

‘When a weasel makes a courtesy call on a hen’: A ‘pro-China’ Dutton and Chinese-Australian voters

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When I asked [Jocelyn Chey](#) about her experience at the [lunch](#) in Parliament House in honour of Chinese Premier Li Qiang, she said, ‘I thought the best part of the lunch was Dutton’s speech through gritted teeth about how everyone wants relations with China to improve.’

Also, speaking to 2GB, Dutton said, ‘I’m pro-China and the relationship that we have with them.’ He also wanted to increase trade with China. Dutton’s almost gushy remarks caught many, including journalists, by surprise, prompting Sydney Morning Herald’s [Matthew Knott](#) to ask whether ‘pro-China’ Dutton has ‘morphed from a hawk into a dove’.

Dutton’s about-face on China was met with a mixture of pleasant surprise and acerbic cynicism. Many see this as yet another example that some politicians would say just about anything in order to get themselves elected. But despite the different reactions, the general consensus is that his change of rhetoric, if not his change of heart, can only be a good thing.

Of course, no one can predict what Dutton and his party will say and do about China if the Liberals win the next election. But as James Laurenceson points out, at least it can be fairly certain that [China won’t be a wedge issue in the next election](#).

Dutton has to reckon with the fact that Scott Morrison left behind a party that not only has a ‘women’s problem’ but also a ‘China problem’. It seems that when Dutton [said](#) ‘I’m not Morrison’ in his attempt to woo back women and urban professional voters, he might as well be pitching the same message to Chinese-Australian voters.

As is made painfully [clear](#) to the Liberals, the Coalition’s anti-China position cost them dearly in electoral terms. Four marginal seats with a large percentage of the population of Chinese heritage—Chisholm in Melbourne, Tangney in Perth, Reid in Sydney, and Bennelong in northern Sydney—swung to Labor. Many Asian-Australians who do not have Chinese heritage also voted against the Coalition largely in response to the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism they had been subjected to, especially during the peak of Covid.

One of the key election campaign agendas of the Coalition was national security. Who can forget the eye-catching red trucks in Canberra, Perth, Melbourne, and possibly other cities, carrying images of Xi Jinping with slogans such as ‘CCP says vote Labor’. The election campaign stunts were [apparently](#) authorised by the conservative political lobby group Advance Australia.

The Coalition's anti-China rhetoric such as this clearly backfired spectacularly. This is the bitter pill that the Liberals now have to swallow. It seems that in the future they might be better off getting advice from the ABC's the Gruen team than from their own political lobby group.

Dutton sought to assure people that he is not Morrison, 'but I am still Dutton'. But that is hardly reassuring to many people. And his own track record on China is not much better than his predecessor's. In his role as Defence Minister in the Coalition, Dutton made his own fair share of gratuitous comments aiming to ramp up security concerns about China—comments which earned scathing criticism from [Kevin Rudd](#), who called Dutton's rhetoric 'hairy-chested', 'idiotic', 'declaratory bullshit'.

It's true that since he became the opposition leader, Dutton has toned down his hawkish rhetoric on China and has mostly refrained from making gratuitous, provocative comments—he seems to leave that task to his subordinates like James Paterson and previously moderate Simon Birmingham.

But because the Liberals are led by Dutton, many Australian Chinese voters may still find it hard to take his words at face value.

Following Dutton's declaration that he is now 'pro-China', Sydney Today, Australia's biggest Chinese-language digital media outlet, conducted an informal poll among its readers asking if Dutton's 'pro-China' declaration will likely change how they vote.

The percentage figures would not be to Dutton's liking. Among the 600 people who participated in the poll, as many as 65 percent said that they 'definitely do not trust Dutton, because the Coalition's aggressive behaviour from the last election is still too vivid in memory'. Another 9 percent said that they 'want to believe him but they are still not convinced, so they would most likely still vote for Labor'.

Readers' comments at the end of the survey are helpful in making sense of these percentage figures. More than one reader evoked a well-known Chinese saying 'when a weasel makes a courtesy call on a hen, you can be sure that the weasel harbours no good intentions'. Others are less literary, saying that 'I would not vote for a war-mongering party, especially one that now favours nuclear options'. Another reader observes, 'If the Coalition gets in, it won't affect China that much – China is too strong to care. But us Chinese-Australians are the first to suffer'.

This is not to say that Labor can rest on its laurels if it wants to retain Chinese voters. Figures from the latest UTS:ACRI/BIDA [poll](#) should be an early warning sign. When asked which political party is best placed to handle Australia's China policy, the results show that the gap between support for the Australian Labor Party and support for the Liberal/National Coalition's management of China policy that opened up in 2023 seems to be closing. According to the poll, four in 10 Australians (40 percent) nominate the Australian Labor Party as the political party best placed to handle Australia's China policy. This reflects a nine-point decrease from 2023 (49 percent), although still up from a pre-election low of 35 percent in 2022. Thirty-four percent of Australians say the Liberal/National Coalition is best placed to handle Australia's China policy, a five-point increase from 2023 (29 percent), inching back to its high of 36 percent going into the 2022 federal election.

It is possible that some traditional Liberal voters in various Chinese-Australian communities who swung to Labor in protest against the Coalition's anti-China policy last time may decide to return to the Liberals next time for two main reasons. Like most Australian voters, the cost of living is perhaps the most important consideration, and rightly or wrongly, some Chinese-Australians, like many in the general public, seem to buy into the assumption that the Liberals are better at managing the economy than Labor.

Furthermore, Chinese-Australian communities have noticed – much more acutely than the general public – that Labor's China policy does not seem very different from that of the Coalition, despite its calmer rhetoric. Chinese-Australians also [reported](#) a significantly lower level of approval for AUKUS—a defence commitment which Labor has not only inherited from the Coalition but also taken ownership of.

Perhaps the most important message for the major political parties is that none of them can take the support of Chinese-Australian communities for granted.

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