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ASIO, the Aboriginal
Movement and Me

ASIO, the Aboriginal Movement and Me **by Prof. Uncle Gary Foley**

I seem to have first come to the notice of ASIO in March 1970, but I did not realise this until more than three decades later when my ASIO file became available under the thirty-year rule. Thus I first became aware my file was available when in 2002 a French history student from the University of Lyon advised me that he had come across it while doing research with me.

For the ten years since then I have at different times been bemused, excited, angry, and appalled by the annual additions to my file that I read each 1 January when they are released by the National Archives. Unlike some whose ASIO files are bulky for a year or two during their days of student activism and then fizzle out as they get older, mine seems to keep growing. So far I have been entertained by the fear and paranoia generated for ASIO in the 1970s by me and my friends in the Black Power movement and I am at present reading about my antics against Malcolm Fraser in the demonstrations at the 1982 Commonwealth Games. At times all this makes for jolly reading and at other times induces both sadness and anger as one figures out who those were who dobbed us in or asked for ASIO investigations into us.

There is not just my file. My name appears in the files of many other individuals, organisations and events. For example, ASIO maintained a voluminous file on the Aboriginal Embassy and kept files on numerous Aboriginal organisations. So keeping up with ASIO's monitoring of my friends and me has become a serious field of study for me. In fact, significant parts of this chapter were originally part of my doctoral thesis on the Black Power movement and the Aboriginal Embassy.

So this chapter looks not only at ASIO's surveillance of me, personally, but also the broader context of ASIO's interest in, and surveillance of, the Aboriginal political movement generally. This will provide a better understanding of ASIO's specific obsessive preoccupation with possible communist infiltration or manipulation of the Aboriginal rights movement from 1951 till the end of the Cold War.

ASIO AND THE ABORIGINAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In a letter written by Sir Charles Spry in 1962 to the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, the ASIO chief spelt out his organisation's concerns about 'communist peneration' of the Aboriginal groups. The

letter pointed out to Hasluck that ASIO regarded communist activity among Aboriginal peoples as being directly related to the 1928 World Congress of the Comintern, which has detailed the 'fundamental tasks of the proletarian dictatorship'. These 'tasks' included:

The recognition and right of all nations irrespective of race to complete self-determination, that is self-determination inclusive of the right to state separation.

And:

Every assistance ... of the formerly oppressed territories, dominions, and colonies, with the object of transferring them to socialist lines, so that a durable basis may be laid for complete national equality.

Spry pointed out that an edition of the CPA newspaper in 1931 had contained an article titled 'Communist Party of Australia Fight for Aborigines: Draft Programme of Struggle Against Slavery'. The article set forth fourteen demands and Spry's letter quoted Demand 14 in full:

The handing over to the Aborigines of large tracts of water and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads etc., to become one or more independent aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the aborigines all central, northern and north-west Australia to enable the aborigines to develop their native pursuits. These aboriginal republics to be independent of Australia or other foreign powers. To have the rights to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, Governments, industries and in every way be independent of imperialism.

Reading this one can imagine the fear Australian governments had that *their* Aborigines might be exposed to such subversive notions as these. Nevertheless, Spry continues by asserting that when the Communist Party in the Soviet Union had, at its 22nd Congress in 1961, declared its support for 'all people who are fighting for the complete abolition of the colonial system', the Australian communists had begun referring to the Aborigines as a 'national minority' and had begun attacking the Australian Government's policy of assimilation.

Spry, in his capacity as Director-General of ASIO, had thereby concluded that the 'CPA now regards the aborigines and their problems as an issues to be developed and used by the Party for political purposes, for the furtherance of its own programme for political power in Australia'.

Here then was the prism through which Australian governments and their security agencies viewed Aboriginal dissent from the 1950s until very recently. All Aboriginal protest was interpreted in the context of the international struggle against communism, which as it happened was a convenient way to ignore the legitimate claims of the Aboriginal peoples themselves.¹

Aboriginal activists came under the notice of ASIO as a result of the organisation's preoccupation with the perceived communist threat in the early 1950s. Melbourne activist Bill Onus, along with New South Wales based Ray Peckham and Faith Bandler, were the first black political activists to gain the dubious distinction of having ASIO files opened on them. In the case of Onus, who had married an avowed Scottish communist, it was a negative report against him by ASIO that led to the US Government refusing him a visa to visit the US in 1952. Onus had been invited to America by no less than Walt Disney himself, but even that was insufficient to surmount the obstacle of an ASIO assessment that alleged Onus was a 'fellow-traveler' of communists.

