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Special Issue: Privatisation of Intelligence

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Research Article

Combating Political Police: An Overview of National Action’s Counterintelligence Program 1982–1990

Troy Whitford[§]

During the mid to late 1980s the radical nationalist group National Action was targeted by domestic intelligence agencies. Known as “Operation Odessa” it was part of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation’s program to combat what it saw as a rise in politically motivated violence. ASIO and state police Special Branch officers placed the group under surveillance and sent agents to disrupt meetings and recruit informants. Concurrently, National Action had developed its own counterintelligence program structuring the group in an effort to preserve secrecy, educating its membership in situational awareness and designating a senior member as an intelligence officer. Ultimately National Action counterintelligence program was unable to match the highly resourced government agencies and internal discipline issues meant the group was eventually disbanded. However, National Action’s effort to develop a counterintelligence program provides some examples of what low resourced Issue Motivated Groups are capable of achieving.

Keywords: Human intelligence (HUMINT), counterintelligence, issue motivated groups (IMG), National Action, radical nationalists, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

INTRODUCTION

The capacity of small political organisations or issue motivated groups (IMGs) to disguise their activities from larger organisations or governments is in part contingent on those groups developing counterintelligence programs. This may involve educating the membership on the threats posed by larger

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organisations or governments, developing a culture of situational awareness and establishing protocols for communication between members.

Using the radical nationalist group National Action as an historical example it is possible to explore some of the ways IMGs could develop counterintelligence methods. National Action is a suitable study because it was subject to investigation by domestic intelligence services in the mid to late-1980s and documented evidence is available on its counterintelligence methods. Further, National Action was operating in a period prior to modern technologies such as the internet and social media. The absence of such communication technology meant a greater emphasis was placed on human intelligence gathering or human intelligence sources (HUMINT).

The Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was and still is the primary agency charged with gathering intelligence on IMGs or politically motivated violence (PMV) in Australia. However, state police Special Branches also have a role in gathering intelligence. In some respects there is an overlap of roles between state police and ASIO (James, 2005), but it can be best defined along the lines of ASIO collecting intelligence as a pre-emptive measure and the state police investigating with respect to breaches of criminal codes (James, 2005).

This division is apparent in the National Action narrative. ASIO had tended to use electronic surveillance and human intelligence in an attempt to learn about and disrupt the group's activities. State police, particularly Special Branch were more concerned with actual crimes committed and approaching members to inform on other members regarding criminal activities. As this article illustrates the two approaches to monitoring this particular IMG proved complimentary as it was ASIO's electronic surveillance that unwittingly assisted in the conviction of a murder of one of National Action's members.

While a brief background is provided for contextual reasons it is not the scope of this study to assess the politics of National Action or tell its history. The history of National Action has been documented by its founder Dr Jim Saleam and is featured in a number of articles and texts. National Action's formation, ideology and contribution to the Australian political landscape can be found in Saleam's doctoral thesis, *The Other Radicalism: An Inquiry into Contemporary Australian Extreme Right Ideology, Politics and Organisation 1975–1995* (1999). Further studies include *A Political History of National*

Action: Its Fears, Ideas and Tactics (Whitford 2011) and *All In The Name of Human Rights: An Historical Case Study on Australian Nationalism and Multiculturalism, 1980–1990* (Whitford 2012).

This historical study is solely focused on National Action's counterintelligence program albeit ultimately unsuccessful against better resourced and technologically advanced domestic intelligence services. National Action's approach to counterintelligence provides an interesting insight into how IMGs may operate in developing an effective intelligence and counterintelligence facet to their organisation. The article does not aim at providing direction for intelligence agencies in investigating IMGs, but rather illustrates how at least one IMG had attempted to develop its own intelligence capacity. This modest contribution to the literature on IMGs and counterintelligence looks at the issue from the perspective of National Action without applying the usual political biases which tend to inhibit a better understanding of the operations and tactics of these kinds of groups.

BACKGROUND

In a contemporary sense National Action could well be described as an Issue Motivated Group (IMG). Initially based in Sydney the radical nationalist group was established in 1982, by seventeen people. Its numbers increased over the 1980s and eventually had a membership of over 500 and branches in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide. National Action saw itself as a militant propaganda unit protesting against immigration, multiculturalism and globalisation. Its founder Jim Saleam structured the group on a small executive management supported by an inner membership that would undertake the bulk of the group's activities and an outer group of supporters. The structure was designed to enforce an authoritarian leadership to foster internal discipline and counter infiltrators.

