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# Spying on dissent: it's the Australian way

Rowan Cahill

*University of Wollongong*, [rowanc@uow.edu.au](mailto:rowanc@uow.edu.au)

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# Spying on dissent: it's the Australian way

## **Abstract**

The clandestine involvement of military folk in the political and industrial affairs of the nation has a long history. Dissenting organisations should adopt counter-intelligence measures 'Oppositional, dissident organisations owe it to themselves and their supporters to adopt counter-intelligence procedures.'

Photograph: Guardian Australia Allegations this week that the anti-mining camp at Maules creek in NSW was infiltrated by corporate spies should come as no surprise. While one activist told the Guardian Australia she felt "a sickening feeling of betrayal", in reality this is the Australian way. The clandestine involvement of military folk in the political and industrial affairs of the nation, done with staggering panache and ruthlessness, has a long history.

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# Spying on dissent: it's the Australian way



Rowan Cahill

The clandestine involvement of military folk in the political and industrial affairs of the nation has a long history. Dissenting organisations should adopt counter-intelligence measures: 'oppositional, dissident organisations owe it to themselves and their supporters to adopt counter-intelligence procedures.'

[Allegations](#) this week that the anti-mining camp at Maules creek in NSW was infiltrated by corporate spies should come as no surprise. While one activist told the Guardian Australia she felt "a sickening feeling of betrayal", in reality this is the Australian way. The clandestine involvement of military folk in the political and industrial affairs of the nation, done with staggering panache and ruthlessness, has a long history.

During the 1920s and 1930s, private quasi-military outfits proliferated in Australia, drawing to a great extent on the vast pool of ex-soldiery that was the legacy of the first world war. Bearing names like the order of silent knights, the blackshirts, the white guard, the new guard, and the league of national security, these groups had an estimated overall membership of 130,000. The male population at the time was around 2 million.

Disciplined, well organised and conspiratorial, these outfits were distrustful of democratic processes and hostile towards organised labour. With access to arms and ammunition, and often with significant links to high-ranking military personnel, they waited in the wings for the circumstances that would give them the opportunity to mobilise against industrial militancy, which was seen as Bolshevik and the prelude to working class revolution.

After the second world war, the tradition continued. The Communist party was a strong political and industrial presence, and unrest was increasing. The nation was governed by the Chifley Labor government, the nationalisation of the banking system was a possibility, and socialism was in the air.

In response, an outfit called the association formed in 1947. Headed by senior military personnel from the second world war – including Sir Thomas Blamey, major-general CH Simpson, and general Sir Leslie Morshead – the association was well financed and drew support from ex-servicemen. It only disbanded once the nation was in "safe hands" after the election of the conservative Menzies government in 1950, when the leadership of the Australian security intelligence organisation passed to former military intelligence personnel.

Half a century later, Patrick Stevedores and the maritime union of Australia were engaged in a major dispute. When employer interests sought a non-union workforce to replace unionists on the waterfront, they turned in 1997 to ex-military personnel. The initial recruitment drive was run in the official Army newspaper.

And so to today, and another time with a supply of ex-service personnel, courtesy of our involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some have subsequent experience as mercenaries in the lucrative subcontractor world of private security in the same zones of

conflict. Add to these former Australian federal police personnel, experienced abroad in Australian "peace keeping" missions.

It is to be expected that civilian community organisations that oppose and threaten the smooth rollout of corporate plans will be targeted by spooks of either the official or private kind. It doesn't matter their stripe: anti-coal mining outfits, anti-coal seam gas outfits, anti-logging organisations, conservation organisations of any kind, NGOs that end up contesting government policies – indeed, any organisation that has the potential to mobilise political dissent – should expect to be infiltrated. Indeed, it [became known in 2012](#) that conservation groups were already under surveillance by ASIO.

Oppositional, dissident organisations owe it to themselves and their supporters to adopt counter-intelligence procedures and processes. This has been done before. During its lifetime, the communist party of Australia ran its own operation. While abundant official and party archival materials highlight its failures to defend itself from spook penetration and surveillance, so too are there manifold examples of its successes, including its own penetration of Australian security and police services. It's not rocket science; simply a judicious mix of common sense, care, discretion – and perhaps a touch of suspicion.