OPENING THE CLOSET

A review of NEST OF TRAITORS by Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs. Published by the Jacaranda Press, 1974. 259 pp. $7.50. Reviewed by Rowan Cahill.

One of the uses of history elaborated by Nietzsche was the critical function, where aspects of the past are brought to court, inquired into, and convicted.

Slowly this process is happening to the Petrov Affair which created national trauma in Australia twenty years ago.

The defection of Vladimir Petrov, a minor Russian diplomat and self styled super-spy, on the eve of the 1954 Federal elections and the Royal Commission into Espionage that followed was a major event in the political history of Australia.

As a result of the Petrov Affair, Russia broke off diplomatic relations with Australia for five years; the ALP was shattered and fragmented and the DLP was spawned; Dr.H.V.Evatt's chances of becoming Prime Minister were dashed and his career and health wrecked; the Crimes Act was amended to make it a potential suppressor of political dissent (a function it performed during the Vietnam War); a number of Australian citizens were driven into exile, reputations were smeared, careers wrecked; fuel was added to the fires of antipodean anti-communism and the ALP was cast into the political wilderness for some eighteen years; the intelligence organisation ASIO came before public notice and its existence and clandestine activities created a paranoia amongst leftists of all hues, encouraging and facilitating an intellectual conservatism and social passivity in academia (something that was changed by the Vietnam War).

Yet for two decades the Petrov Affair has been allowed to slumber in the national closet, a political skeleton needing a good airing, but receiving very little; that is until the publication last November of Nest of Traitors by Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs.

Belatedly then, but better late than never, the Petrov Affair has been "discovered". Why now? Well, the times are propitious - times warmed from abroad by the flames of Nixon and Watergate, the CIA and Chile; and at home by former Attorney-General Murphy's raid on the Canberra headquarters of ASIO (March 1973) and the current Royal Commission investigation into Australia's security and intelligence services.

A fair amount of what is contained in the Whitlam-Stubbs book can be read elsewhere, in the parliamentary speeches of Dr. Evatt, in the writings of Dr. John Burton (onetime Secretary of the Department of External Affairs - 1947 to 1950), Brian Fitzpatrick, W.J.Brown, Allan Dalziel, and Kylie Tennant.

Indeed at a time when it took tremendous courage to speak out against the Petrov Affair, that is back in the 1950's, it was the respective voices of Burton, Fitzpatrick and Evatt that were heard, to be joined later by that of the federal M.P. Eddie Ward whose consistent and pointed "muckraking" made him the nemesis of ASIO. And one must not forget a fine book that has been conveniently "forgotten" by many journalists, commentators, analysts, authors, etc, The Petrov Conspiracy Unmasked (1956), edited by the communist journalist W.J.Brown (this book was republished in 1973 but was totally ignored by the mass media, the literary and academic journals etc).

None of the foregoing is to decry Nest of Traitors. It is an excellent book drawing on a history thesis undertaken at Harvard University by Nicholas Whitlam, 1966-67. This initial work has been extended and supplemented by extensive interviews with the incredibly theatrical medical practitioner and onetime ASIO counterspy Dr. Michael Bialoguski, and Dr. John Burton (now Reader in International Relations, University College, London). Other important sources for the book are
the excellent investigation into the Petrov Affair by
journalist Evan Whitton (and published in the
National Times, September 1973) and, of course, the
nine volume transcript of the Royal Commission on
Espionage.

This transcript is a particularly odious document
which shows just how dangerous a Royal
Commission can be when it interferes in political
matters and, incidentally, places large question
marks against the reputations of a number of
members of the legal profession who comprised the
Commission, raising questions about the integrity of
the law when it plays at politics.

The authors (Whitlam is a merchant banker in
London, Stubbs a Canberra journalist) rightly
commence their investigation of the Petrov Affair
back in the immediate post-war years when the
Chifley Labor government created the ASIO hydra.
Here the early cold war influence of British
intelligence (MIS) upon the domestic policies of the
Chifley government is explored - courtesy of
material supplied by Dr. Burton.

