ASIO’s Surveillance of Brian Medlin

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Abstract

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, thousands of South Australian protesters took to the streets, publicly demanding social justice and an end to what they regarded as the unwarranted and imperial ventures of the western world. In Adelaide, authorities noted what they saw as the use of a ‘Paris-style’ charge at demonstrations, with participants marching ten abreast with linked arms. At Flinders University, students threatened to burn a dog to death as part of an anti-Vietnam War demonstration. In Adelaide, the man who more than any other personified the Moratorium movement was Flinders University philosopher Brian Medlin, who advocated for a peaceful end to Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War. As his former student John Schumann has pointed out, an enduring image of that time is of Brian Medlin, ‘the long-haired professor of philosophy, spread-eagled between two policemen, being dragged from the front of the anti-war march in the September of 1970’.

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Throughout the 1960s and 70s, thousands of South Australian protesters took to the streets, publicly demanding social justice and an end to what they regarded as the unwarranted and imperial ventures of the western world. In Adelaide, authorities
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Unsurprisingly, Medlin attracted the attention of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which at the time of the Vietnam War took measures to identify and monitor individuals of interest within the anti-war movement, searching for communists and their fellow travellers connected with the cause.⁴ ASIO’s extensive monitoring of communists

² Graham Hastings,  *It Can’t Happen Here, A political history of Australian student activism*, The Students’ Association of Flinders University, Adelaide, 2003, p37
had begun well before anti-Vietnam War protests. Founded in 1949 in response to strong and well-founded suspicions of a Soviet spy network in operation in Australia, ASIO had continued through the 1950s, 1960s and beyond to focus its surveillance work on supporters of left-wing causes in Australia, even after the existence of the Soviet network had been revealed and the dangers it posed averted.⁵

A close study of the acute interest ASIO took in Brian Medlin offers insights into the history of the organisation and the way in which its role changed after the Soviet network was revealed and broken up, largely as the result of the 1954 defection of Vladimir Petrov. It illustrates the growing emphasis in ASIO’s work on perceptions of ‘home-grown’ threats identified overwhelmingly with progressive political ideas and their advocates. Beyond that, the Medlin files give a clear indication of the sorts of strategies ASIO adopted in order to counter the threats to Australian security it identified. For this reason, a targeted study such as this provides pertinent historical context for understanding the broader aims and activities of ASIO, a topic of great importance in the current political climate in Australia.

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This essay will therefore use Medlin’s ASIO dossiers to demonstrate why he was placed under surveillance and what kind of information was recorded. It will trace the course of his surveillance over an extended period, establishing what the nature of ASIO’s interest in Medlin was, how it went about gathering that information, and how the intelligence gathered reflected ASIO’s understanding of the alleged threats confronting Australia at that time. These security files are valuable examples of ASIO’s reach into academic life, yet they must nonetheless be treated with appropriate caution. There are clear limitations to the knowledge they provide, both in relation to the observers and the observed, and they are replete with gaps, redactions and inconsistencies. Consequently they need to be read alongside other sources documenting a tumultuous period in Australian history. Bearing those caveats in mind, the ASIO files nonetheless allow historians to paint a portrait of Brian Medlin as seen through the eyes of ASIO.

**Brian Medlin at Flinders University**

Brian Medlin was born in Orroroo in South Australia’s mid-North in 1927. He was educated at Richmond Primary School and then Adelaide Technical High School, although he was often to contend that much of his education came from his extensive reading in the State Library of South Australia and from his experience of life in the Australian bush. After he had finished his formal schooling in the mid-1940s he worked as a
storekeeper on the Victoria River Downs station and travelled widely in the Northern Territory.6

Medlin became the Foundation Professor of Flinders University at the beginning of 1967, where he taught until his retirement in 1988.7 During his time at Flinders, Medlin established a reputation as a bold and interesting character. As Schumann observes, ‘he brought to his teaching charisma, dramatic flair and rigorous argument’.8 When asked how he defined his politics, Medlin replied that he was ‘a passionate, but not a bigoted socialist’.9

