

The curious career of Cheryl Gwyn, New Zealand's inspector-general of intelligence and security

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15 August 2015

This week's issue of the *New Zealand Listener* magazine has announced that a "cultural shake-up" has taken place within the country's spy agencies. The cover story, "Secrets and Spies" by Rod Vaughan, is designed to portray the agencies as essentially harmless. As evidence of this supposed "revolution," Vaughan asserts that the three women appointed over the past year to run the intelligence apparatus "come from backgrounds that would probably shock the old guard" of Cold War veterans.

Vaughan reports that Security Intelligence Service (SIS) head Rebecca Kitteridge once took part in anti-Apartheid protests, while the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) acting director Una Jagose "has been in a committed lesbian relationship for almost 25 years." These banal facts are supposed to demonstrate progressive credentials.

Vaughan also notes the striking fact that Cheryl Gwyn, the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS), "once belonged to the Trotskyist Socialist Action League" during the 1970s and 1980s. This is the first time Gwyn, who has had a lengthy career in the state apparatus, has spoken publicly about her membership in the now-defunct Pabloite SAL.

The *Listener* article is part of a state-organised campaign of damage control. Since 2013, the political establishment has been rocked by a series of leaks from whistleblower Edward Snowden, revealing that the GCSB illegally carries out mass surveillance of New Zealand citizens. Snowden also revealed that the GCSB, as a member of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, gathers information from millions of people in countries throughout the Pacific, and has spied on China on behalf of the US National Security Agency (NSA).

The leaked documents reveal how the agency has been used to prosecute the interests of New Zealand and American imperialism, including the build-up to war against China. At the same time, the indiscriminate spying demonstrates that the ruling elite is preparing to carry out the systematic and targeted repression of the opposition to militarism and austerity that will inevitably emerge in the working class. Vaughan notes that "public confidence in the GCSB [is] at an all time low."

In response to the widespread outrage over the activities of the GCSB, the National Party government has been trumpeting the role played by Gwyn, who was appointed to her new role as IGIS last year. Gwyn's job, according to a February press statement, is

to ensure that "the public have confidence in the oversight of the intelligence and security agencies that is provided by my office." The government and the opposition Labour and Green parties have presented Gwyn as an "independent" overseer of the spy agencies.

In fact Gwyn was appointed by Governor-General Jerry Mateparae—a former Defence Force chief and GCSB Director. On behalf of government ministers, Gwyn conducts ongoing reviews of the GCSB and the SIS and has "the ability to access all premises and documents of the intelligence and security agencies, and to require the appearance of witnesses under oath."

The question needs to be raised: Who exactly is Cheryl Gwyn? Vaughan writes: "The Cold War warriors watching Cheryl Gwyn when she was in the Socialist Action League would probably turn in their graves if they could see her now." His brief biography of Gwyn fails to explain, however, how someone who was involved in an organisation claiming to support socialist revolution now occupies one of the most sensitive positions in the spy apparatus of the capitalist state.

For a role such as Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, the ruling elite needs someone able to appear independent, while at the same time being absolutely reliable. Gwyn's appointment, moreover, has followed the strengthening of military and intelligence ties with Washington by successive Labour and National-led governments, which have joined the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and integrated the GCSB into the NSA's global spying operations. It goes without saying that Washington would have been closely consulted on—and approved—Gwyn's appointment.

After graduating with a law degree from Auckland University in 1979, Gwyn spent six years working at the Whakatu meat processing factory in Hawke's Bay. During this time she was a prominent representative of the SAL. She wrote articles for its newspaper *Socialist Action*, mostly about workplace disputes, between 1981 and 1984, and was the Hastings organiser for the Young Socialists, the SAL's youth wing.

In 1985, she joined the Office of the Race Relations Conciliator as an investigating officer. During the 1990s, she worked for the prominent law firms Chapman Tripp and Russell McVeagh.

In 2001, Gwyn was appointed by the Clark Labour government to the position of Deputy Secretary of Justice, and in 2003 became Deputy Solicitor-General in the Crown Law Office. Her meteoric

rise involved working directly with the intelligence agencies. Gwyn told Vaughan that she still had “views on social issues and social justice” and once worked on a case involving abortion rights. Her most prominent task, however, as Deputy Solicitor-General was leading Labour’s persecution and imprisonment of Algerian refugee Ahmed Zaoui on unsubstantiated terrorism allegations made by the SIS.

