

A CAREFUL ANALYSIS

THE STUMBLEBUM SYNDROME by Laurie Aarons. Red Pen Publications, Sydney, 1984, 85 pages, soft cover, \$4.95. Available from Intervention, 4 Dixon Street, Sydney; International, First Floor, 17 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, and other good bookshops.



David Combe's fate at the hands of the Hawke Labor government is an issue which has touched deeply people's sense of injustice: there is substantial suspicion that he has been "dumped" with no justification.

But at the popular level it is only suspicion. Among other considerations, disbelief that a Labor government would destroy its ex-secretary causes doubt about the conclusions and the secrecy surrounding the evidence before the Hope Royal Commission makes it difficult to patch together a convincing commonsense explanation of extraordinary events.

But still the suspicion exists. *The Stumblebum Syndrome* takes us beyond suspicion into careful analysis of the evidence that is available.

Although the bulk of the book is about the Combe-Ivanov Affair, the central theme is ASIO: under the guise of "national security".

The ASIO outlook, moulded from its origins, its history and its tasks assigned by anti-Labor governments, remains deeply suspicious of trade unions, the Labor Party and Democratic Socialism, however moderate and reformist this may be. When it come to Labor's left ... the Security mind sees little or no difference between them and communists. And as the case of David Combe shows. ASIO can find dangers even in people from the ALP's centre ground.

ASIO's doubts about Combe have a number of strands.

ASIO'S CASE AGAINST COMBE

The first doubt about Combe is money: he planned to make a lot. ASIO saw him as being greedy and thus vulnerable to KGB funds. Unfortunately for ASIO, Combe

"expected to make a fortune quickly from big and 'respectable' corporations, he was not in any financial difficulty and was inundated with clients". Mr. Justice Hope saw no problem in this.

Secondly, Combe was supposedly "bitterly anti-American" (and thus prone to subversion of Australia?). Again, ASIO had it wrong; they based their judgment on Combe's criticisms of the CIA's role in the destabilisation of the Whitlam government and the Kerr coup. Combe is not alone in this, but "In ASIO's eyes, this is sufficient to prove 'bitter anti-Americanism' and even significant evidence of being a potential traitor".

Combe, of course, rejected the assertion in detail in his evidence: there is some small distinction between the CIA and the USA. Hope concluded that ASIO was wrong.

The third strand in ASIO's case is Combe's "apparent enthusiasm for things Soviet", amounting to an ideological commitment.

Combe claims that he was only concerned with developing closer relations, mutual understanding, the development of trade and, above all, peaceful relations between East and West.

He was, in fact, "highly critical of the Soviet System". Character witnesses from the ALP supported him on this. ASIO embellished its case with embarrassingly mistaken accusations of free trips on a luxury liner and to the Soviet Union. Again, Hope was not impressed by ASIO's case.

INTELLIGENCE LOGIC

The crucial issues in the case lie beyond these absurdities. However, it is important to see in these and later arguments more than that they are just wrong. The crucial point consistently brought out by

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Aarons in the treatment of all ASIO's allegations is that

Everything is circumstantial, everything depended on accepting their premises and following the intelligence logic, wildly different from ordinary logic and certainly unsuitable to prove a case in any court.

The evidence is tailored to support a position that is predetermined on the basis of institutionally deep-seated prejudices. It is difficult to grasp the extraordinary reality of these practices without seeing how it is consistently presented in the detailed dissection of the ASIO case. This brief summary can state it, but cannot drive the point home.

THE REAL ISSUES

ASIO's case really stands or falls on whether or not:

- * Ivanov was a KGB operative*
- * Whether Combe knew he was*
- * Whether, knowing this, Combe was prepared to sell himself to Ivanov*
- * That Ivanov suggested and Combe accepted that their relationship should 'become clandestine'.*

Most of the evidence on Ivanov as a KGB agent is censored. Without access to it, we cannot decide whether he was or not. On the evidence available, some doubts are suggested; cross-examination by Combe's counsel of the ASIO operatives produces some interesting holes in the view that Ivanov was a professional, dedicated KGB agent. From this evidence, Aarons concludes:

Ivanov may be a KGB man, of course, but if so he was not very capable, effective or careful.

Frankly, the more crucial question is whether Combe knew. ASIO's evidence is indirect ("his alleged attempt to make their relationship 'clandestine' ... his acceptance of the



possibility that any Soviet diplomat may be ... a KGB member") and from two witnesses.

The clandestinity suggestion arose from Ivanov telling Combe on April 3 that he (Ivanov) could be expelled, that Combe's phone was tapped and that he could be implicated. Ivanov suggested that any further contacts should be made by one contacting the other at home. "ASIO claims that this meant Ivanov was proposing a 'clandestine' relationship which Combe accepted." Nothing had happened; ASIO feared it might. On what basis? Under cross-examination, virtually none.

Of the two witnesses relied on by ASIO, one is entirely unreliable. The other, Matheson, has a lengthy chapter devoted to him. He has a strange background: ex-naval intelligence, incredibly rich after trade deals with the Soviet Union, etc. He is the only one to claim that Combe knew that Ivanov was KGB.

On March 7th 1983 ... he alleges Combe told him 'Ivanov is more than

he appears to be'. Matheson says he did not ask what Combe meant by this because he considered that it meant 'Combe believed Ivanov was a KGB man'.