Medlin’s left-leaning political interests came to be reflected in his teaching at Flinders, and were integrated into the philosophy curriculum in the early 1970s. Along with his political philosophy teachings, Medlin also became involved in Adelaide’s protest movement, participating in anti-Vietnam war committees and marches with vim and vigour. It was his enthusiastic anti-war work, outspoken character and striking personality which saw him placed under surveillance by ASIO.10 Although Medlin was a more moderate advocate amongst

6 Schumann, Obituary for Brian Herbert Medlin
7 Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich (eds.), Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie: The Correspondence between Iris Murdoch and Brian Medlin, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014, pxv
8 Schumann, Obituary for Brian Herbert Medlin, p2
9 Dooley and Nerlich (eds.), Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie, px
10 For a discussion of ASIO’s surveillance at Flinders University more generally see Anna Kovac, ‘Under Surveillance: The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation at Flinders University, 1969-1983’, Honours thesis, School of History and International Relations, Flinders University, 2015, chapter 2
protesters – favouring compliance with law enforcement and peaceful actions – he continued to be observed and recorded.  

The ASIO record

The seven volumes of ASIO files under analysis span from 1954 to 1977 and provide an insight into the scrutiny under which he was placed. As a frequent meeting and event attendee, much of what makes up Medlin’s files is his appearance at such events. He was watched at group gatherings, his telephone conversations were transcribed, and his involvement in protests was recorded. These notes are interspersed with news clippings and mentions of Medlin by fellow protesters, forming a scrap book of his public political activities.

Curiously the file record begins not with him but with his first wife Prudence Lethbridge. Lethbridge was suspected of gathering intelligence for the Soviets during her time working as a waitress at the Woomera Rocket Range. ASIO, however, did not have ‘anything to back this suspicion up with’. The heavily redacted first page from 1954 titled ‘Prudence LETHBRIDGE

11 For a broader study of ASIO’s activities at Flinders University, see Anna Kovac, ‘Under Surveillance: The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation at Flinders University, 1969-1983’, Honours thesis, School of History and International Relations, Flinders University, 2015, chapter 2

12 As part of the ‘Inter-Government Agreement Between the United Kingdom-Australia Government on the Guided Missile Project’, a testing range was set up at Woomera in South Australia. See David Lowe, Menzies and the ‘Great World Struggle’: Australia’s Cold War, 1948-1954, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 1999, pp17-18

13 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA: A6119, 4000, pp6-7
& Associates’, mentions Medlin in the last few sentences as the man known to be Lethbridge’s husband. Medlin was recorded as having recently married Lethbridge and was studying teaching at the Adelaide Teachers’ College. This association with a suspected communist first brought Medlin to the attention of the intelligence organisation.

One other Medlin relative also was considered worthy of observation and mention, namely his brother, Harry Medlin, a physicist who was vetted for a position at the Long Range Weapons Establishment, north of Adelaide. Though the ‘special check’ presents glowing remarks about Harry, it was sceptical of Brian. The report referred to Brian Medlin as ‘a poet, a bohemian type whose moral standard is open to question’. Why Medlin’s character as a ‘bohemian type’ was of interest to ASIO makes sense only in a Cold War setting. As David McKnight explains, for some ‘a seamless web connected immorality to subversion to espionage’. Apparently the brothers were not close, lessening the impact of Brian’s questionable moral standards. Through this connection, it was Brian who came under the watch of the intelligence

14 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p7
15 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p7
16 The Long Range Weapons Establishment at Salisbury was also part of the ‘Inter-Government Agreement Between the United Kingdom-Australia Government on the Guided Missile Project’. The Salisbury site was a research laboratory, and was later incorporated into the Defence Science and Technology Organisation. See Lowe, Menzies and the ‘Great World Struggle’, pp17-18
17 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p9
18 David McKnight, Australia’s Spies and Their Secrets, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p35
organisations. Yet it was not until the early sixties when Brian Medlin returned from a research and teaching sojourn abroad that his ASIO files picks up again.\footnote{Schumann, Obituary for Brian Herbert Medlin, p. 2}

