

ASIO boss Mike Burgess is known to be more open in his approach than many in the world of spooks. Even so, it was startling when late Sunday night he tweeted a pointer to his statement that ASIO is investigating a claim China had tried to put a plant in the federal parliament.

The Burgess statement is immediately important for two reasons.

By (very unusually) confirming the investigation, it gives credibility to the Nine story that made the claim.

And it puts some obligation on ASIO, or the government, to inform the public of the results of that investigation.

Nine newspapers and Sixty Minutes have reported two extraordinary spy stories in the past few days.

One is the bid for Australian protection by Wang Liqiang, who says he has been a spy for China. “Wang ‘William’ Liqiang is the first Chinese spy to ever publicly blow his cover in Australia,” Sixty Minutes said.

The government is examining whether his case stacks up. But it is in an awkward position – given Wang has spoken out, he’d be in serious danger if his claim were rejected.

But the other story in the Nine package – the alleged attempted penetration of federal parliament - is the more significant, given (if true) its deep implication for Australia’s democratic system.

It is reported that a Chinese espionage group offered a young Melbourne car dealer and Liberal party member, Bo “Nick” Zhao, A\$1 million in campaign funding if he would run in the marginal

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Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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seat of Chisholm, which has a high Chinese vote. Zhao declined, and went to ASIO. Later he was found dead in a motel room in March, with how he died a mystery.

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At the May election Chisholm was won by Hong Kong-born Liberal Gladys Liu, whose past connections with organisations with links to the Chinese Communist Party and spectacular fund raising record became highly controversial.

Scott Morrison fended off questions about Liu, and denounced her detractors. He tabled a statement from her in parliament, which she declined to make personally.

Well placed security sources say there's no problem with Liu. But there is every reason why she should speak for herself, and quite odd she won't.

Burgess's statement homes in on the Zhao case, and its wider context.

"I am committed to protecting Australia's democracy and sovereignty. Australians can be reassured that ASIO was previously aware of matters that have been reported today, and has been actively investigating them.

"Given that the matter in question is subject to a coronial inquiry, and as not to prejudice our investigations, it would be inappropriate to comment further," he said.

He added: "Hostile foreign intelligence activity continues to pose a real threat to our nation and its security. ASIO will continue to confront and counter foreign interference and espionage in

Australia.”

ASIO has been putting itself out there in this debate for a while. Its former chief Duncan Lewis made frequent broad references to foreign interference (out of the job, he was more explicit in targeting China in an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald’s Peter Hartcher published last week).

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**Read more:** [\*Inside China's vast influence network &ndash; how it works, and the extent of its reach in Australia\*](#)

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While cautioning against jumping to premature conclusions, Morrison on Monday said he found the allegation China had tried to infiltrate the Liberal party “disturbing and troubling”.

He shouldn’t have found it surprising, after the amazing evidence over recent years of China’s tentacles reaching deep into Australian politics.

Former Labor senator Sam Dastyari allowed himself to be cultivated to the extent he had to quit parliament when the scandal became too hot to handle.

Chinese billionaire Huang Xiangmo – ubiquitous until he was banned from the country on security grounds - had an apparently endless desire to pour money into the coffers of the major parties, whether delivered by Aldi bag or more conventional means.

The closed eyes of ALP officials in particular about Huang’s unexplained generosity was breathtaking, causing immense harm to the party and individuals.

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It ranks as the most spectacular recent example of how the lure of the dollar can blind political players, who'd be expected to be more cautious.

The government has acted to combat the foreign threat to Australia's democracy, notably with the foreign interference legislation and the ban on foreign donations.

But the parties were tardy in coming to grips with what was happening, because they wanted the money.

Alleged attempted infiltration of parliament takes concern to another level.

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**Read more:** [\*Paul Keating attacks media for 'pious belchings' over China\*](#)

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As the chair of parliament's committee on intelligence and security Andrew Hastie said on Sixty Minutes, "this isn't just cash in a bag, given for favours. This is a state sponsored attempt to infiltrate our parliament, using an Australian citizen and basically run them as an agent of foreign influence in our democratic system".

This raises challenging issues for Australia's multicultural society.

With large numbers of Chinese migrants and students coming here, and Chinese authorities active among this diaspora, the placing of "plants" into state and federal parliaments could become easier.

The flip side is aspiring politicians of Chinese heritage, whose loyalty to Australia is total, could be falsely tarred with the "foreign agent" suspicion.

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The argument about China's influence is not running in only one direction. Last week Paul Keating renewed his attack the intelligence chiefs, lashing out at what he identifies as their anti-China stand.

"The subtleties of foreign policy and the elasticity of diplomacy are being supplanted by the phobias of a group of national security agencies which are now effectively running the foreign policy of the country," Keating said.

What Keating condemns as "phobias", others see as alertness to a growing danger that's become increasingly complicated to counter.

*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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