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"Communists and Conspiracies"

Doreen Borrow

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"Communists and Conspiracies"

Abstract

Let me first thank those who organised this seminar and who invited me to speak. The eclectic mixture of those who have attended and those who have already made a contribution, the young, the not so young and the old have made for a very interesting and informative time and given me much to mull over. Many of the contributions you have heard and will hear during this seminar have a scholarly character. My education was extremely limited. I do not hold any degrees let alone a PhD. My formal schooling ended at primary school level and what education I have I obtained in the school of hard knocks and the University of Life. I am an old Bolshie, defined by some as an unreconstructed Stalinist, who has spent more than half a century working at grass roots level in an unsuccessful attempt to change this unjust and inequitable society in which most of us who inhabit Planet Earth live.

“Communists and Conspiracies”

Doreen Borrow

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Doreen Borrow, May Day, Wollongong 2008

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The majority of my generation was not part of love-ins or dope smoking, although we were known to imbibe alcohol, smoke fags, and sex was also part of our agenda. However, I do recall some that succumbed to the siren call of the Counter Culture.

One who comes to mind is Eric Aarons whose photo appeared on the front page of the Sydney press. He was photographed sitting on the lawn at Sydney Uni, surrounded by young people in hippie attire, wearing a chamber pot on his head and smoking a rather large joint. As you can image this did not amuse many members of the CPA who claimed he had brought the party into disrepute. People of my generation are the products of the Depression, war and terrible working and living conditions.

Allow me to tell you a little of my background before I came to the attention of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation. A euphemism if ever I heard one! The first part of my life was one that echoed the pattern of most women of my era. I received a rudimentary education, left school, got a job, married, had children and, as a wife and mother, became economically dependent on the pay packet of a male breadwinner.

Where I lived politics was a male domain and unions were not for women. This did not sit easy with me and, during the many struggles the miners engaged in, the seeds of my future life as a Communist were planted. Much of this changed towards the end of the fifties. My husband David was killed in a mining accident and at the age of 32 I become a single parent with four small children. My future prospects were very bleak where I lived and where the town's people were economically dependent on hard rock mining and the raising of sheep. The prospect of remarriage held no appeal and the chances of obtaining paid employment extremely limited. So after a period of hard reality I packed up our few belonging and made plans to leave behind all that was familiar to us.

With the new man in my life, my children and our dog Pongo we crammed into an old borrowed and battered car, and

like the Joads in the Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, we headed for the promised land. Except that our destination was not California – it was Wollongong. That is when my life began to diverge from the trajectory once reserved for working-class women. I became a political activist when I re-entered the paid workforce and came under the scrutiny of ASIO, a body I didn't know existed when they began compiling notes on my comings and goings.

One could be forgiven for asking what I had done to incur the interest of the secret police? Had I become a spy for some foreign country selling them secret information about the Postmaster Generals Department who employed me? Had I joined a terrorist organisation and taken to making bombs in the garden shed in what little spare time I had left from my duties as a working mother?

I had come to their attention for joining a legitimate organisation – I had joined The Communist Party of Australia and on rejoining the paid workforce I had become active in my union, the APWU, the peace movement and the political scene in Wollongong. By the time 1968 came around I had been upgraded to a “Category A” suspect and hundreds of files had been compiled about my activities, many of which were later to be found erroneous.

At some point in the nineties I became aware that I could obtain some of these files and made application to do so. I rang AISO, identified myself and inquired as to how I could obtain my dossier and was asked in a very cold and formal tone: “And what makes you think there are files on you, Mrs Borrow?” When I concluded my rundown and why I thought there would be a record of my political activities, the man at the other end of the line must have come to the conclusion that I was a “service user”. And no doubt like himself, a decorated and staunch veteran of the Cold War, he probably visualised me as a John Le Carre character, a female Karla perhaps, who had seen the Berlin Wall tumble and now thought it safe to come in out of the cold.

I was by this time a pensioner eking out an existence on the pittance provided by the then Howard government. The cost of obtaining the files was prohibitive. Eventually Agent X and I reached an agreement that the photos contained in the files

would be put up on the National Archives of Australia website and I would pay for the hard copy. To my horror not only were the photos displayed for all to see but my files also. My role as an Australian Mata Hari exposed in intimate detail for the entire world to read. Minus substantial areas of text deemed too sensitive to publish for national security reasons. In time I purchased further hard copy records of my activities up to 1975 – 3 volumes in all, nine folders exempted.

I was amazed to see the number of errors these files contained. I wondered if the person who was spying on me was a double agent and setting false leads, or whether he/she were second guessing my life or just plain stupid. There were photos of me in May Day marches, funerals, meetings of the CPA, Hiroshima Day commemorations, peace marches and so on. The photos were of very poor quality and failed to capture my best side. Had I but known that I was being photographed I would have buffed myself a little.

My files portray me as something of a chameleon, my appearance and persona altering with each report. My description underwent many variations regarding my age, height, nationality, how I looked, dressed and what sort of a mother I was. But there were two constants: 1. That I lived in a *de facto* relationship with Mike Clunne, also a well-known Communist, and 2. The subject of my hair. Now all my life I have been cursed with having very fine hair and I could not count the times when I presented at hairdressers to have them say: “My! You do have fine hair, dear. We will have to see what we can do with it.” I never thought I would have this information recorded in a secret police file. Agent Plodd who was recording my activities varied the description of my hair as being blond, dark, and fair but always as “fine” and once as being “wispy”!