National Action came to the attention of domestic intelligence services ASIO and NSW police Special Branch early in its formation. Changes to racial discrimination laws during the 1980s had criminalised many of the propaganda activities of National Action and it in response tended to move toward more confrontation tactics. In 1984, members of National Action stormed the offices of Macquarie University's Student Council after it had been attacked by pro multicultural groups and barred from campus (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March 1984). Later in the same year, an organiser for the Combined Unions

Against Racism (CUAR) had their car fire bombed and claimed it was orchestrated by National Action (*Ultra* 1984).

In 1989, National Action attacked the Offices of the Antidiscrimination Board in Sydney and a meeting of the NSW Liberal Party (*Ultra* January 1989). Links were also made between National Action and Jack Van Tongeren a West Australian based neo-Nazi who was charged with arson, conspiracy to commit arson and break and enter after a number of Chinese restaurants were fire bombed (*Sydney Morning Herald* 19 February 1989). Simultaneously, National Action were also deliberately creating a mystique around itself starting rumours it had connections to extreme right wing overseas organisations such as the French Party of New Forces and the South African Afrikaner Resistance Movement (Saleam, 1999).

Rumours that National Action had access to firearms also increased domestic intelligence services' interest in the group. The violence surrounding National Action peaked in 1989 when two of its members fired a shot gun shot into the home of Eddie Funde, the Chief Representative of the African National Congress. The two assailants were charged along with Jim Saleam. Saleam denied any part in the crime but was convicted for providing the shot gun to the two members.

Mostly attributed to National Action the spate of right wing violence taking place in Australia during this period saw the Human Rights Commission announce an inquiry into racist violence. Further, National Action was named in Parliament by the then-Prime Minister Bob Hawke as a "threat to the social cohesion" of Australia (Hawke, 1989). Responding to political concerns NSW Special Branch officers and ASIO officers launched Operation Odessa which involved infiltrating National Action's meetings to disrupt and inform on the membership, surveillance of the group's activities and leadership and the instillation of listening devices at National Action's headquarters.

Operation Odessa was part of a larger strategy to address what ASIO perceived as an escalation in violence from right wing groups (ASIO, 1990). Through its Politically Motivated Violence Program, ASIO claimed it had operational success in curbing the work of violent racist groups and its investigation in conjunction with state police had led to a number of arrests (ASIO 1991) notably Jim Saleam and members of National Action. Further, in 1991, prosecutions of a shooting murder which had taken place at National

Action's headquarters were assisted by recordings made by ASIO. Officers had actually recorded an altercation between two members of the group and the subsequent shooting (Fife-Yeomans, 1991).

DEVELOPING A COUNTERINTELLIGENCE PROGRAM

Since its inception National Action had viewed itself outside of Australia's political mainstream and viewed the established political apparatus as a combative. Early in National Action's formation "secrecy" was an important facet to its operation. In one of its early manifestos *What is to be done?* (1985) Saleam wrote secrecy would be an important part of the organisation. He understood that if the organisation grew into a mass movement that general secrecy would be difficult to maintain but it could still be applied to key sections of the organisation.

Secrecy about the operations of the National Action, according to Saleam, was the best defence against the 'political police' in their efforts to infiltrate the group or gather intelligence. In National Action's manifesto Saleam remarked that early attempts by NSW Special Branch to investigate National Action had failed and officers had remarked that it was National Action's secrecy which made investigations difficult (Saleam 1985).

Enforcing secrecy was an organisational structure which favoured a hierarchy of members and supporters. A supporter was seen as a person of loose commitment to the organisation while a member was more trusted and proven in their commitment to National Action. Information regarding National Action's activities and program would be reserved for members. Secrecy was also enforced within the general rules of conduct for members and supporters. For example, it was required at general meetings members and supporters would not discuss their occupations, sources of income, or personal affairs; nor would they share full names and addresses (National Action, 1987).

Educating the membership on the intelligence threats to National Action was another key element to its counterintelligence program. In 1987, Saleam wrote an extensive pamphlet on dealing with domestic intelligence services. He highlights ASIO, the federal police and Special Branches as performing intelligence gathering activities on political organisations. The pamphlet then provided scenarios on how members or supporters of National Action could be approached by domestic intelligence services. The pamphlet emphasised that members and supporters would often be approached with threats of criminal

charges or given information about the group's leadership in an effort to create doubt and division in the mind of the activist.

In addition to general warnings and background to police activity some fundamental practical measures were highlighted and members were encouraged to adopt them. Some of the measures included hiding membership lists and contacts, never bulk mailing organisational mail from the same post office, avoiding business discussions on the telephone, reducing paperwork and destroying processed mail. It was also stressed that vehicles should not be parked near meeting venues as intelligence officers often made note of registration plates. National Action also encourage its members to be suspicious of new members or supporters particularly those that may advocate violence as they may be a provocateur (Saleam 1985).

