



23 June 2011

TOP SECRET ASIO FILES REVEALED FOR FIRST TIME

Top secret ASIO files will be revealed for the first time in a new exhibition at the Justice & Police Museum, lifting the lid on espionage, sabotage and subversion in Australia between 1949 and 1980.

Persons of Interest: the ASIO Files examines the impact of ASIO investigations on a selection of unlikely targets with even the most unassuming suburban streets subject to complex intelligence operations.

An estimated half a million Australians have intelligence files, in some cases recording the most intimate details of everyday life from affairs with colleagues to family feuds.

Haydn Keenan, the inspiration behind the exhibition, began delving into the secret files, films and photographs in 2006 after being shown a friend's ASIO file, inspiring him to uncover other targets of ASIO suspicion.

"It took fourteen ASIO surveillance personnel to keep one person under twenty-four hour surveillance, each file starting with a basic trace of the target's details. Files would soon be filled with transcripts of phone conversations, travel and employment history and details of intimate relationships.

"These days we are preoccupied with the threat of terrorism and cyber crime, forgetting the days when the national security agency was consumed with the fear of a Soviet takeover.

"A Soviet spy ring was found to be operating in Australia in the 1940s and although we didn't have many intelligence secrets, we did share the secrets of the British and American allies and risked being cut off from intelligence communications if a solution was not found.

"In 1949 Prime Minister Ben Chifley authorised a new security service, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to protect Australia from threats of espionage, sabotage and subversion.

"ASIO identified Communist Party member Wally Clayton as the Russian spy master, however to this day there are eight Australians who worked for the Soviet Union who were never caught.

"The films and photographs are fascinating because of the cases they were following but also because of what they tell us about Australia at the time. In some cases the same building is filmed over forty years and in the process ASIO created an extraordinary social history of Australia.

"The files are also an insight into the methods and motivations of ASIO and the atmosphere of Sydney during the Cold War. No piece of information was irrelevant and eventually suspicion widened to anyone showing dissent, from mothers' clubs to student groups and Aboriginal activists," says Keenan.

Highlights of the exhibition include surveillance equipment, ASIO footage and recreated phone intercepts revealed for the first time, and a rare recording of Wally Clayton confessing his role as a Russian spy master shortly before his death – so secret not even ASIO has a copy.

Persons of Interest: the ASIO files 18 June 2011 – 29 April 2012 at Justice & Police Museum,
corner Albert & Phillip Streets Sydney, daily 9.30am – 5pm, T 02 9251 5988, hht.net.au,
General \$10, Concession \$5, Family \$20.

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