Welcome is their analysis early in the book of the
character of Dr. Evatt, an analysis which grapples
with his contradictions and inconsistencies,
humanises him a great deal, supplementing and
modifying the valuable - but adulatory - work on
Evatt by Dalziel and Tennant.

For the rest of the book the story of ASIO intrigue
and political opportunism by the Menzies
government is well known to those who lived
through the Affair.

Italians in Australia. Paper presented to the
World Conference on Italian Immigration,
Rome, February 1975. (Obtainable from FILEF
18 Munro Street, Coburg, Victoria. 3068.
Reviewed by by Alastair Davidson.

The first wave of post-war migrants to Australia,
the "bloody Balts" who arrived in the late 'forties and
early 'fifties, were fleeing the old world for political
reasons. But many, far too many, were more pro-
German than pro-Russian, and confusing
nationality with politics, more pro-fascist than
anything else. Despite the rigors they faced as
foreigners breaking up a smug Anglo-Saxon (plus
Irish) homogeneity - in camps like "Riverslake" and
on the "Snowy", they merged into our society. They
learnt English, took up the Australian way of life, and
now, are almost indistinguishable from the "true
blues". In doing so they drove Australia to the right
politically - though, of course, not by themselves.
For the conservatives who rule Australia, they
provided a useful core of people who had seen that it
wasn't a God that had failed in communism, but that
it had always been a Demon possessing men.

The old chestnut about Menzies being the "grey-
eminence" behind the Affair is properly put into its
place. Sure, he used the Affair to further his own,
and his party's, political fortunes but the authors
rightly concentrate more on the activities of a select,
clandestine, group of self appointed custodians of
Australian democracy (christened by Burton as the
Gnomes of Melbourne), based in the Australian
intelligence community, who engineered Petrov's
defection (without any recourse to any
Parliamentary representative, ministerial or
otherwise) and as the authors suggest - and almost
conclusively prove - indulged in forgery and
conspiracy to defraud a nation when it came to
creating the top secret documents Petrov was
alleged to have stolen from the Russian Embassy.

The authors develop the point that Australia
experienced a strong McCarthyite period during the
'50's, a point that needs to be made since so many
commentators consistently ignore the facts and
look back at the period as a golden era mellowed by
the Churchillian glow of Menzies a man by the way
who emerges from this study deservedly tarnished
(a man who I feel is too well protected from serious
historical analysis by our savage overprotective laws
of libel).

Nest of Traitors is a timely vital book, especially
for the generation of Australians who did not
experience the fifties with its fears, its hatreds, and
the general attempt to stifle political dissent
characterised so much of the domestic policies of
successive Liberal governments.

To explain how they have fitted in we need to look
beyond the political explanation of an Australian
culture always a little to the right and welcoming
those devoted to private enterprise. We must also
remember that these people arrived when the
government-promoted infrastructure of Australian
capitalism - transport, vast schemes of hydro-
electrical development - was burgeoning. There
were plenty of jobs, plenty of money, and above all
relative isolation from the urban centres and the
classic place of capitalist production, the factory. All
these factors combined to make Australia a rather
pleasant place to be after the Old World - even for the
"Poms" who have always constituted the largest
migrant group.

In the middle 'fifties, a second wave of migrants
started to arrive, the "Wogs" from Southern Europe,
who were fleeing the old world for economic
reasons. Many of these were socialists, or had come
from countries where the working class is
traditionally committed to revolutionary socialist
parties, like Greece and Italy. They have never really
been assimilated; have congregated in
ghettoes like Carlton, Brunswick, Coburg; still
speak their own language, and even differ from the
"true blues" in their physical appearance. Because
of their relative isolation from the community they
did not affect it politically for many years. Occasionally, rather trite nonsense (and irritating nonsense) was written about how Australian eating and drinking habits had changed since the arrival of the Italians, etc. This only indicated how plain bloody discrimination had given way to patronising attitudes which allowed Italians to be restaurateurs or boxers, and Greeks to run fish 'n chip shops, but not to aspire to the jobs of the "real" Australians. Parenthetically, I recall being told by an Australian (who admired the Germans as "real good fighters") when I was migrating to Australia in 1958, that we were all being imported as slave labor so that real Australians could get ahead on our backs.

