**Draft**

**Of Spooks and Imaginary Plots: ASIO and the 1970s Black Power Movement**

As a historian nowadays I get to be a detective without having to be a cop. And over the past ten years or so among the most interesting documents I have been trawling through are files that the misnamed *Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation* (ASIO) kept on the allegedly subversive elements of the Black Power movement in Redfern, Brisbane and Melbourne in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Federal Government of Billy McMahon became quite alarmed in December 1971 when the now defunct Weekend Australian newspaper, owned by Rupert Murdoch, published a major article about ‘Black Power in Australia’. As a result the federal Office of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra, headed by Nugget Coombes and Barrie Dexter (later head of Whitlam’s Dept of Aboriginal Affairs) requested that ASIO begin covert surveillance of certain Aboriginal activists said to be the leaders of the Black Power movement.

Among those who came under notice were myself, Paul Coe, Gary Williams, Denis Walker, Sam Watson, Bob and Kaye Bellear, Naomi Mayers, Chicka Dixon, Bruce McGuinness, Sol Bellear and Lyn Thompson. For at least the next ten years activists such as us, as well as a range of key Aboriginal organisations were subjected to intense covert scrutiny, including telephone taps, clandestine photographic surveillance and attempts to plant ASIO spies in our midst. The resultant extensive files that ASIO kept, like all government documents, become public when they are lodged with the National Archives after 30 years has elapsed. As a result, many of us who were under surveillance in those days can now peruse our files and discover many interesting things.

Even after thirty years it seems ASIO still thinks some information contained in them is too sensitive and as a result many pages have large areas of text blacked out. This usually involves the names of ASIO agents and civilians who were informing on us to the authorities. But there remains an extraordinary amount of detailed and interesting information (complete sometimes with surveillance photographs, taken in several instances from a camera concealed within a briefcase, just like in a James Bond movie). This information, whilst often unreliable hearsay and rumours, is sometimes very useful and often quite hilarious.

The ASIO files have proven to be a goldmine for me in terms of things I had forgotten I had been involved in. I never kept a diary in those days and ASIO has kindly provided me with detailed accounts of meetings I attended (complete with lists of attendees), rallies I spoke at and places I visited. And often ASIO's clandestinely assembled minutes of meetings were actually a better record than the officially recorded notes and minutes of some organisations. They were no good as photographers though .

Furthermore, the ASIO files clearly show just how tight-knit and effective a group we in the Redfern Black Power group really were. I am amazed when I realise reading ASIO files just how well-organised we were, and the amount of political activity we were involved in was spectacular by today's pathetic standards. In many of the files on the Redfern group ASIO is seen commenting on the extreme difficulty of getting a ‘plant’ into the inner leadership circle of the Redfern Black Power group. In fact ASIO admits that they were never ultimately able to infiltrate the group because of the tight security that we had in our organisation.

The funny bits include many files and the comic antics of both spooks and politicians as they drove themselves crazy trying to get to the bottom of the great ‘Black Power Death List’. The problem was that such a list never existed and was merely a figment of the overactive imagination of Aboriginal Senator Neville Bonner. That did not stop ASIO and the Commonwealth Police mounting an extensive and expensive investigation. At one stage in the farce Federal Attorney General Ivor Greenwood announced in Parliament that the Black Power movement had drawn up a ‘death list’ of politicians and bureaucrats. When we in the movement strongly denied that any such list existed and we challenged Greenwood to produce the alleged list, his lame response was, “well, it’s not a list that’s written down’. In the long term a secret Commonwealth Police report found that no such death list had ever existed, but only after vast amounts of money were wasted on the investigation and politicians and senior public servants had been given round-the-clock police protection for over a year.

But at the end of the day the amazing thing is how mundane and boring the ASIO files are. Too often they consist merely of tidbits of gossip, rumour and newspaper cuttings. They show an ‘intelligence’ service that was essentially incompetent and whose primary obsession about ‘Communism’ usually clouded their assessments and judgement. In fact the greatest fear of all about the Black Power movement had to do with our alleged associations with ‘influential’ members of the Communist Party of Australia. Some in government and ASIO seemed to believe that the whole Black Power Aboriginal self-determination movement was simply a Communist plot.

I am in the process of writing a detailed historic account of ASIO surveillance of Aboriginal political activists that began in 1951 when Ray Peckam and Faith Bandler were the first blacks to have the dubious honour of gaining and ASIO file. It is a long and interesting history as it reveals exactly who the white establishment have regarded as the truly effective Aboriginal political activists were over the past 60 years. You can be assured they weren’t the Noel Pearsons or the Warren Mundines of their day.

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