Ray Peckham and Faith Bandler came to the attention of ASIO when both attended a 'Berlin Youth Festival' in the then communist East Germany in 1951. Peckham went on to become a trade unionist and one of the few Aboriginal activists ever to become a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Consequently his is one of the largest files so far assembled by ASIO on Aboriginal activists. In an ASIO letter in 1965, from no less an official than Director-General Charles Spry, Peckham is said to have 'first come to notice' when he represented the Aboriginal Rights Council at the Berlin Youth Festival; at the time he was an employee of the Communist Party of Australia. According to Spry, ASIO's interest in Peckham stemmed from his having undertaken 'political training' in Moscow at the Institute of Social Sciences, which ASIO regarded as 'a political training school' for 'overseas Communist party members'.

Faith Bandler, who in the 1960s became one of Australia's most famous agitators for Aboriginal rights during the campaign for the 1967 referendum, was also accused by ASIO of being a CPA member. Even if Bandler was a party member for a short period in the 1950s, the most important question should be why ASIO was so concerned about communist influence on the Aboriginal resistance.

1 Editor note: It is worth noting that ASIO's remit is explicitly to monitor 'threats to Australia's [alleged] sovereignty'

During the 1950s the Australian Government was distributing material through its overseas embassies that painted a carefully contrived but false image of its policies on Aboriginal people. This propaganda portrayed Australia as a racially harmonious society where Aboriginal people were being gently 'assimilated' into the broader Australian community.

This was during a period in history when the world was still coming to terms with the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany just a decade or so earlier. Furthermore, it was an era when many former colonial powers were divesting (or being divested of) their former colonies.

These factors no doubt were part of the Australian Government's determination that no news of Aboriginal political activity should be allowed to disrupt their carefully controlled international campaign. As well, in context of those times, the great fear that communist agitation *might make the natives restless*, was the apparent explanation of ASIO's interest in Aboriginal activists who had any form of communist associations.

There is little evidence that the Australian Government was aware of the inherent contradictions in their reasoning. If the Aboriginal people were perfectly happy to comply with the imposed process of assimilation as the government propaganda suggested, then how could they be susceptible to external communist agitation? Nevertheless, ASIO's interest in possible communist influences in the domestic Aboriginal political movements continued for at least the next thirty years.

But despite the intensification of ASIO's interest during the 1950s and 1960s, especially with the advent of the first national Aboriginal political organisation, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Affairs, the security agency found remarkably little hard evidence of communist infiltration, manipulation, or influence in the local Aboriginal networks. This did not prevent frequent allegations and assertions by some connected with the intelligence community that eminent Aboriginal leaders such as Pastor Doug Nicholls, poet Kath Walker, and Charles Perkins were either communist-influenced or communist dupes.

In 1958 an ASIO report titled 'Communist Party of Australia Interest in the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement', the security agency effectively declared the Council a communist front organisation before it had even become operational. The report's opening paragraph reads:

It is expected that the formation of a Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement at a conference in Adelaide ... will provide the Communist Party of Australia with a further important target for penetration and control.

This report concludes by asserting that the early part of the campaign that led to the 1967 referendum was communist inspired and directed, as were protests against mining on Aboriginal lands and the call for Aboriginal people to be eligible for child welfare payments and the old age pension.

Today these ideas seem bizarre, especially given that most of the founders of FCAA were conservative Christians such as Presbyterian Church Moderator Dr Charles Duguid and Pastor Doug Nicholls. But ASIO had actually regarded Nicholls as a suspected dupe of communists anyway, such was the strange world that they lived in. ASIO was so preoccupied with its obsessive quest to uncover imagined communist subversion that they clearly denied any ability of Aboriginal people to think for themselves. This was a recurring theme with almost all Australian government agencies throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The Aboriginal Embassy protest action first came under the notice of Australia's security agencies within hours of it being established on the lawns of [Old] Parliament House in the darkness of 26 January 1972. At eight minutes past six on the morning of 27 January, ASIO headquarters received a telex message from its Canberra office advising that the protest had been set up and seeking urgent information on the four young black men present on the lawns.

