



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Senator Rhiannon

SPEECH

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Speaker Sinodinos, Sen Arthur

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Senator SINODINOS (New South Wales) (13:00): I rise on a matter of public interest to do with my colleague Senator Rhiannon and ASIO. In preparing for this, I was reminded of a quote from the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

In March 2010, in two speeches to the New South Wales Legislative Council, the then Lee Rhiannon sought to discredit ASIO's surveillance of and files on her, claiming that they were riddled with errors. Shortly afterwards, the questionable claims in her speeches were reported as fact in a breathless newspaper article entitled 'ASIO spooks spied on little girls'. Thus Lee Rhiannon, who at the time was vying for the Senate, was attempting to inoculate against objective coverage of her 800-page ASIO file which had just been released by the National Archives. In a blog on 3 September 2010 entitled 'Responding to attacks on my family and political background', the now Senator Rhiannon revisited the same theme while giving rose tinted accounts of her early activism.

I have looked at Lee Brown, aka Gorman, aka Rhiannon's ASIO files and I must say I am impressed with their thoroughness and the obvious skill involved in their compilation. While ASIO's intelligence was not perfect, as is to be expected, it was much, much better than Senator Rhiannon has made out. Senator Rhiannon claims that ASIO's 'biggest howler' was 'the assertion that I studied motor mechanics at UNSW'. This is disingenuous. In fact, the ASIO report on the Young Socialist League's Marxist coaching seminar states that, 'Lee Brown made the general remark that she is studying motor mechanics at the University of New South Wales, where she is currently employed as a lecturer'. ASIO were not making that assertion; it was ASIO reporting Lee Brown's own words, a significant distinction I would have thought, since elsewhere ASIO accurately record her university studies.

Recently it was disclosed that on 19 January 1970, as an 18-year-old embarking on a voyage to the UK on the Russian vessel *Shota Rustaveli*, Lee Brown was appointed to meet one Vladimir Alekseev from the Soviet Embassy in cabin 190 on J-deck, where he would wait for her. An ASIO intelligence file reveals that, when arranging this meeting, Alekseev said that he was calling on behalf of one Ivan Stenin.

An ASIO telephone intercept reveals that the previous month Stenin had contacted Rhiannon's father who was intending to travel abroad before his daughter by air to England, Switzerland and Russia. We now know of ASIO's conclusion that Stenin was a senior intelligence officer, and that many believe that Vladimir Alekseev was the KGB station chief or 'rezident' at the Soviet Embassy in Canberra.

It is therefore timely to examine Senator Rhiannon's ASIO file and to test some of her other claims. In her 2010 blog she claimed that there was no expectation she would follow in her parents' political footsteps. But in truth Senator Rhiannon was an in-vitro communist. According to Mark Aarons, he and Lee Brown were 'red-diaper babies', a term by which the Communist Party of Australia members affectionately referred to the children of communists destined to inherit their parents' political genes. Rhiannon has perpetuated the line that ASIO began spying on her when she was seven, because an ASIO precis-history of her activity has a one-line record of her at a *Tribune* picnic in 1958. I think we can assume that ASIO at the time was more interested in Rhiannon's parents and other communists than they were in Lee, precocious though she may have been.

In fact, the first item in Senator Rhiannon's ASIO file is a clipping from an April 1955 edition of the CPA's *Tribune* headlined 'Kiddies' big part in May Day', showing three-year-old 'little Lee Brown' dabbling at a sign saying, 'For me—Ban that H-bomb' in preparation for the upcoming May Day march. I am sure that 'little Lee' was oblivious to the Soviet Union's possession of the H-bomb which they had successfully tested two years earlier. Rhiannon also claims ASIO inaccurately noted that she was a founding member of the Eureka Students Organisation, in one stroke glossing over her involvement with this organisation which was the CPA's youth wing, described by her father as being like the Pioneers. In its heyday, the Pioneers was an international organisation for children, operated by the Communist Party, which promoted sports and outdoor skills while teaching communist principles. In actuality, Rhiannon's ASIO files record the application to attend the Junior Eureka League's 1964 summer camp at age 13, her election as treasurer of the Junior Eureka League's South Sydney branch in 1965, her graduation from JEL and her role as a Pioneer of the Souths branch.

By age 14, Lee was demonstrating against the Vietnam War. At 15, ASIO's files show she took part in a rowdy Eureka CPA protest against Prime Minister Holt, participated in other protests, marches and communist social functions, and attended a CPA Sydney district meeting. By age 16, the ASIO files indicate that Lee did clerical work at CPA headquarters during her school holidays. They also show that she was involved in pamphleteering high schools, involved in Secondary Students for International Tolerance and Equality and organising an anti-Vietnam War peace ride to Canberra.

What the headline 'ASIO spooks spied on little girls' overlooks is that the communists of the day did indoctrinate and attempt to use young people and others to further Soviet ambition, a fact ASIO was well aware of. The truth is that by the time Senator Rhiannon was 18, embarking the *Shota Rustaveli* for the UK and who knows where else, she was a hardened communist. It is easy to forget—and people born since may not even appreciate—that during the Cold War the CPA was part of the Comintern or Communist International which owed its loyalty to Moscow and was dedicated to the revolutionary overthrow of our democratic system. The CPA received funding and took direction from the Soviet Union, senior members regularly travelled to and trained in Russia, its members infiltrated other organisations and agencies while a few were involved in espionage against their own country, Australia. In this connection I note Laurie Aarons's accusation contained in Mark Aarons's book *The Family File* that Senator Rhiannon's father, Bill Brown, procured spies for Ivan Skripov, the Soviet diplomat who was later declared persona non grata and deported for spying in 1963. I quote:

... he (Skripov) got onto Bill Brown who started to try and get some people, and in fact, he got one or two people. I don't know what happened. It's wrong in principle and also stupid to get involved in that.

