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Review - Michael Tubbs, *ASIO: The Enemy
Within*

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Abstract

ASIO: The Enemy Within is a combative book. Based on his research and experience, Michael Tubbs argues that the Australian Intelligence Security Organisation (ASIO) has no place in Australia's democracy. According to Tubbs ASIO has, since its formation in 1949, acted as a partisan political secret police force, ridden roughshod over civil liberties, engaged in illegal activities, all with the aim of creating and managing a docile, tranquil public.

Michael Tubbs, *ASIO: The Enemy Within*, Boolarong Press, Brisbane, 2008. pp. xii+275. \$35.00 paper.

Reviewed by Rowan Cahill, University of Wollongong

ASIO: The Enemy Within is a combative book. Based on his research and experience, Michael Tubbs argues that the Australian Intelligence Security Organisation (ASIO) has no place in Australia's democracy. According to Tubbs ASIO has, since its formation in 1949, acted as a partisan political secret police force, ridden roughshod over civil liberties, engaged in illegal activities, all with the aim of creating and managing a docile, tranquil public.

In case the reader fails to detect his combative edge, Tubbs prefaces the book with a condemnation "of all those ministers of federal governments who had any ASIO involvement or responsibility from 1949, and who have either by incompetence, malice or lack of fortitude, allowed ASIO to become the enemy within". It is a shotgun blast that, as Tubbs demonstrates, includes members of both Labor and non-Labor governments.

The background of Tubbs is relevant to his book. He is a left-activist who was, and possibly still is, the subject of an ASIO file. Beginning as a factory worker, Tubbs became a full-time organiser for the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) during the 1960s. Reinventing himself, he became a lawyer during the late 1970s, and retired in 1998. A significant part of his career as a barrister was representing clients appealing to the Security Appeals Tribunal, individuals whose careers had been variously affected by adverse ASIO assessments. The Tribunal was established following Justice Hope's Royal Commission on Intelligence and Security (1974–77), which was scathing in its criticisms of ASIO.

Tubbs makes considerable use of his experiences gained while counselling, advising, representing ASIO victims; he draws on the ASIO files that came his way, and also on his own ASIO file—ten volumes and over 1500 pages for the eleven-year period to 1974. Trawling through these files Tubbs sheds light on ASIO data and its data-collection processes, revealing a toxic brew of fact, gossip, innuendo, creative leaps of the imagination, intrusive snooping into personal lives, and illegal activities. However Tubbs is mistaken to think, as he claims, he is doing something new here; Fiona Capp similarly used security files in her study *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals, 1920–1960* (1993).

There is merit in parts of *ASIO: The Enemy Within*,

especially the close discussion and analysis of personal/organisation files. However the book could have been better had Tubbs drawn upon the work of historians like Frank Cain on the origins of political surveillance in Australia, and Phillip Deery, Les Louis, and David McKnight (post-1994), on ASIO and the Cold War. Tubbs argues that ASIO was, in effect, a foreign transplant, modelled on MI5 and the CIA; in part true, but it also grew out of the intelligence community that developed in Australia during World War 1 onwards. Arguably, ASIO was influenced by the culture and personnel of Military Intelligence, hence its vehement anti-communism and its hostility towards Australia developing a vibrant/lively democratic culture. Further, Tubbs does not take into consideration the significant advances in Australian Cold War historiography following the 1995 release of details of Operation Venona, involving decrypted messages sent between Moscow and the Soviet Embassy in Canberra during the late 1940s.

I am critical, too, of the insistence by Tubbs on depicting the CPA as a benign political organisation. Granted, attempts since the 1930s to ban the party eventually failed and the CPA was able to operate in Australia as a legally recognised political party. However, its aim was to work against the capitalist-state and at times it may have actually constituted a real political threat. Even if this was not the case, it was perceived to be a threat by outsiders. As such it was a 'legitimate' target for those who sought to protect the state. Certainly during the 1940s and early 1950s, the CPA leadership expected to be targeted, hence the underground work of Wally Clayton, and the counter-intelligence work of Jack Hughes and the party's Control Commission which endeavoured to protect the CPA from surveillance and penetration by the state.

None of which is to condone the work of ASIO, simply to recognise that if you are going to oppose the state, of any ilk, in a serious way, then you must expect to be seriously opposed, and plan for that contingency. Historically, spooks feature in the defence of the state, no matter what nation, or what time; their tactics traditionally tend to be characterised by deceit, intrusion, secrecy, fear, illegality, even immorality. It is part of the trade, and may even attract a personality type.

Mick Tubbs published the book himself, so there could be distribution problems and copies may be difficult to come by; in which case contact Michael Tubbs at PO Box 445, Croydon Park, NSW, 2133. Copies are also available from Neville Arrowsmith, 21 Lorking St., Bellambi, NSW 2518. The price is \$35 and postage is free.