During his time at Flinders Medlin accrued a number of surveillance files in the ASIO office.\footnote{In 1988, Medlin became an Emeritus Professor.} Medlin was recorded on many occasions for challenging tendencies to conform with past practices. ASIO also became aware that along with introducing political philosophy topics at Flinders, he was also involved in numerous acts of protest.\footnote{ASIO’s monitoring of Brian Medlin was a typical case for the time. Many left-wing activists were placed under surveillance due to their political beliefs and actions. For more information, see: Fay Anderson, \textit{Historian’s Life: Max Crawford and the Politics of Academic Freedom}, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2005; Meredith Burgmann, (ed.), \textit{Dirty Secrets, Our ASIO Files}, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2014; Fiona Capp, \textit{Writers Defiled}, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, 1993; David Horner, \textit{The Spy Catchers, The Official History of ASIO 1949-1963}, Volume I, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2014}

The influence of Medlin’s political interests on his teaching practice was evident within just a few years of his appointment. In 1971 the Philosophy Department began to offer the subjects: Marxism-Leninism I and II, and Applied Philosophy: Vietnam, Imperialism and the Nature of Man.\footnote{David Hilliard, \textit{Flinders University, The First 25 Years, 1966-1991}, The Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1991, p57} These topics were radically different to the subjects usually taught by the Philosophy Department. Indeed, Medlin himself saw these views existing within a traditional university setting:
In the early days of the university, many academics saw themselves as pretty progressive. In this I think they were partly mistaken. There was feeling abroad that Flinders embodied a new educational philosophy. This feeling was reflected in nomenclature rather than in practice. Our ‘schools’ were still pretty much faculties, our ‘disciplines’ pretty much departments.²³

The new political philosophy topics on offer were viewed with scepticism by more traditional academics, as well as being noted by ASIO. Medlin defended his teaching of radical politics against conservative critic Professor David Armstrong, Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney. Armstrong observed: ‘It seems to me that at least half of their [Flinders Philosophy Department] courses are devoted to pushing a particular political line and I think that’s very objectionable in a university.’²⁴ Reports of these new topics and the reaction they garnered were snipped out of newspapers and added to Medlin’s ASIO dossier.

On campus Medlin and senior lecturer in philosophy Gregory O’Hair openly and publicly expressed their disdain for conscription of young Australian men for military service in the Vietnam War. As an act of defiance, both Medlin and O’Hair filled out National Service Registration forms with false names

²³ Brian Medlin, ‘A Time of Revolt, An account of the late sixties and early seventies’, Brian Medlin Collection, MED/001-026, MED/010, Special Collections, Flinders University, p5
²⁴ David Armstrong in Peter Fry (ed.), ‘Fact and Opinion’, Brian Medlin Collection, MED/001-026, MED/003, Special Collections, Flinders University, p5
and addresses, encouraging others to join them and protest against the draft. A clipping from *The News* detailing this resistance was inserted into Medlin’s file.\(^{25}\) As well as carrying out acts of resistance on campus, Medlin continued to encourage others to do so at anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. An ASIO report from an anti-conscription rally held in Adelaide in 1969 noted that after a speech student Albert Langer, ‘MEDLIN continued speaking in an anti-conscription vein and urged non-compliance with the National Service Act.’\(^ {26}\) Another report from the same event made by the South Australian Police Special Branch recorded that Medlin had previously spoken against conscription and the Vietnam War at demonstrations and that he planned to lodge a false registration form for National Service during the next week.\(^ {27}\)

As evidence from the ASIO files which documented the student political groups at Flinders shows, informants were present on campus. It is then rather curious that none were assigned to report on Brian Medlin. Although the dossiers relating to Flinders generally show that on-campus informants only passed on information sporadically, there are *no* reports whatsoever in Medlin’s file from contacts working at Flinders. Perhaps there was a lack of co-ordination with surveillance carried out on students, or Medlin’s on campus activities were viewed as less important. What seems of more pressing interest

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\(^{25}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA: A6119, 4001, p28  
\(^{26}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, p40  
\(^{27}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, p36
was his off-campus political involvement, which saw him become a key figure in Adelaide’s protest movement.

Medlin’s pro-communist political views made him a clear target for surveillance by ASIO. Though Medlin participated in numerous protest activities on campus, ASIO seems to have recorded these events only from afar. Newspaper clippings make up most of the recorded Flinders-based activities, with close contact surveillance conducted off-campus.

