New Zealand spy agency investigated victimised journalist

John Braddock
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The *New Zealand Herald* reported on April 17 that the internal spy agency, the Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) investigated Radio NZ (RNZ) journalist Mick Hall, whose edits of foreign news stories in 2023 resulted in him being publicly smeared as a "Russian agent."

Hall was forced to resign from his job at the state-owned broadcaster amid an hysterical campaign during which he was denounced by RNZ management for making "inappropriate edits" to online articles from Reuters and the BBC and spreading "pro-Kremlin garbage."

Hall, who worked as a sub-editor for RNZ's website, made legitimate factual corrections to articles about the war in Ukraine and other topics. He was witch-hunted because he incorporated into reports the role of neo-Nazis in Ukraine's armed forces, and the fact that the 2014 US-backed coup in Ukraine toppled a pro-Russian government, directly paving the way for Russia's reactionary invasion.

Far from being "pro-Russian," the edits inserted rarely-stated and necessary truths into the wall-to-wall barrage of pro-war propaganda which dominates the jingoistic media. A McCarthyite frenzy was whipped up to intimidate any opposition to the US-NATO war and the then Labour-led government's involvement.

Hall only learned last year that he had been secretly investigated by the NZSIS in mid-2023. He complained to Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Brendan Horsley that the agency improperly shared information about him. He said the NZSIS had briefed the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office and gave them information about himself.

According to Horsley, the NZSIS investigation was prompted by "the widespread speculation of foreign interference" and accusations circulating in the media. But Hall revealed on his Substack blog that the probe began on June 10, 2023, "one day after I was accused by public broadcaster Radio New Zealand (RNZ) of inserting Russian propaganda into a Reuters story published on its website."

Horsley concluded that the NZSIS had followed its so-called Sensitive Category Individuals (SCI) policy and the probe was limited to "initial" enquiries to determine whether Hall was involved in "interference" activities. After its inquiry finished on August 11, the NZSIS briefed "interested parties" that it had found nothing to indicate Hall was an agent of foreign interference or a national security threat.

In a statement, Hall welcomed the report saying he had "no problem agreeing with Horsley's conclusions." The NZSIS had acted out of "what it believed was necessity," he said, "due to a hysteria and widespread concern caused by RNZ management's mis-framing of my sub-editing of international news agency stories as an exercise in Russian propaganda."

Horsley's investigation, he added, pointed to "the dangers of challenging hegemonic narratives and media executives setting their own messaging in motion, without evidence and with the unmitigated power to do so."

In fact, Horsley's report whitewashed the entire process, which from the beginning targeted Hall for legitimate journalist practices. Hall should never have been subject to vilification by RNZ bosses, forced to resign amid a manufactured public furore and, in a sinister manner, secretly investigated by the country's spy agency.

Horsley's report justified the widespread media-state conspiracy. He declared the NZSIS investigation was "necessary, legal, proper and proportionate." The agency's actions, he intoned, were "limited in scope to what was strictly necessary to satisfy the NZSIS that this was not a case of foreign interference" and it had properly reported its "positive conclusion" to the "relevant parties."

In an interview with the WSWS in November 2023, Hall explained that, based on his 20 years' experience as a journalist, "I thought it was part of standard journalistic duty to remove bias from any wires copy, and that's what I did. I had got into a routine of putting context in and it didn't start a year ago, it started many years ago."

Hall said: "When the US started to try and contain China with provocations against China using Taiwan, and when the war started in Ukraine, the instances of US bias in Reuters copy or BBC copy increased. So the journalistic duty to address it increased for me, and I never really saw it as a

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subversive act or something that would be overly controversial."

RNZ conducted an "audit" of Hall's work, identifying 49 articles where he had made editorial changes. Besides Ukraine there were reports on Israel and Palestine, on the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, on Latin America, and US provocations against China over Taiwan. Dispensing with the concept of journalistic accuracy and objective truth, RNZ expunged Hall's changes in all the articles.

The complaint that ignited the furore did not come from RNZ followers, but via a provocation by Luppe B. Luppen, a New York-based lawyer with connections to the Democratic Party. He tweeted an RNZ link to a Reuters article in which Hall had removed a glorification of the 2014 Maidan coup in Ukraine as a "revolution." Luppen falsely alleged the reworded report was "Russian propaganda."

Hall described what happened next: "International coverage by the *New York Time*s, the BBC, the UK *Independent* and all of the main international wire copy agencies followed. Self-appointed disinformation experts, defence and foreign policy think tank fellows, politicians and establishment journalists were platformed to sound the alert over what they thought looked like Russian Federation infiltration of the national broadcaster."

Hall was placed on leave and forced to resign, at which point RNZ established an "independent" panel to conduct an inquiry. Far from defending the station's reportage, let alone its editorial independence, board chair Jim Mather declared the focus of the inquiry was to restore "public confidence" in the broadcaster.

Hall told the WSWS the inquiry gave him "some closure" but "didn't go to the heart of the matter." It was "a politicised show trial and had little to do with editorial standards" and that "left me without a job, left my health in tatters and my career in tatters," he said.

The review panel concluded that the vast majority of stories were edited "appropriately and professionally," but it criticized certain "inappropriate" edits that it declared "involved adding information or using language which challenged the foreign policy settings of the United States or allies."

Hall was absolved of any intent to "introduce misinformation, disinformation or propaganda." The inquiry concluded however that he had "acted in breach of both editorial standards and RNZ's contract with Reuters and an organisation [RNZ] that facilitated the conditions for a journalist to do so."

The finding enabled RNZ to clamp down on its editorial controls. In the face of numerous complaints from pro-Palestine advocates over its coverage of Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza, RNZ released a report last month boasting it had "abided by its editorial policy" and achieved "balance" on the issue—a patently absurd claim.

The case presages a return to the reactionary atmosphere and methods of the 1950s anti-communist witch hunts: pre-determined investigations, show trials, forced "confessions," victimisations and sackings. Media mouthpieces, which serve as propagandists for the ruling class, seek to condition the population for a vast escalation of imperialist wars abroad and class war at home.

The National Party-led government is currently preparing to double military spending—with the Labour Party's support—to strengthen New Zealand's integration into US and NATO wars. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon recently extended the deployment of 100 military personnel in Britain where they are training Ukrainian forces for the war against Russia. The ruling elite is simultaneously further militarising the Indo-Pacific region amid US-led war plans against China.

The government also recently introduced an upgraded Foreign Interference Bill which will be used to drastically curtail freedom of speech and basic rights. The former Labour-led government proposed the law change following a campaign by the intelligence agencies and corporate media, which have made lurid and unsubstantiated claims about Chinese and Russian "interference."

There is no constituency in the ruling class for the defence of free speech and democratic rights. The methods used against Hall are an indication of how the state will respond to any opposition to war that emerges in the working class. The whole police state apparatus must be opposed as part of a broad mobilisation in defence of basic rights and against austerity and war.

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