NSW Special Branch had acknowledged that National Action developed a sophisticated intelligence network. In the pre information technology age, National Action had created extensive index systems including the names and addresses of politicians, police and media (Harvey, 1989). National Action had also developed an executive position within the group serving as an intelligence officer. The position was developed as early as 1984 and involved the vetting of new members or supporters in an effort to assess if they were infiltrators or informers for government intelligence officers or even opposition groups.

The leadership was acutely aware of the damage informers and infiltrators could have on the group. An important part of National Action's counterintelligence program was monitoring new members and supporters for signs of connections with Special Branch or ASIO officers. According to National Action documents, several attempts at infiltration or efforts to recruit National Action supporters as operatives had been undertaken by ASIO and Special Branch police.

A key infiltrator and subsequent informer later referred to as CC18 during the 1994–1997 Royal Commission into New South Wales Policing is an ideal example on how intelligence agencies were able to exploit division within National Action and weaken the movement. CC18 was associated with National Action from September between 1983 until April 1985. According to Saleam, CC18 had approached the group with ambitions of taking over the leadership and steering it toward more neo-Nazi ideals (2003).

Nevertheless, his attempts proved unsuccessful and he had a violent altercation with one of National Action members. NSW Special Branch had learnt of the altercation and approached CC18 in an effort to recruit him as an informer. CC18 would regularly make contact with a Special Branch officer over the telephone and provide that officer with information regarding activities of the group but it was not until 1989 he was formally recruited as an informer (Saleam, 2003).

To combat informers National Action's intelligence officer had adopted an internal surveillance method when assessing its new members. The officer would organise new members or supporters to be placed alongside trusted members when the group were distributing literature, hanging posters or attending protests. The aim was to monitor the behaviour and conversations of the new member and report back to the intelligence officer and the group executive. The new member would be assessed for the kind of conversations they would have with their mentor and also to assess their position on a range of political views.

In addition to vetting new membership the intelligence officer also collected substantive subject files on other groups and individuals perceived as threats to National Action. With greater access to personal computers the group also established extensive databases of information using their subject files and electorate rolls. The intelligence officer was also responsible for ensuring the groups important documents were spread out in a few different locations. Full membership lists and other material deemed "classified" were never kept at the group's headquarters (Saleam 2013).

National Action also had concerns about electronic surveillance early on. As a basic means to counter electronic surveillance they developed the "burning bin." As the name suggests members had simply used a steel rubbish bin and would write down on paper the conversations they wanted to have in private and then burn each piece of paper after it was read by the other party. National Action also removed the telephone from the wall at headquarters during meetings or discussions. However, on the night of the shooting murder this protocol was not observed (Saleam 2013).

Not all the counterintelligence measures were defensive. As a means of identifying individuals in opposition groups National Action's intelligence officer would organise its members to visit the meeting locations of opposition

groups and copy down car registration numbers. Prior to 1990, it was possible to get the details of an individual by requesting it from the Roads Traffic Authority. A person seeking details of an individual could supply the registration number of the vehicle, pay a small administrative fee and receive the name and address of the owner of that vehicle.

A key success to National Action's counterintelligence program was its tactic of publicising interactions with intelligence officers. National Action advocated that if approached by domestic intelligence services, members were encouraged to first provide misinformation through simple lies. Secondly, where possible members were also asked to photograph intelligence officers and put names to the photographs. Finally, they encouraged members to gather details of the intelligence officers who approached them and publish the Officer's details along with photographs. The strategy was to name lead intelligence officers, what they had said to National Action members and achieve maximum coverage from the media in order to expose ASIO and Special Branch operations (Saleam 2013).

GATHERING AND UTILISING ITS INTELLIGENCE

Obtaining details on intelligence officers and members of state police as well as the Special Branch fed National Action's more aggressive counterintelligence measures. In 1989, a Sydney Morning Herald journalist reported that National Action had mailed a three page letter to the home addresses of NSW police officers. The letter suggested that the Special Branch had been requested to undertake the anti-racism cause and was 'out to get anyone who is pro-Australian and opposed to Asian uncontrolled immigration' (Harvey, 1989).

The letter continued to assert there was a liaison between Special Branch, the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Task Force and Sydney Anti-apartheid activist Rev Dorothy McMahon. However, for many the contents of the letter campaign were of less interest than the ability of National Action to obtain the names and private addresses of NSW police officers. According to the media report officers were distressed at the prospects that a radical group such as National Action was able to gather their personal details.

