying (to an unidentified person, not Huang): "One of my best friends is Peter Dutton. He is the most honest politician that I have ever come across, but he tries to be helpful.[...] I can go to somebody in the minister's office and say 'can you have a close look at this'".

According to Four Corners, Santoro charges at least \$20,000 for access to Dutton's office.

Dutton says: "There are lobbyists who are registered on both sides of parliament, people that operate as lobbyists. Their transactions and how they conduct their business is an issue for them".

Actually, how they conduct themselves and how ministers respond are matters for the democratic system.

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That you can write Santoro a cheque and expect to be fast-tracked to the minister's office (whether that ends in a successful outcome or not) isn't the way the system should desirably work.

We do have a federal register of lobbyists. But we don't have enough information about their operations - until they find themselves in the spotlight.

Journalist Primrose Riordan tweeted on Tuesday that Santoro had "just updated his listing on the foreign influence register to include a heap of Chinese companies".

At the very least, the Dutton affair suggests we need a lot more transparency about what in recent years has become a sunrise industry of politics, and a lucrative occupation for spent politicians.

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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