**Adelaide’s Protest Movement**

In 1964, the National Service Act saw thousands of young people sent to fight in the Vietnam War. A ballot system was used to determine who would be drafted, with the birthdays of twenty-year-old males entered to be drawn. Compulsory service in a foreign war brought the realities of the Vietnam to Australian shores. In response to this many young people, university students and concerned citizens came together to oppose conscription and Australia’s involvement in the War. Protests opposing the war were part of an Australia-wide movement that drew much attention from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation.

Medlin’s involvement transcended university politics, and saw him participate in numerous anti-war organisations and demonstrations. He was involved in multiple peace groups who organised protests, readings, distributed literature and hosted conferences. Most notable was his involvement in the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam and the Moratorium movement. Medlin
was adamant that all demonstrations be kept peaceful, advising demonstrators to co-operate with law enforcement when required. This straight line approach occasionally saw him clash with more radical personalities at protests. As these groups were strongly opposed to the Liberal-supported Vietnam War, the government directed the intelligence organisation to keep a watchful eye on protest activities. Most of what was noted consists of details of meetings and protests, interspersed with recorded telephone calls and second-hand pieces of information.

**ASIO and the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam**

Medlin’s most active role during this period was as chairman and member of the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam (CPV). The CPV was a moderate anti-Vietnam War group which formed in Adelaide in 1967, with Medlin as its chairman.\(^{28}\) It began as a small organisation, which aimed to promote an end to Australia’s involvement in Vietnam and general hostilities in the region. It announced its establishment with a letter to the editor of *The Advertiser*. It reads: ‘There have been many signs recently that a bigger Australian military involvement in the Vietnam War is being called for. Disturbed by this prospect, a number of Adelaide citizens recently established “Campaign for

\(^{28}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p79; Graham Hastings, *It Can’t Happen Here: A political history of Australian student activism*, The Students’ Association of Flinders University, Adelaide, 2003, p43
Peace in Vietnam”. It was with the CPV that Medlin would be most involved during the Vietnam years.

The bulk of CPV activities included letter writing, organising petitions, holding conferences, distributing literature and hosting speakers; the group was far from a revolutionary movement. Despite its moderate aims, the CPV meetings and demonstrations were under surveillance by ASIO’s agents and officers. The open-meeting minutes, protest attendees and CPV newsletters make up the bulk of Medlin’s file. A CPV meeting on Wednesday 30th August 1967 was said to be attended by ‘not the usual types seen at such meetings’, but ‘a better class of person who seemed to be of a higher intellectual level than usual’. This comment is one of very few instances of somewhat irrelevant ‘analysis’, but analysis nonetheless, as usually details were recorded without any discussion. What seems to be missing are CPV letters sent out to committee members, indicating that no agent or privy informant had gone so far as to actually join the group. Surveillance on the CPV was largely carried out from a distance. Many pamphlets and flyers produced by the CPV and other peace organisations Medlin was involved in – such as the School for Non-Violent Direct Action – were merely ‘forwarded for information’ to ASIO and filed

among surveillance details.\textsuperscript{31} ASIO noted separately the people mentioned in the CPV literature, including their profession and home address, and the relevant file number where applicable. This was likely used to cross reference gathered information, but there are no comments made on the interactions or relationships between people.\textsuperscript{32}

In December of 1967 Medlin was nominated to serve on the National Literature Censorship Board. As with any appointment by the state government, the usual process of vetting was carried out. In this instance, the check was ordered by Mr. A. G. Venning, the Collector of Customs for South Australia. Venning had been instructed ‘to make local enquiries and submit his comments and advice within a period of two hours’.\textsuperscript{33} ASIO pointed Venning in the right direction, referring him to a publicly available article in \textit{The Advertiser} which detailed Medlin’s role as chairman of the CPV.\textsuperscript{34} Correspondence with the National Archives of Australia indicates that Medlin was not appointed to this role, but with no explanation why.