Gwyn’s career cannot help but raise serious and disturbing questions. When, for example, did she first come into contact with the intelligence agencies? What precisely was her role in the SAL and to what information did she have access? How much did the SAL leaders know about her?

The question of when Gwyn’s relationship with the intelligence agencies began is especially significant given the close collaboration between the SAL and the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP). By the 1980s, the SWP was stacked with FBI informants, including within its top leadership, and had effectively been transformed into an arm of the US State Department.

In the mid-1970s, an investigation carried out by the International Committee of the Fourth International (which today publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*) uncovered evidence that SWP leader Joseph Hansen had been a GPU (Stalinist secret police) agent inside Trotsky’s household in Mexico, and had subsequently become an FBI informant after Trotsky’s GPU-orchestrated assassination in 1940.

Following Hansen’s death in 1978, the leadership of the SWP was taken over by his protégés, a close-knit group of graduates from the conservative Christian-oriented Carleton College, in Minnesota. Led by Jack Barnes, this clique expelled hundreds of SWP members, including party founders with decades of experience.

This state-controlled, anti-Marxist organisation wielded great influence over the SAL. Writing on the *Redline* blog on December 7, 2014, Canterbury University academic and prominent ex-SAL member Philip Ferguson, bitterly denounced the SAL’s “blind following” of the SWP’s New York head office—caustically referring to it as “the mothership.”

None of the former SAL leaders has, however, commented on Gwyn’s time in the organisation or her elevation within the state. Approached by the WWS in April, ex-SAL leaders Keith Locke and Mike Treen refused to speak about her background and politics. An email to Ferguson remained unanswered. Locke, a Green Party MP from 1999–2011, described Gwyn’s time in the SAL as a “personal” matter while, in a hostile tirade, Treen, who leads the Unite trade union, denounced WWS reporters as “provocateurs” for raising the issue.

Why these dismissive and incensed reactions to what are entirely legitimate questions? It is well known that the SIS spied intensively on the SAL, including on Locke, who obtained and publicised his SIS file in 2009. The 400-plus documents in his file contain detailed records of Locke’s activities in the organisation. Some of the material, such as descriptions of meetings, copying equipment expenses and personal details of SAL members and their spouses, could only have been accessed by well-placed informants.

However it came about, Gwyn’s appointment as IGIS, along

with the silence of her former comrades, is indicative of the politics of the SAL and the evolution of New Zealand’s petty bourgeois pseudo-left. While mouthing “socialist” phrases and posing as Trotskyist, the SAL was neither. Its main function was to block the development of socialist consciousness within the working class by subordinating it to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy. As Gwyn told the *Listener*, the SAL campaigned on issues related to Maori nationalism and feminism that “are now very much mainstream.” Throughout the 1980s, the SAL campaigned consistently on behalf of the Labour Party, painting its history and policies in the brightest colours, and promoting MPs such as Michael Bassett and future Prime Minister Helen Clark.

After coming to power in 1984, the David Lange-led Labour Party launched a far-reaching pro-market restructuring of the economy. This included privatising state-owned enterprises and—with the collaboration of the trade union leaders—massive downsizing and sackings in “uncompetitive” industries, including meat processing.

At the same time, Lange postured as an opponent of nuclear weapons and banned US nuclear-capable naval ships from entering New Zealand. In reality, his Labour government was secretly strengthening intelligence collaboration with the US and vastly expanding the GCSB.

In 1987, while thousands of workers, angered at Lange’s policies, were abandoning Labour, the SAL continued to support this big business party. Simultaneously, it sought to divide and divert workers and youth by promoting various forms of identity politics, including Maori nationalism and feminism. Following the collapse of the SAL in the late-1980s, several members joined the unions or Labour’s support parties—NewLabour, which later became the Alliance, and the Greens. The Alliance and Greens backed the 1999-2008 Clark Labour government’s decision to join the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Today, the former SAL leaders are part of an affluent middle class milieu that is deeply hostile to the working class and has injected itself into the operations of the trade union bureaucracy, bourgeois politics and the state. They apparently see nothing of concern in Gwyn joining the upper echelons of the spy apparatus.

For the working class, however, fundamental issues are at stake. To start with, the hundreds, if not thousands, of workers and youth who, during the course of two decades, came into the orbit of the SAL, have the absolute right to know what information about them was collected and handed over to the intelligence apparatus, how, and by whom.

The authors also recommend:

The theoretical and historical origins of the pseudo-left
[24 February 2015]



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