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which the CPA had criticised, the Soviets began courting Dick Dickson, Claude Jones and Bill Brown to overthrow those in the CPA who had deviated from the Moscow line. Dixon and Jones apparently refused. Jones knocked back the usual bribery, saying, 'I was offered any amount of money that I would like to name from the CPSU'—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As Mark Aarons put it:

As good punters, the embassy hedged its bets... and had already put money on Bill Brown, who had previously demonstrated his loyalty by assisting the KGB officer, Ivan Skripov.

This was Bill Brown's hour. ASIO documents show that the Soviets—Stenin in particular—had established a clandestine link with Bill Brown outside of CPA channels and that communications increased dramatically after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Given all the above, but in particular given Bill and Lee Brown's involvement with the KGB agents Stenin and Alekseev at exactly this time, is it any wonder ASIO's director-general asked British intelligence to be apprised if Lee Brown came to notice in the UK.

Let us now examine Senator Rhiannon's initial response to the *Australian's* story about her rendezvous with the KGB agent Vladimir Alekseev. Firstly, she claimed it was based on 'inaccurate ASIO records'. Contrary to her previous claims, the ASIO records are generally very accurate. Moreover, ASIO's report of the telephone intercept of Vladimir Alekseev's call to her mother, Freda Brown, is quite detailed. Secondly, she claimed the attempt to associate her departure on a Russian cruise ship to potential spy activities was ridiculous. That claim was not made. Thirdly, she said, 'I've never been a spy and no-one ever attempted to recruit me.' Again, no-one made that allegation. The suggestion was that the KGB wanted to cultivate her as a long-term agent of influence. Fourthly, she said, 'Spy reports of me being involved in clandestine meetings on board the ship are wrong.' Did you meet Alekseev or not? Fifthly, Senator Rhiannon played the ingenue, just a young student, who was involved in some anti-Vietnam war protests, embarking on a working holiday. I think we have established she had a much longer rap sheet than that.

Senator Rhiannon may get away with this sort of fudging with her Eastern bloc comrades in the New South Wales Greens; she cannot get away from it here. As the *Australian* noted, Senator Rhiannon dismissed the report of her rendezvous with Vladimir Alekseev as Cold War delusions but did not deny the claim.

Finally, yesterday Senator Rhiannon, in a letter to the editor in the *Australian*, asserted that to the best of her knowledge she had never met a Russian spy and never attended a meeting on the ship—not a totally unqualified denial. There are therefore a number of very serious questions which Senator Rhiannon must answer. What was her involvement with KGB agents Ivan Stenin and Vladimir Alekseev? Did she visit any Eastern bloc countries in 1970-71? If so, which ones, why and precisely when did she return to Australia? Did she attend the Lenin School during any of her trips abroad?

In 2010 Senator Rhiannon promised that a full report on her ASIO file would shortly be placed on her website. She never did this. I encourage her to do so. It would be helpful to her and to the Senate.

Perhaps she could detail the extent of her involvement in plans to raise money for North Vietnam, revealed in ASIO's telephone intercept of 18 May 1972. Senator Rhiannon may also care to confirm ASIO's belief that she authored a caustic letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 26 February 1974—a fortnight after that giant of letters and human rights of the 20th century Alexander Solzhenitsyn was deported from the USSR and stripped of his Soviet citizenship after the KGB found his manuscript for the first part of *The Gulag Archipelago*. In the letter, one Lee Brown took issue with the suggestion of Dick Klugman—a former Labor MP and distinguished member of the lower house—that the Canberra street in which the Soviet Embassy is situated be renamed Solzhenitsyn Avenue. She suggested that streets around the US Embassy be renamed Watergate Boulevard, Rosenberg Road and My Lai Memorial Avenue. The Rosenbergs, of course, were executed for giving the Soviet Union atomic bomb secrets.

Lastly, in 2010 Senator Rhiannon said she did not support the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I quote:

... My recollection is that we marched up New South Head Road to the Soviet Consulate where there were speakers long into the night ... Personally I did not support the invasion and to conclude that when I was first getting involved in politics as a teenager and in my early twenties I backed oppressive violent actions against people in Czechoslovakia and Poland is ridiculous.

Curiously, ASIO's extensive surveillance files of protests disclose no record of Senator Rhiannon protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. They do, however, disclose the existence of a 1975 document for the Young Socialist League detailing planning by one Lee Brown for a forthcoming Czechoslovakian delegation tour to Australia. No doubt she made a personal protest.

I conclude with this question. Senator Rhiannon, if you were not a neo-Stalinist, what were you? Are the Greens just another front for you and your Eastern bloc clique? You owe the Senate and the people of New South Wales and Australia a full and frank explanation of all these matters. I say to the Greens as a whole that in recent times there have been disclosures in a magazine, the *Monthly*, about a so-called rift within the Greens between the original Greens, who came to the movement out of a conviction that more needed to be done on the environment, and other groups which started to join later on. One of those groups came out of New South Wales. The real issue for the Greens now is the fight that is going on for the heart and soul of the Greens. The Greens are split. The Australian people should know that and they should

know that there are people in New South Wales within the green movement who are seeking to subvert the green movement as a whole. Finally, it has come to my attention over time that there have been attempts by people on the Left to ridicule and trivialise the work of ASIO during the Cold War. ASIO did what they needed to do. I am sure they made mistakes along the way, but we should not underestimate the threats that we faced. In an open society we do need bodies like ASIO to help protect us against our enemies.