Although Aboriginal organisations, especially the Redfern Black Power group, had triggered ASIO and NSW Special Branch² attention earlier, after the setting up of the Tent Embassy, surveillance increased. One of those investigations was triggered in June 1972 when a report appeared in a Sydney newspaper claiming that the organising committee for the forthcoming 14 July Black Moratorium demonstration (dominated by the Redfern Black Power group) had invited famous American Black Power activist Angela Davis to visit Australia.

In Melbourne *The Age* newspaper had reported that not only had Angela Davis been invited, but also two of the founders of the US Black Panther Party, Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale. This was not the first time that

² Editor note: One of the now defunct state-based political police units, since subsumed into state police forces like the Joint Counter-Terror Teams (specialised state police working with ASIO and the AFP).

Australian government officials and security agencies had been confronted with this sort of situation. On two separate occasions the previous year similar scenarios had created concern in government circles.

The first occasion had been on 24 March 1971 when the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* reported that a 'group of fifteen men and women', described as 'Black Power workers', were due to arrive in Queensland to visit Aboriginal communities for the purpose of 'fact-finding' and 'explaining how black militancy works'. This report prompted an outraged letter from Neville Bonner³ to Prime Minister McMahon, who in turn asked his department to advise him what his response might be. The department firstly sent an urgent 'confidential' communique on 30 April to the Australian Embassy in Washington to find out if any radical black Americans had applied for Australian visas, and if any had, their applications should be 'withheld pending clearance' from Canberra.

At the same time the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet sought advice from the recently formed federal government agency, the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA). The CAA Secretary, Barrie Dexter, responded with a letter outlining his understanding of the newly emerging Black Power movement in which he speculated that if a visit was impending, then it must have something to do with Aboriginal activist Bruce McGuinness, whom he described as 'an extremist'. Dexter concluded that whilst it was 'difficult to gauge the degree of support ... among Aboriginals' for Black Power, in his opinion the concept 'had not yet impinged to any great extent on the great bulk of Aborigines'.

Ultimately someone in the Australian Government must have discovered the innocuous nature of the visitors, because Prime Minister McMahon was able to write to Neville Bonner reassuring him that in fact this was a group of Christian workers.

The group would consist of 'an American group of multiracial Christian youth' and the trip was being arranged jointly by the Australian Council of Churches and the United Presbyterian Church of the USA. The group was coming to Australia to discuss race relations with 'young Australians in a Christian perspective'.

They were hardly a bunch of terrorists, but the uninformed reaction to word of their visit illustrates the occasionally irrational response of Australians to non-white people who might in some way be 'political'. Not unlike certain aspects of Australia today.

3 Editor note: Bonner was the first Aboriginal person to be a minister in federal parliament.

Another significant investigation at that time had been requested by the Council of Aboriginal Affairs. Today Mr Dexter presents a more benign image of the CAA in his memoirs, but it is apparent from correspondence in 1972 between Dexter and the Regional Director of ASIO in Canberra that the CAA was very concerned about the alleged connections between the Communist Party and the Redfern Black Power group.

On 3 November 1972, some six months after the removal of the Aboriginal Embassy from the lawns of Parliament House, Dexter, as Director of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, wrote an extraordinary letter to Colin Brown, the Regional Director of ASIO in Canberra. The fact that Dexter addresses Brown as 'Colin' indicates a level of familiarity that is unusual in ASIO correspondence files. Given Dexter's previous career as a diplomat and Australian ambassador, one can believe he was very comfortable in his relations with members of the security and intelligence fraternity.

In the letter, Mr Dexter states that the 'core' of the former Tent Embassy had continued to operate as an 'informal grouping' functioning under the name of the 'Black Caucus'. Dexter advised that the Black Caucus 'seem to be the most cohesive grouping of urbanised Aborigines' and said that members included Bobbi Skyes, Paul Coe, myself, Gary Williams and Billy Craigie of Sydney. Associates of the group include Denis Walker and Len Watson of Brisbane and Pat Eatock of Canberra.

