

Nation of Change

Guns, climate denial and conspiracies: Al Jazeera captures Australian far right political figures meeting Koch Industries

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Sitting in the offices of Koch Industries in Washington D.C., far-right Australian politician Steve Dickson shows his hand in a request for their cash.

“This lefty attitude that just thinks solar and wind are going to change the world for the better ... it’s sending us all broke,” Dickson, the Queensland leader of the political party One Nation, told Koch Industries director of federal affairs Catherine Haggett.

The exchange with the petrochemical giants, from September 2018, is part of a blockbuster hidden-camera investigative series released by Al Jazeera.

Socialism fears

Dickson and senior One Nation figure James Ashby traveled to the United States, to try and solicit millions of dollars in donations, and promise this could help the party gain a balance of power and then weaken Australia’s gun laws.

The two-part Al Jazeera investigation took years to compile. The broadcaster used an actor and journalist to set up a public-facing, but fake, Australian gun rights lobby group. Then journalist Roger Muller of the fictitious “Gun Rights Australia” facilitated a One Nation trip to the U.S., accompanying Dickson and Ashby to multiple meetings, conferences, and lavish dinners events.

The conduct of the One Nation representatives was revealed just a week after 50 people were gunned down in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. An Australian far-right extremist is accused of carrying out the massacre.

There is no evidence that One Nation was able to secure any money from its U.S. trip. Just months later the Australian Senate, where One Nation leader Pauline Hanson has a seat, voted to ban foreign political donations. Ashby is Hanson’s chief of staff.

Koch Industries billionaire owners Charles and David Koch have pumped their influence, and their millions, into a wide network of libertarian and conservative lobby groups and think tanks that push climate science denial, promote fossil fuel use, and block climate-friendly policies.

In the meeting, Ashby complains that Australia is “turning socialist” before Haggett adds: “We are too, and when you look at the data of young people and how they perceive socialism, it’s terrifying.”

She adds: “We are not naive to the importance of politics in Australia and how they relate to the U.S.”

One nation’s denial

The Al Jazeera series has already had major political ramifications for One Nation, with Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison saying his conservative Liberal Party will ask voters to place One Nation candidates below key rivals Labor on voting papers in the upcoming national election, expected in May.

One Nation’s far-right policy platforms include banning Muslim immigration and exiting the global Paris climate change agreement. The party considers human-caused climate change to be unproven.

Conspiracy theories

The Al Jazeera documentary also caught Hanson discussing Australia’s Port Arthur massacre – a 1996 mass shooting in Port Arthur, Tasmania, where 35 people were murdered with an assault rifle.

The massacre was the catalyst for Australia’s National Firearms Agreement that included a ban on semi-automatic and automatic weapons.

But Hanson is heard suggesting the shooting could have been a political or government conspiracy, pointing at the “accuracy” of the shots.

Hanson told Muller that before the shooting, “An MP said it would actually take a massacre in Tasmania to change the gun laws in Australia.”

“Haven’t you heard that? Have a look at it. It was said on the floor of parliament. I’ve read a lot and I have read the book on it, Port Arthur. A lot of questions there ... those shots, they were precision shots.” Ashby adds: “It’s that whole September 11 thing too,” without elaborating.

When Donald Trump won the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Hanson joined former One Nation senator and climate science denier Malcolm Roberts to drink champagne in front of Parliament House in the Australian capital.

“We will free the world of this rubbish they call climate change,” said a jubilant Malcolm Roberts. Roberts would later leave the Senate after it was discovered his British citizenship should have disqualified him from standing.

With them drinking champagne was American climate science denier and blogger Tony Heller, who had been in Australia with Roberts.

Heller has also suggested a conspiracy behind the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Connecticut, where 20 children and six adults were killed.

One nation in D.C.

In December 2016, Roberts traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with a who’s who of climate science denial, including Heller.

Several of the people Roberts met, work at Koch- and fossil fuel-funded think tanks, including Patrick Michaels of the Cato Institute, and Myron Ebell of the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

In the first episode of the Al Jazeera investigation, National Rifle Association bosses coach the One Nation representatives on how to react to mass shootings. One NRA public relations figure advises the response should be: “How dare you stand on the graves of these children to put forward your political agenda?”

At a press conference, Hanson attacked the “Islamist” outlet Al Jazeera, and said One Nation would not have engaged with the NRA or Koch Industries had it not been for Muller’s approaches. She said footage had been heavily edited, taken out of context and accused Australian media of being biased against her. “Journalism ethics are on the line today,” she said. She added her views on Port Arthur were that a lone gunman was responsible, and said that man should have been given the death penalty.

Hanson confirmed her chief of staff James Ashby and lead Senate candidate for Queensland, Steve Dickson, would both remain.

Her only previous statement had come in a Tweet, where Hanson said: “I was shocked & disgusted with the Al Jazeera hit piece. A Qatari government organization should not be targeting Australian political parties. This has been referred to ASIO. After the full hit piece has been released I’ll make a full statement & take all appropriate action.”