National Action's intelligence gathering capacity also assisted it in its anti-media campaign. After National Action had unsuccessfully lodged a number of complaints to the Australian Press Council for unfair or erroneous reporting it used its intelligence network to find the names addresses and telephone numbers

of targeted journalists. The personal details of those journalists were published in National Action's journal and subsequently they received threats via mail and telephone. At one juncture, a journalist working for *A Current Affair* had her home picketed by National Action members after the journalist had earlier filed a story on the group and allegedly invaded the privacy of National Action members (Whitford, 2011).

National Action's intelligence networks also extended to the Sydney taxi industry. During the late-1980s National Action had embarked on a propaganda campaign to highlight the rise in immigrants working as taxi drivers in Sydney and contended that these drivers were working longer hours and without holiday or sick pay benefits. The inference was that European drivers were being pushed out of the industry in favour of other ethnic groups.

In response to its concerns of corruption in the taxi industry and anxieties that it had become too orientated toward migrants, National Action embarked on an intelligence gathering operation to expose immigrant drivers. It had been able through its network to collect the taxi licence numbers, and ethnic backgrounds of those driving taxis in Sydney. Over a short period of time National Action compiled a list of almost 200 drivers. The driver's ethnic appearance, taxi licence numbers and the company they worked for were printed in a publication titled *Taxi-Gate: Cheap Labour and Corruption in the Taxi Industry* (1988). The publication also stated that it would locate and publish the names and addresses of those they believed were corrupting the taxi industry.

More intriguing is the possibility that National Action had also been effective in getting information from intelligence agencies. In a document entitled *The Security Question* (n.d.) there is reference to a meeting between ASIO, the Victorian Counter Terrorism Unit and NSW Special Branch that took place in May or June 1990. According to the document the meeting was to review the information these bodies had gathered on National Action including divisions within the group. The document also suggests that a Special Branch officer had told a female associate of National Action the name of an informer within National Action ranks.

There are two likely interpretations of this anecdote; first the Special Branch officer may have been spreading disinformation about the meeting between intelligence agencies and perhaps deliberately named the informant as a means to incite greater disharmony in the group. Second, National Action may

have had some ability in extracting information from intelligence officers. Regardless of the interpretation what remains clear is the interplay of intelligence gathering and counterintelligence between government agencies and National Action.

ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL ACTION'S COUNTERINTELLIGENCE PROGRAM

National Action appears to have had some success in their ability to exploit its networks and gather information. It is difficult to gain a clear view of the extent and range of its network of information as historical sources are very narrow—but National Action's ability to locate journalists and police certainly demonstrate an intelligence capability.

As stated earlier, a substantial part of National Action's counterintelligence program was fundamental secrecy, but, as National Action grew in size and notoriety secrecy proved more difficult to manage. Despite protocols and an organisational framework designed to keep secrecy it was unable to develop a disciplined membership and supporter base. It appears the vetting process introduced by National Action—the decision to align new members or supporters with more trusted members and then essentially report back to National Action's executive on behaviours and political outlooks was not affective in the long term. National Action had difficulty in identifying which members would be effective 'political guerrillas' and which were essentially just thugs.

The dispute between National Action members at its headquarters (recorded by ASIO listening devices in 1991) that ended in a shooting death is just one example of the undisciplined violent influence which had consumed the group. Another type of person attracted to National Action were young men often of middle and working class backgrounds who felt marginalised and disaffected from society (Moore 2005). A membership comprising of even a few such people may have proven an asset for intelligence agencies seeking informants but from National Action's perspectives these kinds of individuals were security risks.

CONCLUSION

National Action had certainly developed an intelligence program that made use of extensive human intelligence contacts to develop a network of information

gathering that was able to ‘shock’ media and law enforcement. It had made use of open source information and conducted covert surveillance as a means to protect its interests. Its membership was educated in situational awareness and practical measures for developing a culture of secrecy.

The establishment of an intelligence officer position within the group also illustrates an understanding by National Action that collecting and protecting information was a significant part of the group’s operation. Another facet to its program was the conscious decision to make public every encounter it had with intelligence agencies therefore reducing the capacity of Special Branch and ASIO to undertake covert activities.

After eight years National Action was ultimately, disbanded and its key personnel were imprisoned in part due to the role of intelligence agencies. But as an historical example, National Action’s counterintelligence methods illustrate the possibilities for low resourced IMGs. Any group that adopts a degree of intelligence capability along with principles of secrecy, situational awareness and proactive information gathering techniques can aim to protect its interests against Government intelligence agencies or oppositional groups.

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