Book Review by Rowan Cahill*


The Protest Years and The Secret Cold War complete the ‘official history’ of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) that began in 2014 with the publication of The Spy Catchers by David Horner, dealing with the organisation’s history from inception in 1949 to 1963. The official history project was generously financed by ASIO. At the outset, Horner assured readers that he and subsequent project authors had/would have unrestricted access to ASIO’s archives. The footnoting and contents of the three volumes attest to the archival richness drawn upon. In a sense, Horner had an easier task than the two authors who followed him; his slice of history had been well furrowed by scholars, while the past he dealt with was relatively distant.

In The Protest Years, John Blaxland takes the ASIO story from 1963 to 1975— the Vietnam War years and the introduction of a lottery style selective system of conscription. It was a time of increasingly vocal and militant dissent, student protest, trade union militancy, effective mobilisation by minorities, the development of a significant activist left intelligentsia based in the universities, social movements, increasing disaffection with Cold War political and cultural conservatism, the advent of offset printing which facilitated and encouraged the publication and circulation of dissident and minority views, and the rise and fall of the first Labor Federal government in twenty-two years.

In terms of content, though not structure, the book has two almost equal sections: the Vietnam War years to 1972, when Australia’s involvement in the war ended following the election of the Whitlam Labor government; and the turbulent period from then to the fall of that government in 1975, years in which the relationship between ASIO and the Federal government was traumatic, the organisation besieged and kept at a distance by a government that did not trust it.

For ASIO, the protest and social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were all part of a plot by the Communist Party of Australia. The complexities of a society and culture undergoing significant changes, and an increasingly dissident youth population, were beyond the understanding of ASIO’s grab-bag of former military personnel, ex-police, its military culture and its anti-intellectualism.

Blaxland provides an exhaustive account of ASIO’s dealings with these complexities, urged on by Liberal-Country Party governments hopeful of finding evidence of treachery and sedition. Within universities, the emergence and growth of critical and interdisciplinary studies, and the infancy of what would later morph into post-modern discourses, were framed as attempts by Marxists to march through the academy, turning universities into ‘red bases’ as the prelude to revolution. As
Blaxland shows, overall it was an expensive and wasteful deployment of resources, not without internal criticism, and ultimately corrosive upon the organisation.

The cosy and partisan relationship ASIO had developed since 1950 with successive Liberal-Country Party governments, gave way following the December 1972 election of the Whitlam Labor government to one which ASIO personnel regarded as an “unduly intrusive” approach to the running of the organisation. In part this was based on Labor’s justifiable suspicions and distrust of the organisation, party elements and allies long the target of ASIO investigations and intrusions. But as Blackman explains, it was also part of a legitimate and genuine perception that the organisation needed to be reformed and modernised in order to function in an increasingly complex political, economic, and technological world, rapidly changing as the simplicities and divisions of the Cold War gasped their last breaths.

As Blaxland shows, the reform process began earlier, initiated by Director-General Peter Barbour during his short term of office (1970-1975). An in-house appointment, Barbour was cut from a different cloth to that of many of his ASIO colleagues. While ex-military, he was also well-educated, scholarly, adept in Latin, German, French, and Japanese. His ambitious reforms aimed at ditching the organisation’s militarised/police culture, its political partisanship, and the anti-intellectual aspects of the ASIO culture. He also sought to end the organisation’s opposition to the employment of women, and embrace modern technologies, in particular computers.

Which did not go down well with everyone in the organisation. Such reforms, according to Blackman, required leadership abilities and style that Barbour lacked; government intervention was required. The Whitlam government stepped up to the mark, beginning in 1973 with raids ordered by Attorney-General Lionel Murphy on ASIO offices. He was in pursuit of evidence to substantiate the Labor leadership’s distaste for the organisation’s methods, its right-wing biases, and in particular evidence ASIO had been sympathetic to Australian-based Croatian nationalist extremists and associated terrorism at home and abroad. Before losing office in 1975, the Whitlam government established a Royal Commission (1974-1977) to enquire into Australia’s intelligence and security services and make wide ranging recommendations regarding matters like organisation, operations, accountability. NSW Supreme Court Justice Robert Hope was appointed Royal Commissioner, and followed up again in 1983 with a second Commission addressing similar issues.

The Secret Cold War completes the ASIO trilogy, covering the years 1975-1989. In this Blaxland is joined by Rhys Crawley. They detail the efforts by ASIO to modernise, variously implement the recommendations of the two Hope Commissions, and adapt to a changing political world in which the old spectre of ‘communism’ which originally fuelled its existence, finally disappeared with the official end of the Cold War in 1989, and terrorism emerged as a significant political and security threat. It was an unsettling process, and ASIO went through five successive Director-Generals. As part of this process, ASIO finally faced up to something it had put in the too hard/too unpleasant basket since the 1950s: the strong possibility it had been penetrated by Soviet moles, and that a number of operations against Soviet espionage in Australia may have been compromised in the past. It was a sensitive matter, and while there were leads, no hard evidence was found. But fingers were pointed, and ASIO tightened its internal security procedures. ASIO did not want this matter included in this history, and the authors had to insist.
Accepting this trilogy is the history of an organisation, not an argument for or against its existence, the authors have done a commendable job. They have given a human face to an organisation that works in the realms of secrecy and the clandestine. They have been critical, either directly, or gently, pointing to some of the organisation’s shortcomings and failures. My reading leaves me with the sense of an organisation that is difficult to reform, difficult to make accountable, expensive to properly resource, and susceptible to partisan political use. As to whether it is up to the challenges and complexities of the 21st century, time will tell. Revelations in 2013 that Chinese hackers had outfoxed firewalls or the lack thereof and accessed the blueprints of ASIO’s new Canberra headquarters during construction by contractors, forcing a multi-million dollar internal reconfiguration of the building, was either an embarrassing oversight by ASIO, or raises serious questions about its current and future efficacy.

ROWAN CAHILL

* University of Wollongong

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