Hope rejected Matheson's interpretation of Combe's remark but then concluded that Combe believed that Ivanov probably was a KGB officer. Aarons suggests

"not from evidence but from his own prejudice and already-formed opinions about Combe and his attitude to Ivanov Hope appears to be saying that Combe ought to have known Ivanov was a KGB officer, therefore he did know.

Matheson apparently is also the source of the clandestinity proposal and appears to be ASIO's chief informer in the Affair. There is even a suggestion that he acted as an agent provocateur. The extensive treatment of the extraordinary figure of Matheson is fascinating.

Combe's great attribute was his access to Labor ministers. Would he betray them and would they let him? Security hopefully makes such matters difficult. Where is the evidence that it was on the cards ... or even a possibility? It obviously doesn't exist because, as the ASIO head says:

fortunately it never happened due to Ivanov's expulsion but we were scared it would happen.

The chapters on Combe and Matheson constitute the bulk of *The Stumblebum Syndrome*.

Some of the other chapters proceed to address broader questions related to the cloak of security. Mr. Justice Hope comes under fire in Chapter 4 as an apologist for the security mentality. In Chapter 5, the cult of security —

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internationally — is elaborated on and criticised.

Part of the new ASIO Act of 1979 is examined in Chapter 6. Steve Rix is an Australian government employee who was given an adverse security report in relation to his employment on the basis of his membership of the Communist Party. He appealed successfully. Through the examination of this case and the way ASIO defines its powers — often in contravention of the Act which is the theoretical source of its legal powers — Aarons

reveals the very serious extension of ASIO's powers and the surreptitious erosion of civil liberties which occurred when the Act was passed. The Act means that all people employed directly or indirectly by the Federal Government are now the subject of ASIO assessments. All these people are now placed at risk in relation to their democratic right to freely associate in lawful social and political activity.

All under the pretext of "national security".

Finally, the argument is drawn together in the seventh chapter on the security services and the labor movement. The Combe-Ivanov Affair is not an isolated crucifixion of one person. The orientation of the security services is established:

ASIO faithfully followed the Security/Intelligence tradition, dating back to 1916, of seeing the left as the main danger and almost ignoring the right.

A picture is built up. Whitlam is elected and Security checks on staff are vetoed at first. Attorney-General Murphy "raids" ASIO. Accusations fly about CIA-ASIO involvement in the fall of the Whitlam government. State police Special Branches are disbanded by Labor governments.

Faced with a new Labor government, including ministers who had been critical of ASIO and ASIS, the Security Establishment may well have felt some concern for the future ... the issue could and should be put to the test, the Security Establishment left. The Combe-Ivanov matter, almost routine on 3rd February 1983 with Fraser in office, suddenly became a matter of utmost urgency on 5th April, with Labor in office only a month.

A plausible scenario? The details are interesting: read them.

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The answer to that question is to be found in isolation and loneliness, the cultivation of art as a substitute reality, the use of art as a weapon against the life which has rejected the artist, the feeling of contempt for others who comprise that life and the viciousness that results as the artist takes his revenge upon them. Indeed, it is significant that Orwell should look back upon his childhood and see it as an enactment of this modernist predicament:

I was somewhat lonely, and I soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays. I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life.¹⁹

It is a common charge against marxist criticism that it attempts to characterise a writer's work in terms of his background. But while it is not in the spirit of marxism to descend to such crude determinism, it is quite evident that a writer's background cannot be entirely ignored. This is particularly so in Orwell's case, for having himself reminded us of his childhood he goes on to explain,

I give all this background information because I do not think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early

development ... before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape.²⁰

We cannot ignore Orwell's own insistence upon the importance of his early development; nor can we ignore that description of the emotional attitudes towards life and other people, formed in childhood, and from which, in his own words, "he will never completely escape". He was, I believe, unable to escape from those early attitudes because he failed to rise to an understanding of the nature of modern life, of its qualities and possibilities, and was unable therefore to grasp the great liberating ideas of the times in which we live. He had made contact with these ideas, but he was unwilling to accept them and the view of life which they represented: as he himself remarked, "I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood".²¹ He did not wish to abandon a view in which his "literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued" and in which art became "a sort of private world in which" he "could get" his "own back for" his "failure in everyday life".²² It is this sense of personal failure coupled with this desire to be avenged upon life which is projected in the failure of Winston Smith and the sordidness and brutalities of his world. But the success which attended and continues to attend *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives it a wider significance and places it as a fantasy which, as Orwell said of Dali, casts "useful light on the decay of capitalist civilisation".

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FOOTNOTES

1. George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Penguin 1951).

2. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin, 1954), p. 22.

3. Howard Fast, *Literature and Reality* (New York, 1950), p. 97.

4. *ibid.*

5. George Orwell, "Why I write", *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Penguin, 1965), p. 187.

6. *op.cit.*, p. 184.

7. Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (London, 1938), p. 48.

8. Isaac Deutscher, "'1984' — The mysticism of cruelty", *Russia in Transition* (New York, 1957), p. 245 Reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, ed. Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), pp. 39-40.

9. "Why I write", p. 186

10. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 59.

11. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 60-61.

12. Gustave Flaubert. See 4, 35n

13. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Penguin, 1963), p. 284.

14. *ed.cit.*, p. 99.

15. *ed.cit.*, p. 140.

16. *ed.cit.*, p. 230

17. *ed.cit.*, p. 215.

18. George Orwell, "Benefit of Clergy", *Decline of the English Murder*, p. 27.

19. "Why I write", p. 180.

20. "Why I write", p. 182.

21. "Why I write", p. 186

22. "Why I write", p. 180.