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\textsuperscript{31} Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p105  \\
\textsuperscript{32} David McKnight comments that ‘The routine copying of reports, such as a report of a meeting of eighteen people being copied and placed on the eighteen personal files of those attending can be seen today in many files.’ See David McKnight, ‘How to Read Your ASIO File’, in Meredith Burgmann (ed.), \textit{Dirty Secrets, Our ASIO Files}, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2014, p37  \\
\textsuperscript{33} Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p43  \\
\textsuperscript{34} Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p43
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ASIO noted the crossover in CPV and CPA membership, but concluded that the two organisations were not working together.\(^{35}\) However, Medlin’s file contains many mentions of his contact with workers at the CPA newspaper, *Tribune*. This relationship is recorded as a largely professional arrangement, with *Tribune* publishing details of prospective CPV events and successful activities. For example, following a vigil hosted by the CPV, a record of the events was sent to the *Tribune* to be printed.\(^{36}\) ASIO noted the CPA’s interest in the CPV for future reference, recording details without assessment.

Medlin’s involvement in the CPV continued to be monitored throughout the Vietnam War period, despite it being a peaceful group. Details of meetings – times, places, attendees and discussions – were recorded, with comments from the ASIO agents conducting surveillance sprinkled throughout.\(^{37}\) The CPV’s connection with the CPA was considered, yet documents showing the two groups interacting do not reveal any relationship other a professional one based on solidarity.

**The Vietnam Moratorium Campaign**

Medlin also became involved in a larger, Australia-wide movement to end the war in Vietnam: the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign (VMC), which formed in 1970. Inspired by American protests, Australia’s peace groups came together to lead large-scale street marches in major cities, staging three Moratoriums,

\(^{35}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p79
\(^{36}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p71
\(^{37}\) Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p23
and whipping thousands into action against the war.\textsuperscript{38} The VMC called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Vietnam and a repeal of the National Service Act.\textsuperscript{39} The campaign staged a number of protests which were recorded by ASIO, one of which saw Medlin stop his academic teachings for a week. Along with the happenings of each event, ASIO recorded what was said, what significant individuals did and filed any documents produced by the VMC.

As Medlin was involved in both the formation of the CPV and VMC, the two groups coordinated to organise the Moratorium. The CPV executive was to act as the coordinating committee and ‘harmonise’ the demonstrations in South Australia, to the chagrin of many dedicated CPV members.\textsuperscript{40} While the VMC, as a general aim, opposed the war, many groups involved had other, more revolutionary aims.\textsuperscript{41} In his role as committee member, Medlin continued to advocate for peaceful demonstrations, sometimes leading to clashes with more revolutionary members. Albert Langer, a radical student from Victoria, as well as members of Provo, the draft resistance

\textsuperscript{38} Hastings, \textit{It Can’t Happen Here}, pp39-40
\textsuperscript{40} Derek Healey, ‘Motion proposed by Derek Healey at CPV Executive meeting’, John Tregenza (1931-1999) Papers, 9 December, 1969, MSS0110/2CPV 1969, Adelaide University Rare Books & Special Collections
group, also advocated for more violent measures to be implemented. Medlin’s approach was far more conservative when compared to these more radical advocates.

Only one month after Medlin’s peaceful protest tactics were reiterated in his file, ASIO perceptions of Medlin shifted. A police Special Branch report included in his dossier details scepticism about Medlin’s approach. It reported there was ‘some feeling’ that Medlin had ‘changed his views in relation to his previously stressed non-violent participation at demonstrations.’ It was unsure ‘if or why’ his views had changed but stated that ‘concentration will be aimed in an endeavour to clarify this.’ Later ASIO reported that at a VMC meeting Medlin read a poem he had written mentioning the use of firearms against authorities. This report matches Fiona Capp’s observation that ‘almost without exception, the negative character studies which were more in tune with the premise of the file, ultimately held sway’.

Indicative of this supposed radical shift was Medlin’s arrest on 18 September 1970 during a VMC march. Far from inciting violence, Medlin’s arrest related to his obstruction of traffic during the protest. This incident was filed under the heading ‘Operation Whip’, which was ASIO’s attempt to

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42 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, p82
43 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, pp84-85
44 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, p 92
analyse any seeming connections between the student protest movement and the Communist Party of Australia. Medlin’s arrest record, along with a series of photos taken by the South Australian Police, were indexed under his name.\textsuperscript{46}

There is one more ASIO report from 1968 regarding Medlin’s demonstration methods, but as large portions are redacted it is difficult to determine the context. The general thrust of the report indicates Medlin viewed a particular protest as too peaceful, and urged demonstrators to provoke police in future.\textsuperscript{47}

Despite these accusations of violent motives, Medlin continued to advocate for peaceful protests. Indeed, at one point it was he who was a victim of police violence at a demonstration.\textsuperscript{48} In subsequent files, no other observations recorded by ASIO seem to clarify their claim. His lonely poem was the only scrap of evidence available.