Dexter then got to the point by saying that he had 'recently heard' that the Black Caucus might be 'under the domination' of the BWIU, by which he presumably meant the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation, then under the leadership of Jack Mundey, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens. Mr Dexter pointed out he had 'no evidence of this' but nevertheless:

I wonder if your people have any information on this. I would not ask them to undertake investigations to prove or disprove it if they do not have the information readily at hand.

This is an unusual request in that Dexter does not seem to be seeking a formal investigation but is rather informally asking an apparently close friend to check on a rumour. But because Dexter makes no real mention in his memoirs of his relationship with certain officers of ASIO, we can only speculate as to the nature of any such associations. What is clear, however, is that the three men who comprised the Council of Aboriginal Affairs remained cautious about their dealings with members of the Black Power

collectives, and were much more comfortable dealing with those they considered to be the 'real Aborigines' in the Northern Territory. The ASIO files merely confirm that this was the case.

Examining the ASIO files released since 1998, it is very apparent that the key people in the Aboriginal movement who were regarded as most dangerous by police and security agencies were Paul Coe, Denis Walker and myself. My own file is largely uninteresting because it consists mostly of newspaper clippings, idle gossip, and inane conversations recorded on other people's telephones. The surveillance photographs are furtive but flattering if one appreciates daggy fashion. Several of those photographs are of me entering and leaving a doorway, and as I tell my students, anyone can be made to look suspicious if you photograph them with a telephoto lens as they enter or leave a doorway. But to the mind of a surveillance-oriented person they would have been very exciting.

But ASIO got it very wrong if they thought these photographs of me were evidence of a Black Power-communist plot. These photographs were taken of me entering and leaving the Dixon Street HQ of the CPA in Sydney in late 1971. One of the photographs shows me carrying what ASIO probably considered 'subversive' material, but the truth was much more mundane.

What was actually happening was that I had asked Noel Hazard, photographer with the CPA newspaper *Tribune*, to teach me how to develop photographs and he had kindly assented and told me to come into the *Tribune* office where he had a darkroom. Thus, rather than attending the CPA headquarters for my political instructions (which is what ASIO assumed) I was simply learning a handy new skill from Noel Hazard, who was a close friend of many Aboriginal activists at the time. Indeed, it was Noel Hazard who drove the four Aboriginal men to Canberra on the night of 26 January 1972 when they established the legendary Aboriginal Embassy.

Therein resides the basic mistake that ASIO made in their interpretation of the Black Power movement and our relationship with other external political activists, especially those associated with the CPA. While ASIO chose to interpret our association as evidence of CPA manipulation of the Black movement, they failed to realise that most of the close association was due to pure and simple friendship. As we Redfern activists developed political links with external groups we came to know and respect many of these white activists who then become our close friends. We admired the leaders of the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation and became good friends with Bob Pringle and Joe Owens in particular. We did not judge

our white friends on whether they were communists or not, but rather on the quality of their personal character. Thus there was never any question of them (communist or otherwise) trying to influence or manipulate us because our relationships were based on mutual respect. This was a difficult notion for ASIO agents to grasp because like most of Australia they had come to believe the tabloid inspired idea that because we were Black Power we were therefore black racists who hated white people and therefore could never form friendships with white people. The lunacy of their logic was that, despite thinking we were black racists, they still believed that we were taking orders from white communists.

Another contradiction I noticed when perusing my ASIO file was the level of incompetence and amateurism on the one hand, yet on the other the sheer beauty at times in the recording and revelation of details. I now know the names of all the people who attended hundreds of meetings I was at from 1970 through till 1973, and I know in detail what was on the agenda at all those meetings, happily, thanks to a dedicated band of stenographers/agents who dutifully recorded all this information and made sure it was there for me to discover some thirty years later.

Now having said that ASIO was basically incompetent, I will provide an example of an occasion they got it right.

In 1972 in the lead up to the Black Moratorium demonstration to be held in July, ASIO had maintained its covert surveillance of the embassy tents and certain people associated it with the protest. The main concern of government appeared to be monitoring evidence of communist involvement and/or manipulation, and trying to contain or counter negative media coverage internationally. These seem to be among the primary concerns expressed in a secret ASIO report on the embassy dated 22 June.

