

2019

[Letter to the editor] Security Services - then and now

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Recommended Citation

Steedman, Pete, [Letter to the editor] Security Services - then and now, *Counterculture Studies*, 2(1), 2019, 155-157. doi:[10.14453/ccs.v2.i1.19](https://doi.org/10.14453/ccs.v2.i1.19)

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[Letter to the editor] Security Services - then and now

Abstract

The current international debate relating to press freedom, while seemingly a surprise to the mainstream media, is no surprise to those of us who have been watching the slow erosion of liberties over the last couple of decades, as our governments move us down the path to the totalitarian Right, déjà vu the 1930s. With a new mega department taking over the duties of security agencies, as well as immigration and border security, the Australian government has created a large bureaucracy with competing aims and objectives and a Minister in Peter Dutton who seems impervious to the concerns for empathy and compassion, and has no understanding of the separation of powers or our obligations as signatories to dozens of UN conventions. But it has always been so. Few will remember the censorship during WW1 and the news blackout of the bombing of Darwin in WW2, not to mention the outrageous lies from Vietnam and our following endeavours in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Security Services – then and now

Pete Steedman

[The following letter to the editor was originally published in truncated form during 2019 by *Crikey*, an Australian online, independent journalism outlet.¹ The complete letter is published here. Pete Steedman is a former student newspaper editor and activist during the 1960s, journalist and editor with London *OZ* magazine for a period during the early 1970s and member of the Bob Hawke Labor government between 1983-4.]

The current international debate relating to press freedom, while seemingly a surprise to the mainstream media, is no surprise to those of us who have been watching the slow erosion of liberties over the last couple of decades, as our governments move us down the path to the totalitarian Right, déjà vu the 1930s. With a new mega department taking over the duties of security agencies, as well as immigration and border security, the Australian government has created a large bureaucracy with competing aims and objectives and a Minister in Peter Dutton who seems impervious to the concerns for empathy and compassion, and has no understanding of the separation of powers or our obligations as signatories to dozens of UN conventions.² But it has always been so. Few will

¹ Australians need to be shocked into climate action, *Crikey – INQ: Independent Inquiry Journalism*, 11 June 2019. Available URL: <https://www.crikey.com.au/2019/06/11/comments-shock-climate-crisis-messaging/>.

² The Honorable Peter Dutton is the Minister for Home Affairs in the Scott Morrison Coalition government. Currently, the Home Affairs portfolio has responsibility for national security, law

remember the censorship during WW1 and the news blackout of the bombing of Darwin in WW2, not to mention the outrageous lies from Vietnam and our following endeavours in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 1967 I was editing the University of Melbourne student newspaper, *Farrago*.³ I had commissioned a Northern Territory Patrol Officer to do a three part series on the plight of Aboriginal communities in the Outback, with specific reference to the generations of children who were being destroyed by government policies and racist and exploitive cattle industry. On arriving at the printers for the bedding down of the paper featuring the second part of the Territory series, I was confronted by officers of the Federal Police who served me with a “D Notice”. A D [for Defence] Notice was a communication issued to the media by the Defence, Press and broadcasting Committee. It outlined subjects which bear upon defence or matters of national security.⁴ In other words, they have the

enforcement, transport security, cyber security, critical infrastructure protection, emergency management, immigration, citizenship, and border protection.

³ Lauren Sandeman, Amelia Costigan and Meg Tully, *Farrago – Revolutionary or Redundant? Farrago then and Now*, *Farrago Magazine*, 19 March 2018. Available URL:

<http://farragomagazine.com/2018/03/19/revolutionary-or-redundant-farrago-then-and-now/>.

⁴ D-Notices were first introduced into Australia from Great Britain in 1952 and issued in secret until July 1967 when their existence was first made public. Pauline Sadler, *The D-Notice System*, *Australian Press Council News*, May 2000, 16-17. Available URL:

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjma6X5vbiAhUMTo8KHfdbD90QFjAAegQIBBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww5.austlii.edu.au%2Fau%2Fjournals%2FAUPressCINews%2F2000%2F20.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3PTiUX2v-8H-jr12Cl_XB6.

right to censor and remove articles that are a threat to national security. If you can tell me 52 years later, how exposing the condition of Aboriginal kids living in in our prosperous country was a threat to national security, then you win the steak knives.

It was not uncommon for the government of the day [viz. 1967] to use a variety of police forces to threaten and stand over elements of the press and public the government didn't agree with. The various state branches of the police Special Branch [all of which have since been disbanded] indulged in thuggery and often [with other services] acted as agents provocateur, turning peaceful protests into street battles. Governments also used the local version of the Vice Squad to decide unilaterally whether an article or words were obscene, and while student editors may have been short of cash, the authorities made it clear they would be charging the printers and, if necessary, close them down. It was intimidation and thuggery, but it was the business of the day.

When the 30-year Federal Cabinet embargo on documents from 1968 was lifted in 1998 I was surprised to see that the government of the time had considered changing the law to charge me with sedition, a hanging offense. Wiser minds prevailed, but consideration of this action showed the extent the government would go to shut down any criticism of its political agenda, especially that involving the Vietnam War.

A free press, distorted as it often is by media magnates, is vital to a healthy democracy. Some of our politicians should re-read the history of the 1930s and reconsider their positions.