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The State and the Communist Party of Australia: Surveillance of Dissident Politics, 1945-1955

Glenn Mitchell

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Recent announcements by the NSW government to increase security during the Olympic Games in 2000 have focussed attention on the nature of and reasons for surveillance. The word surveillance has sinister connotations, of a hidden watcher observing a person or group of people without their knowledge. *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* notes that the practice applies especially to a 'suspected person.'

In the 1950s, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) believed communists threatened Australia's national security. The defection of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov in April 1954, both of whom worked at the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, and the Royal Commission on Espionage in 1955 confirmed ASIO's assessments (1). Among the general conclusions reached by the Royal Commission, two in particular highlight ASIO's concerns: "5. . . . it plainly appears that for many years the Government of the U.S.S.R. had been using its Embassy in Canberra as a cloak under which to control and operate espionage organizations in Australia" (2) and "15. Without Communism Soviet espionage could have no hope of success in this country, and the existence here of Communists who were and are willing to act to the prejudice of Australia was the fundamental cause of the formation of our Security Service and necessitates its retention in its present role as a 'Fourth Service,' essential to the security and defence of Australia." (3)

These Cold War warriors developed complex networks of surveillance for individuals or organisations which conformed to ASIO's definition of acting 'to the prejudice of Australia.' They became the subject of observation, surveillance and the development of detailed files. The recent release by the Australian Archives allows allows the first time a public examination of ASIO's surveillance work.

This paper is concerned with one aspect of that work -- the surveillance of members of the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) in the 1950s. Members of the Carpenters and Bricklayers Unions in NSW had voted to form one union, the BWIU, in 1942 (4).

ASIO became especially interested in the union's State secretary, Pat Clancy. His files in particular reveal an organisation which was committed to compiling detailed files on Clancy. What purpose the organisation had in mind for the use of this information is not clear, especially when much in the files consists of information already on the public record, such as newspaper clippings! Moreover, the information in this paper is based only on that which has been released -- there is still a significant amount of material, marked TOP SECRET, which ASIO is yet to declassify.

Clancy's membership of the CPA and his work as State Secretary with the NSW Branch of the BWIU attracted the attention of ASIO. JCB, one of ASIO's operatives responsible for the Clancy file, made the following extract in April 1954 from Clancy's file. Not surprisingly, the extract was stamped SECRET. "It is of interest to note that Patrick Martin CLANCY, Communist, has just been elected N.S.W. State Secretary of the B.W.I.U. CLANCY has been

an official of the Union for some years and, by decision of B.W.I.U. State Conference, had been Acting State Secretary vice BARCLAY (deceased). CLANCY is young and energetic and much the same type as Ernest THORNTON was in his early days." (5)

ASIO interpreted Clancy's youth and energy differently from the BWIU. For the union, these were positive attributes. In an article published in the Communist Party's newspaper, *Tribune*, Tom McDonald, a BWIU organiser said: "Pat Clancy's no armchair official. He gets out among the blokes, to deal with disputes and discuss union policy and questions. This gives members full opportunity to have their ideas considered."

Presumably ASIO thought McDonald's assessment was important; it was atttached to Clancy's file. In their efforts to build a comprehensive profile on Clancy, ASIO appears to have clipped and collected all newspaper references to him -- they make up many pages of Clancy's files. ASIO also collected internal documents from Communist Party meetings, and documents found in raids on houses and party offices in Sydney.

There are also many references to Clancy's activities obtained from ASIO stakeouts. ASIO records that Clancy "Arrived in Canberra on 4.3.53 to survey ground for Deputation on 11.3.53" (6), was "One of 29 persons of security interest who attended opening session of Aust. Convention for P. & W., Sydney 26.9.53", attended at Marx School at Arcadia in August 1953, met delegates returning from the Fourth World Youth Festival on the ship 'Mooltan' on 9 November 1953, farewelled delegates attending the WFTU's Third World Trade Union Congress in Vienna in Ocotober 1953 and addressed an Out Menzies Deputation in front of Parliament House, Canberra, in October 1952. Other times ASIO was less than certain in its observations. For example, Clancy was 'thought' to have attended a meeting of the CPA at the Painters and Dockers Union office in Balmain on 28 June 1952.

ASIO noted that Clancy had signed the Rosenberg petition and when he applied for a passsport to travel to Hong Kong, ASIO prepared a detailed report on his application. The reports noted that he was on Department of Immigration List 124 and would be leaving Sydney by Qantas aircraft on 21 April 1952. One letter noted that ASIO had received this information from 'a reliable source.' A Personal Particulars Sheet (PPS) was filled out on Pat and his wife Alma. This included provision for Bank Accounts and descriptions of vehicles owned by the Clancys -- ASIO thought details such as the number plate, make, year, colour and registration date were important.

ASIO also reported that Clancy met Professor Joseph Hromadka at Sydney airport on 9 September 1954 and that on one occasion, he attempted to photograph an ASIO officer and Special Branch officers while they were examining the luggage of delegates at a youth conference in Sydney in November 1953. The file entry notes with triumph that the film was confiscated.

On other occasions ASIO's surveillance produced the number plates and a listing of the various owners of cars parked outside a hall in Wollongong where a meeting of the CPA was taking place; it used other police/security branches, such as the Special Branch and the NSW Police to get reports on union meetings in Port Kembla and use of them to check fingerprint files and criminal records. ASIO also used Immigration officers to get arrival and departure information and when Clancy travelled to Peking, it used Australian officials to get an assessment of his political work and translations of his public speeches.

Much of the material ASIO collected was seemingly innocuous, boring or both -- most of it was in the public domain, drawn from electoral roles and newspaper articles, and there appears to be no information in these files which a fair-minded person could define as a threat to the nation's security. But the political and cultural context within which it was collected gave the processes of surveillance and the material placed on files a sinister meaning. Thus, the average reader would interpret ASIO's observation that after a meeting of the Wollongong and Ironworkers Branches of the Communist Party in Wollongong on 20 June 1955, "Stephen Mathew QUINN, the last to leave, locked the entrance to the premises when he departed" (7), somewhere between a bad script of Monty Python and an English satire on security services.

For ASIO and its masters, this was important information. Hopefully, the 2000 Olympics will not bring the same attention to political trivia, process it as 'IMPORTANT' and take punitive action. However, the chilling prospect remains of security agencies in 2000, with technology far more sophisticated than the archetypal ASIO agent, lurking in the shadows taking notes in a battered Commonwealth issue notebook. Australia has experienced obsessive and intrusive surveillance once before -- will it occur again?

1. For two accounts of the Petrov defections, see V & E Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1956 and R Manne, *The Petrov Affair. Politics and Espionage*, Pergamon, Sydney, 1987. See also the *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the origins, aims and objects and funds of the Communist Party in Victoria and other related matters*, Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1950-51, Vols.1-2.

2. *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage*, NSW Government Printer, Sydney, 1955, p.295.

3. Ibid., p.298.

4. See G Mitchell, *The Industrial Leopard. The BWIU and Industrial Relations in the Australian Building and Construction Industry, 1942-1992*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, in press.

5. Australian Archives, Series A6119, Item 133.

6. Ibid.

7. Communist Party of Australia NSW Wollongong Branch. Australian Archives A6122:758.