The report summarised the protest to date, noting that the tents had been of particular embarrassment during February when they had been in sight of two visiting dignitaries, President Suharto of Indonesia and US Chief of Armed Forces General William Westmoreland. It also noted that both Soviet and Chinese communist media were reporting on the embassy in Moscow and Peking, and that Russian diplomats from the Russian Embassy in Canberra had visited the Tent Embassy. But in its conclusion the ASIO report not only clears the embassy protest of communist manipulation, but also makes a reasonably accurate summary of the protest so far, and is worth quoting in full:

The initiative and basic support for the 'Embassy' appears to have arisen from the efforts of young New South Wales Aborigines. Although it is apparent that they have had support from other Aboriginal groups and white organisations, some of security interest, the 'Embassy' would appear to be fundamentally an Aboriginal-directed protest measure which aims to obtain publicity and recognition for the *alleged* [my italics] injustices Aborigines are subjected to under existing conditions especially in the Land Rights issue.

Thus despite the bad grammar and minor qualifications, the ASIO report essentially acknowledges that this was an entirely Aboriginal conceived, controlled and directed political action, free of any external manipulation from communists or anyone else. This would not be the first or last time that ASIO reports would try to spell out to government officials that the Black Power and land rights movements were genuine Aboriginal community-grown and sustained political movements.

My own file reveals the remarkable amount of political activity that my friends and I in the Redfern Black Caucus were engaged in, despite our growing commitment to running the community organisations that we were establishing throughout this period. The files show that we Aboriginal activists were involved in political activities across a diverse range of issues from anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, through to a key role in the anti-apartheid movement and speaking out in the campaign against foreign (US) bases in Australia. All this was in addition to the major land rights rallies we organised nationally which rattled the McMahon government. Later in the 1980s the files reveal the paranoia of security agencies regarding the activities of myself and Bruce McGuinness when we managed to breach the tight security surrounding the 1981 CHOGM in Melbourne, as well as close monitoring of me and Queensland activist Denis Walker during the 1982 Commonwealth Games demonstrations in Brisbane.

And that is not even taking into account the time spent partying and drinking for which the Black Power activists were also quietly renowned. It seems most of our most outrageous acts of minor vandalism (throwing black paint over statues of Captain Cook) and campaigns of terror (nocturnally spraying land rights graffiti in public places) went almost entirely unnoticed by ASIO. Yet our appearance at anti-war or anti-apartheid rallies would generate a flurry of paperwork as agents telexed in their reports (note for young people: different sort of text messages in those days). Versions of these reports would be sent to regional and

national offices of ASIO and copies would be placed in the files of the people named. Thus providing me with interesting information about the wide range of activities in which we in the Black Caucus were involved.

Despite the fact that my file contains many pages where names of agents and informers have been blacked out, it is often not too difficult to figure out who some of the informants were. Some were a surprise, like a former father-in-law, and others were not unexpected. A few who dobbed us in were acting out of malice, and often they were reporting out of concern for our welfare. So there is no point in bearing any grudges, not least because most of those who dobbed are now dead. If I was a religious person I would probably think that was divine retribution.

I want to conclude by examining two of the more ridiculous aspects of surveillance by Australian security agencies. The first involves the nature of the files that are ultimately released to public scrutiny after thirty years has elapsed. In all of the files I have examined, including my own, it is obvious there are large gaps in the information contained within them. In some instances this is because all files released to the National Archives of Australia (NAA) have a list of 'exemptions' included at the beginning. In the first volume of my ASIO file is a notice saying that under Section 33 (1) (a) of the *Archives Act 1983* certain documents have been withheld on the grounds that they contain 'information or matters the disclosure of which could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the security, defence, or international relations of the Commonwealth'.⁴

Now while I find it strangely flattering to think that some minor political escapade of mine committed forty years ago might still be considered a potential danger to the Commonwealth of Australia. I nevertheless am perplexed by the possibility. This further attests to the bizarre nature of security organisations that seem to be capable of sensing dangers that sometimes don't exist. Another aspect of the files provided to the archives is that many have large areas blacked out, presumably to hide the identity of agents and informers. The fact that most of these former agents and informers are probably long dead does not seem to deter the censors with the black pen. But sometimes they take that to an even more ridiculous level, such as a document that appears in my file with almost the entire page blacked out apart from the heading 'Communist Party of Australia' and eleven words saying I was due to arrive in Brisbane. It prompts one to ask, 'Why bother to include it in the file if it is all blacked out?'