What bearing this had on me being a “Category A” suspect is difficult to comprehend, as was why I had been upgraded to this category. I had not begun my extensive visits to attend conferences held in various Communist countries and my political activities were very ordinary. And what would I now be categorized as after visiting Cuba, the old USSR many times and Iraq during the Cold War, and being awarded The Eureka Medal of Australia by the Anarchists? I will have to wait years before I find the answer to this and time is not on my side.

Now whilst I have made light of the years that I was under surveillance, and probably still am, there was a very serious side to this. If so much time and effort was spent on me, how many others were subjected to the same treatment? Much of the material recorded was innocuous and banal and hardly the stuff that would warrant recording in multiple copies and passed on to many departments. What was placed on record went unchallenged as to its veracity, and allowed for anyone to report adversely on another person. And who were these people who so diligently recorded my political activities?

Because of the detailed description of my looks and dress I began to assume that one of them must have been a woman and have spent many hours thinking about who she could have been. Was she a mole who had insinuated herself into our sandwich making activities on International Women's Day? Had she penetrated a Communist cooking collective and was busy scribbling down details about my wispy hair whilst other women comrades and I made cakes and chocolate crackles to sell on street stalls in order to raise money to finance the revolution? Was she someone who had access to the Party HQ files? Was she a member of our "Work among Women Group"? Like many other questions this too will probably remain unanswered.

As the years progressed the surveillance on Mata Hari of Wollongong extended to include my children. I also discovered that a person from Special Branch based with the Port Kembla police was also keeping a dossier on me. When Special Branch was abolished in 1997 following evidence given at the Police Royal Commission "that members had abused their authority by gathering information on people who posed no threat of political motivated violence."

Those who had been spied on were allowed to obtain these files. I made application to get mine in November 1999. In due course they arrived and I was rather disappointed by the amount of material I received. So I rang the NSW Police Service and asked to speak to Inspector Langburne whose signature was on the letter that had accompanied the files. I registered my complaint with him about the paucity of the files and he told me in no uncertain terms that I was lucky to have received any! When I inquired why this was so, he said that if a person had not been active for ten years the files were shredded. Then

he made the following comment: "But I see you are still active."

Files had been opened on my two sons and on my daughter Susan. When her engagement was announced in the *Illawarra Mercury* surveillance began, not only on her intended husband, but also on his family who were ultimately to be found as clean skins. At that time Susan was employed in the Public Service as a base grade clerk and her file was marked that she was not to be promoted beyond a particular level, not because of her political activity but because of mine.

In one report I was deemed to have married a fellow called Danny Lean and moved to Newcastle. There are numerous entries recording where efforts had been made to obtain my marriage certificate but all of them proved futile. Now Danny was a very good comrade and a likeable enough fellow but, in truth, not one I would choose to share my bed with, let alone my body – although I don't know if I would be so picky today.

We were recorded as residing in Newcastle and the house that we were supposed to live in had been placed under surveillance. Discreet inquiries had been made with neighbours to ascertain my whereabouts as I had not been seen at this address. Of course not! I was probably outside BHP in Port Kembla trying to sell the *Tribune* to reluctant workers or haranguing my workmates about the merits of equal pay for women.

If there is any upside to the years spent by ASIO and Special Branch recording my political and personal activities it is this: as a family historian I have a record of where I was and what I was doing during those years. Very handy to have your back pages so accessible, especially for someone in their eighties! There is a record of letters I had written and that had been printed in the *Illawarra Mercury* and long lists of comrades and other people, many of which I have long forgotten. These people came under notice of the secret police, not because they were terrorists or spies for a foreign government. What was it that distinguished them?

I would say that it was because they had a connection, however tenuous, with those who wanted to put an end to war and who struggled for justice and a fair go for all who live on this beautiful planet.

As to the legacies of 1968 – with the demise of the Socialist

Bloc and the end of the Cold War a new enemy had to be found in order to sustain the threats posed by so-called 'Enemies of the State'. Before one could say "Jack Robinson", new enemies emerged from the Arab/Muslim world, including Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda and practically every Australian of "middle Eastern appearance." All over the western world new laws have been enacted to protect us against terrorists who, according to the spin-doctors, are everywhere! These laws are far more draconian than previous governments have passed and there can be no doubt that we who continue to oppose injustice will be still under the watchful eye of ASIO.

The thought that you have an extremely well-funded, secret agency empowered to follow you around, photograph you and your friends and relatives, spy not only on you but your immediate family, interfere with their employment security as happened to one of my daughters, and intercept phone calls and these days email communications, is extremely intimidating. We remember from George Orwell's *1984* how the separate departments of the Ministry of Truth, including the Records Department and the Propaganda Department, cooperated to contain and neutralize any opposition to the status quo. Governments lie to achieve desired outcomes, although they like to euphemistically refer to it as spin.

The ramping up of the fear factor in this so-called age of terror has a familiar ring about it for those of us who were targeted during the Cold War, when there were Reds under every bed. The collecting of information and the subsequent unpredictable use that can be made of it causes anxiety even for old stager like me.

Last year I saw the wonderful, award-winning film *The Lives of Others*. No doubt many of you have seen it as well, but for those who haven't let me briefly say that it exposed the spying activities of the East Germany Stasi, or secret police. On leaving the cinema a woman with a foreign accent approached me and said: "It is all true, you know, they did spy on ordinary people ... Aren't we lucky we live in a country where such things have never happened."