During the week some attention was given in Parliament to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, whose task it is to protect the national security of Australia ... the body charged with the task of countering espionage and subversion:

The rare exchange on the organisation -- generally known as "Asio" -- was brought about by a question by Dr. J.F. Cairns, the Labour member for Yarra, who claimed to have knowledge that the Security Organisation had a record of a conversation between himself and another person, a national serviceman. In the ensuing reply by the Attorney-General, Mr. Bowen, and in further debate some interesting points emerged about the powers and status of the Organisation, which I would like to discuss in this talk tonight.

Mr. Bowen -- the Minister responsible for "Asio" -- denied that the Security Service spied or eavesdropped on the member for Yarra in the circumstances that he had alleged. In doing this, the Attorney-General departed to some extent from a practice that had been observed throughout the 19-year history of the Organisation -- that is, a refusal to publicly discuss the operations of the Organisation, and a refusal to deal in detail with security questions by either confirming or denying them.

The point here, of course, is that even a flat denial of some allegation or other about the operations of "Asio" can emerge as a confirmation of some aspect of security techniques or practices.

Let me deal with this point first. There is a rather ironic ring about the periodical question coming to us in the House from some members of the Opposition: alleging instances of "spying" and "plugging" for political reasons.

When the security service originated in early 1949 the then Prime Minister had some interesting things to say about the confidential nature of the security service activities, which has remained an inviolable aspect to this day.

In 1949 the then Prime Minister, answering a question about the scope of the service, said -- "I am certain that no gaps will be left in our security measures. As the honourable member knows, it is not usual to discuss the detailed activities of a security service. Much of the value of such a service lies in the fact that it works quietly. Members of the Organisation should not be unduly prominent at cocktail parties, but should devote themselves to the tasks allotted to them".

The author of those words was Mr. Ben Chifley, the Labour Prime Minister of Australia at that time. So the "security" of the security service itself was laid down, clearly and unequivocally, by a Labour Prime Minister.
In partially departing this week from the long-established practice of neither confirming or denying questions about security, the Attorney-General made it clear he did so in very special circumstances, and that his action was not to be regarded as a precedent.

I will recall to your minds at this point that the allegations had received wide publicity and had been made at a high level - by Dr. Cairns, who recently failed by only a few votes in the ballot for leadership of his party. So there was some measure of public disquiet, and the Attorney-General went on to deny that the telephone of the member for Yarra had been tapped by the security service. Nor had he as Attorney-General received a request from the security organisation to tap the telephone of any member of the Parliament.

Some comments made on the scope of security, and some questions and views put in Parliament, suggest that special categories of people should be declared as being immune from the operations of security. The suggestion is that politicians be immune from security surveillance. Why? Why should politicians be exempt, any more than say, members of the judiciary, magistrates, ministers of religion, doctors, lawyers and so on. Security surveillance in any case arises only under the most serious of circumstances, and I do not think that politicians, any more than these other groups, should be exempt. In a democracy like Australia, security operates under the most rigid of controls to prevent any misuse of powers. There is a Director-General, a man of the highest integrity, and political responsibility rests with the Attorney-General and continues on to the Prime Minister himself.

The episode, which was something of a cause celebre as spy dramas go, served to indicate the unrelenting attempts of Soviet intelligence to penetrate Western institutions in attempts to gain official secret information. It served as a warning that the 'legal apparatus' of a foreign mission - the Russian embassy - was the source of illegal espionage operations; as it had been proved to be the case in other countries at other times.
The functions of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation are not secret. They are laid down in the Act, from which I will quote to give an indication of the scope of the organisation's work.

The Organisation is to "obtain, correlate and evaluate intelligence relevant to security, and, at the discretion of the Director-General, to communicate any such intelligence to such persons, and in such manner as the Director-General considers to be in the interests of security.

The Organisation is also to "advise Ministers, where the Director-General is satisfied that it is necessary or desirable to do so, in respect of matters relevant to security, in so far as those matters relate to departments of state administered by them or to authorities of the Commonwealth established by or under acts administered by them".

The powers of the Organisation relating to the interception of telephone conversations were laid down in the Telephonic Communications (Interception) Act of 1960 — an Act to prohibit phone-tapping except where specially authorised in the interests of the nation's security.

Clear safeguards were written into this measure to ensure that the strictest of controls was maintained on use of the powers conferred. For a start, stiff penalties were laid down to be inflicted on any person convicted of illegal phone tapping. Before the security organisation can act to listen in to a phone call, it has to provide detailed reasons to the highest of authorities. The Director-General of Security has to make a request to the Attorney-General. The Attorney-General has to feel certain that the case involves activities prejudicial to the security of the Commonwealth — or reasonable suspicion of this. The Attorney-General has to feel satisfied that tapping the phone concerned would, or be likely to, assist the Security Organisation in obtaining intelligence relevant to the interests of security.

The Director-General, when he makes a request to the Attorney-General, must also supply detailed reasons, closely specifying the facts and all grounds on which he considers it necessary to tap the telephone service involved.
Espionage has been presented in a decidedly colourful role by the spate of films, television dramas and books on spies and counter-spies.

But now again fancy gives way to fact, as newspaper headlines announce that another espionage agent has been caught, or uncovered, or another diplomat has been expelled.

Behind these occasional lifts in the curtain is a lot of hard, painstaking and probably often dull routine work by security services.

It has been pointed out that it must be much easier for the Communist countries to do their spying, their intelligence surveillance. Like anyone else they are able to read the Western newspapers which report freely in the atmosphere of their democracies, presenting facts for legitimate public consumption.

But the newspapers in Communist countries, containing none of the deep press probing desirable in a democracy, must be rather barren fields for Western security services.
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