4 Editor note: Such laws give us good reason to believe that these extremely secretive security agencies such as ASIO would only release information to the public which portrays them in a certain light which they see as fitting their goals.

Another aspect that both amused and irritated me was that I noticed in my file (as well as in the files of most of my Aboriginal associates) that ASIO had great difficulty in obtaining first-hand information about our little Black Power collective in Redfern. Indeed, in one report where ASIO was asked to investigate possible communist infiltration of our group, their final report stated that the 'Redfern Black Caucus' had such tight security measures that not even ASIO could penetrate it, let alone any communists. On the other hand, it irked me to discover thirty years later that most of the information gained by ASIO about me was gathered in surveillance and phone taps of loose-lipped white political associates of ours who seemed too frequently to shoot their mouths off. This makes some of the transcripts of telephone taps on some of the myriad white Trotskyist groups of that era very interesting reading indeed. Among other things it reveals how amateurish some groups were when it came to security at a time when it was blatantly obvious that they could expect to be under ASIO surveillance.

The final tale probably sums up my low opinion of the perspicacity of the agents who were assigned to shadow us. Reading through my ASIO file I came across a page that was a report of a telephone 'intercept' (wiretap) that said that a certain woman from Brisbane had called a number in Sydney looking for me. The following page was a report that this woman had now spoken to me and that I had told her I was coming to Brisbane and going to Gympie. According to the report I had asked this woman if she was interested in coming to Gympie. The details contained in the report make it clear it was a full transcript of a taped intercept, and the woman and I ended up agreeing to meet in Brisbane and then go to Gympie for three days.

Unbeknownst to me, this woman in Brisbane was a member of the Communist Party and someone in ASIO decided that this was an interesting possible political connection between the CPA and the Black Power movement. Over the next week there were a series of telexes and reports advising of the details of my flight arrangements and speculation on the purpose of my trip. Then there is a report advising of my impending arrival and the fact that I would be met by the woman in question. That report states that if this woman and I have enough money we will leave for Gympie immediately, and then enigmatically it says, 'Reason for the Gympie trip is not known at this stage'. The final communique reports my departure from Brisbane after leaving the house of Denis Walker, a 'known residence of a number of coloured militants'.

When I had first read this series of documents in my ASIO file I was quite perplexed. I remembered this woman and I remembered the nature and purpose of our trip to Gympie, and it certainly had nothing to do with politics as ASIO had imagined. This had been a romantic liaison and nothing else, yet ASIO agents had convinced themselves of some ulterior political motive. This illustrated to me yet again the incompetence and apparent stupidity of people who are tapping phones and actually hearing the conversations but are still incapable of realising that the conversation is about sex, not politics.

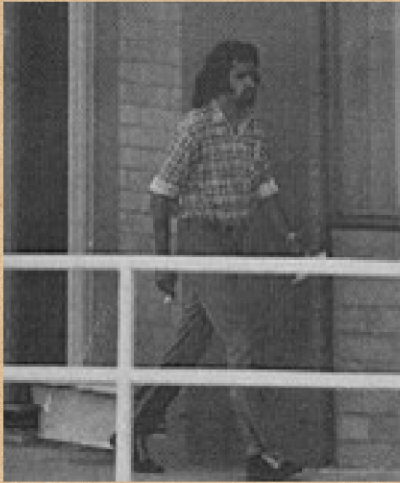
Mercifully, in those days we were probably more of a danger to ourselves than in any real danger from ASIO.



Text from Foley's chapter in *Dirty Secrets: Our ASIO Files*, 2014. Edited by Meredith Burgmann

Made on occupied Wurundjeri country during this moment of increased militancy and state repression, 2026.

Glory to the martyrs and Elders of this ongoing struggle for the land's rightful return!



"...the 'Redfern Black Caucus' had such tight security measures that not even ASIO could penetrate it, let alone any communists. On the other hand, it irked me to discover thirty years later that most of the information gained by ASIO about me was gathered in surveillance and phone taps of loose-lipped white political associates of ours who seemed too frequently to shoot their mouths off..."