These migrants - the second wave which started to peter out in the mid-sixties - arrived just as Australia was caught up in the contradictions of the world market. Before that, we may agree with MacFarlane and others, peculiar conditions had ensured relatively good conditions for the workers. On these conditions had been built the myth of a lucky country, free from the ills of the Old World. When the second wave arrived the great schemes of development were closing down and the real development was in the urban centres, where they found out the reality of their luck in the factories of the imperialist controllers of Australian industry. Nearly all, despite their origins as peasants ended up (at least at first) in the factories. In particular the women were only freed from the misery of the rackrented houses of the industrial periphery to escape into some factory or other.

There is no possibility of a decent life - much less an escape from the contradictions of capitalism - for these people, whose condition has now been surveyed by Des Storer. Although his inquiry is into the Italian community, it holds mutatis mutandis for the others. First, he points out that "Italians form a significant population in a pluralistic Australian society in 1975."

The bulk of these people live in "working class" inner and middle area suburbs of "working class" quality. Areas like Coburg-Brunswick in Melbourne, where he interviewed 400 families, are almost ghettos (25,000 Italians live here in 11.5 square miles). 47.5 per cent of his interviewees were unskilled laborers. Only 18 per cent earned more than $100 a week. 60 per cent earned between $65 and $95 per week, while the average weekly earnings in Australia were $124. Storer writes: "All this data is collected, but only hints at problems Italians face in coming to live in Australia. They are forced to take low paid unpleasant work and to work long hours. Italian women must work to add to the family income. They tend to live in cheaper suburbs where they must renovate at high costs. All this is done often to give their children a chance to obtain better employment and more opportunities than they had. Has this happened?" He then goes on to show that they are blatantly discriminated against in education and social mobility and do not participate in Australian political life, even at the trade union level. His sources (1971) show that only seven non-anglo-saxons hold office in Victorian trade unions. His own survey reports: "The FILEF survey shows that while 40 per cent of the 400 Italian families had at least one member in a trade union, only one person was a shop steward and none were office holders in their unions". And, this is not because they don't want to be involved. On the contrary, it appears that Australian structures and attitudes are geared to keeping them out of the decision-making positions. For example, of the 169 persons refused Australian citizenship in 1966-1970, 155 were communists. The people whom they would lead if allowed, favor the ALP by 70 per cent if this survey is a guide.

This exclusion from political life extended to most other social functions: "Well over 80 per cent of families stated that none of their family ever use the following services - day nurseries, kindergartens, elderly citizens' clubs, home help services, meals on wheels, child endowment, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, maternity allowance benefits, mental health services, legal services, child welfare or youth clubs."

Yet, despite the radical segregation which they experienced they wanted Italian, that is, ethnic services of the same sort, not admission on Australian terms to the poor social facilities available in this country. Indeed, in their choice of schools - Roman Catholic - they showed a determination to maintain the social and cultural patterns of their past.

Des Storer's solutions follow fairly directly from these preferences. He argues for less nationalistic citizenship conditions; for free health and the interpreters to make it really available; for multi-lingual teaching and the systems to create cross-cultural awareness; and for the encouragement of participation by Italians in union and industrial activity. Above all, he urges an end to the paternalism of the present through direct aid by the government to the Italians so that they could organise themselves, "and advocate their own cause".

These suggestions are of course, all worthy and their implementation needed, but they are reformist. Moreover, they assume that a spontaneous consciousness of their "own cause" emerges. As marxist-leninists, we cannot agree with this position and we must ask ourselves what real activity have we been conducting in what is Australia's new proletariat - or at least constitutes a large part of it? So far, it appears to me that the lefty has indeed left the Italians and others to do their own thing - which may breed chauvinism and perhaps damage working class unity.