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STATEMENTS BY SENATORS
COVID-19: Science
SPEECH

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Speaker Carr, Sen Kim

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Senator KIM CARR (Victoria) (12:53): Can I begin by endorsing the remarks of Senator Van. The pandemic has sparked calls for a rapid and radical decoupling of Australia's trade and political engagement with China, and this is despite the fact that our resources and agricultural sectors have been the main beneficiaries of the massive growth in trade with China. These calls have now been extended, unfortunately, beyond trade to science and research. Those making such calls ought to be very, very careful of what they wish for.

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic will ultimately be overcome only by science, by the development of a vaccine. That will depend on the collaborative efforts of scientists from all over the world, including Australia. But some conservative politicians—this is where I might differ from Senator Van—have been only-too-willing accomplices in scurrilous media attacks on science. In response to media reports suggesting that eminent scientists have been dupes of the Chinese government, if not actively disloyal, they have called for an end to international collaboration in research until it can be regulated, it's alleged to protect our national security. This is a demand that ignores the fact that the activities of our scientists in universities and public research agencies are already subject to strict security controls and state ethics legislation, and that these controls are in fact much, much stronger than those that exist within the United States. We've seen no reports of any breaches of relevant legislation, such as the Defence Trade Controls Act or the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act. In fact, if there had been breaches, those would have to be reported by law.

Demands by these maverick politicians also ignore the fact that our intelligence agencies in Australia and elsewhere have expressed profound doubt about the claims that have been made by these media campaigns. Media stories such as those by Sharri Markson, published in *The Daily Telegraph* and other News Limited mastheads, were first reported to derive their information from what they called a dossier—a dossier compiled, they said, by Western intelligence sources. That was a shaky claim at best, but it does not even appear to be supported by our own intelligence agencies. It's most likely to be a collection of media reports. It's been suggested that in fact Ms Markson obtained those materials from US diplomats acting in support of President Trump's re-election campaign. We don't know the truth of that, but anyone who remembers how an earlier US administration used stories planted in the global media to spread the fiction of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq would certainly recognise the tactic.

President Trump, of course—and Senator Van is quite right about this—has been intent on blaming China for the pandemic. He calls COVID-19 'the Chinese disease' and claims to have seen 'very strong evidence' that the virus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Such language can only serve to inflame racism and xenophobia. Evidence has not been produced, and the claim is contrary to the conclusions of scientists around the world who have studied the genetic make-up of the coronavirus. They have indicated that the virus was not created in a laboratory; it was transmitted from animals to humans. There have been suggestions the virus arose in the Wuhan wildlife markets. However, other experts—such as Professor Maureen Miller, recently interviewed on the ABC, who is in fact a virus expert from Columbia University, and her reports were supported by researchers at the Los Alamos National Laboratory—suggest that the virus may well have seen life first in Guangdong as early as September and has mutated several times since then, spreading to Wuhan, and then to France and to Germany.

The Prime Minister has not adhered to President Trump's declarations on the origin of the virus. Nor have Ministers Birmingham, Andrews or Littleproud supported the calls that have been made to bust open our relationship with China on science research or on trade. But that hasn't deterred the actions of the mavericks within the coalition. Their ill-considered, reckless and irresponsible calls work directly against our national interest.

Equally disturbing is their assault on the reputation of our leading scientists and researchers. This is a new low, even in the long history of shameful attacks on science by members of this government. It recalls the campaigns directed against science by the far-Right politicians in Europe in the 1930s, campaigns that also shrugged off any need for evidence, campaigns run by people who assured us that, if you keep repeating a slur, however ill-founded, sooner or later people will believe it. Most recently, Ms Markson announced 'explosive revelations' that

research leading to the unveiling of the genetic sequencing of novel coronavirus was undertaken by the University of Sydney and the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences. She names, among other scientists involved in the research, Professor Wu-Chun Cao of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and Professor Edward Holmes of the University of Sydney. Ms Markson implies that the collaboration was somehow or other inappropriate but doesn't tell us why. Earlier Ms Markson tried to find somehow sinister the proposition that Dr Trevor Drew, the director of CSIRO's Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness in Geelong—which was formerly known as the Animal Health Laboratory—had worked with Dr Tu Chang-Chung, the director of the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Science. In other words, two scientists working on shared research interests are caught working in a collaborative manner, and that's it! The working relationship between Dr Drew and Dr Tu was seen as a fact in itself—and the only fact—and out of this arose a dark web of hints that Australian security had been endangered.

Ms Markson also reported that Dr Shi Zheng-Li and Dr Peng Zhao of the Wuhan Institute of Virology had previously worked at the CSIRO facility in Geelong. Again, that's the only fact that's reported. It's hardly surprising that Chinese and other scientists interested in the transmission of viruses from animals to humans sought to conduct research at the Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness. Anyone who recalls how CSIRO traced the transmission of the Hendra virus from bats to horses to humans should understand that. We should recall that four Australians died when that outbreak occurred and that CSIRO was the lead agency in combating that outbreak. Yet, to these mavericks, the collaboration should be suspended and all international collaboration should be stopped. Ignoring just how extensive the regulations are, they effectively claim that we should establish a new blacklist. These mavericks ought to know just how strict the protections of our national security are, already built into legislation in this country, and that any breaches of the Defence Trade Controls Act and the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act are in fact required to be reported to parliament. None have been—none.

We should understand the foundations of anything Ms Markson chose to report about this collaboration. Researchers from CSIRO and the universities collaborate with colleagues from all over the world, not just China but the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore and others. International collaboration will be the essential element in our defeat of the COVID-19 pandemic. That's the message that our Chief Scientist, Dr Finkel, delivered to the UNESCO meeting last month on behalf of the government. Smearing the reputation of scientists with baseless allegations puts at risk the international effort to develop a vaccine. The Prime Minister should reprimand those in his ranks who are not supporting that effort.
(Time expired)