

Political police strengthened in Australian state

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The Labor Party government in the Australian state of New South Wales is undertaking a two-pronged operation to legitimise and strengthen the state's political surveillance force -- under the guise of replacing the notorious police Special Branch.

The government commissioned a report revealing that the now disbanded Special Branch had nearly 60,000 secret index cards on organisations and individuals.

According to the government's Police Integrity Commission, the Special Branch records room contained 26,800 cards related to individuals, 6,930 on 'terrorists', 6,000 on organisations, 866 on bomb threats and 228 on a 'particular religious group'.

In addition, between 1939 and 1997, Special Branch established 10,324 in-depth 'dirt' files. All but 1,079 had been destroyed or removed, possibly illegally.

For decades, Special Branch functioned as a pervasive agency for spying on, mounting provocations and frame-ups against and keeping records on government opponents, particularly socialists, trade unionists and anyone regarded as left-wing.

Its targets included some MPs, journalists and judges, often it seems, for the purpose of political blackmail. The Integrity Commission report was instigated after an anti-corruption Royal Commission found that Special Branch tried to smother information relating to a judge's sexual behaviour.

The Carr government's changes are designed to revamp Special Branch under a new name, stop it squandering its resources on people who have proven their loyalty to the political establishment, and focus its activities on those considered to be 'subversive'.

First, a new agency, the Protective Security Group (PSG), has replaced Special Branch, formally disbanded in March 1997. When Police Minister Paul Whelan first mooted the formation of the PSG last year,

its roles were described as anti-terrorism and VIP protection. Now Whelan has confirmed that the PSG will retain some of Special Branch's intelligence-gathering powers.

Secondly, the government has appointed a working party to decide which of the 58,000 index cards and 1,079 'dirt' files will be made available to Special Branch's targets and to the public. To help provide the PSG with some credibility, the working party will include Tim Anderson, who was himself framed up by Special Branch and wrongfully jailed for the 1978 bombing of the Sydney Hilton Hotel.

Anderson, representing the Civil Liberties Council, will sit alongside officers from ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) -- the federal political police -- and other government agencies to determine which files should be kept secret. The working party's main concern will be to protect undercover police operations -- including the names of informers.

The Police Integrity Commission report found that Special Branch opened files on anyone leading 'any form of public support for or association with a political, religious or social cause'. Even those writing to newspaper editors were recorded. 'The range of such activity included anti-Vietnam war rallies, trade union marches, anti-logging protests, demonstrations against the third runway and protests against Commonwealth cuts to legal aid.'

But the report's concern was not with infringement of democratic rights and freedom of political expression. Its criticism was that resources allocated for political surveillance were wasted. For example, it complained that funds designated for payments to informants were used for alcohol-laced 'long lunches' with informants.

Releasing the report, Police Minister Whelan

declared: 'The B-Grade gumshoe, cloak and dagger days of the old Police Service are gone.' By implication, the new PSG will be an 'A-Grade' agency specialising in political information gathering. It will be headed by a police commander who will report directly to the Police Commissioner.

Last October, reports surfaced in the neighbouring state of Victoria showing that a similar sham took place in 1983, when the then state Labor government supposedly disbanded its Special Branch and set up an Operations Intelligence Unit. In reality, Special Branch's files were retained and extended. OIU officers infiltrated a wide range of political, community and ethnic organisations, illegally bugged premises and maintained files on hundreds of people.



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