During the week of the first VMC, Medlin left the university to join in the marches. In the Flinders University student magazine, \textit{Empire Times}, Medlin wrote a letter to the editor about his plans to suspend his academic teachings from May 4-8: ‘During that week I shall be fully occupied with the affairs [sic] of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign. In the

\textsuperscript{46} Brian Herbert Medlin, vol III, NAA: A6119, 4002, p127
\textsuperscript{47} Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p64
\textsuperscript{48} Brian Medlin, ‘Evidence, J.W. Lewis 46.1172’, Medlin Collection MED/0027-034, MED/032, Special Collections, Flinders University, p5
present national situation I regard these as more important than my academic duties.’ 49 ASIO was right there to monitor the marches. Along with this, newspaper clippings about the event were cut out and pasted into his file.

Medlin was seemingly aware that the eyes of ASIO were upon him, but this does not appear to have hindered his involvement in the protest movement. He simply became a little more wary of his personal interactions. As a former student noted, ‘Brian, particularly, was very cautious about who he associated with, who he invited into his home and with whom he discussed political rather than academic matters.’ 50 Evidence shows only one conversation was recorded between Medlin and an employee at the office of the CPA newspaper, Tribune, but nothing more suggest that Medlin’s telephone was tapped. However, other conversations recorded from the Tribune office telephone suggest it was the telephone that was tapped. 51 One page, which has been heavily redacted and rendered incomprehensible, reads ‘his telephone was being “tapped” and that on one occasion the equipment had gone wrong and had played back part of the conversation that had just taken place’. 52 Whether this was in reference to Medlin or not is unclear.

49 Brian Medlin, ‘Strike’, Letter to the Editor, Empire Times, vol. 2, no. 5, Flinders University Student Representative Council, April 24, 1970
50 Schumann, email correspondence to author.
51 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I NAA, p66
52 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol I, NAA, p64
Although the VMC was a much larger movement that included a diverse range of radical viewpoints, it was still a relatively harmonious affair. Medlin’s role in the VMC also continued as a peaceful one, despite suspicions that his motivations had changed. ASIO recorded much of the VMC’s activities, from marches to meetings to literature distribution, in much the same way it recorded details of students at Flinders: with a high level of detail, but little comment or analysis.

**Modes of surveillance**

Both agents of ASIO and employees of the South Australian Police Special Branch monitored and recorded details of Medlin’s political activities. The majority of these observations were made off campus, with on campus activities were usually recorded in the form of newspaper clippings.

The details reported in Medlin’s ASIO files suggest more than one person gathered intelligence on the professor. While some reports are seemingly authored by an ‘agent’, others show information from a ‘contact’ or ‘case officer’. Yet only one individual is revealed as working undercover for ASIO: Corporal Brian A. McDonald. He is recorded as a former army member and part-time student, sent undercover to gather intelligence in Adelaide’s politically left circles. Unfortunately, no other details on this individual have been uncovered.

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53 Brian Herbert Medlin, vol II, NAA, p94
Medlin’s dossier includes reports not only from ASIO, but also from the Special Branch of the South Australian Police Force. One example is a series of three reports from a single demonstration: one authored by a member of the Special Branch, a second version of the police report rewritten by ASIO, and a third report written directly by an ASIO officer. The administrative incompetence of the intelligence organisation meant multiple copies of near identical documents were filed away. Additionally, the number of reports from the Special Branch show the great overlap in the monitoring of individuals. There may have been far more surveillance conducted by the police than ASIO intelligence officer themselves, and therefore far more information stored away in the Special Branch archives.

The Report on Special Branch Security Records, compiled by Mr. Acting Justice White in 1977, seems to suggest that the Special Branch was equally as guilty as ASIO of unjustified surveillance. The report noted that among the persons on file were ‘all university personalities with a strong view on any political or social issue, usually designated as either “left” or “radical”.’ Alongside them were ‘a thousand or so innocent people who casually “came under notice” but about whom

54 The Special Branch of the South Australian Police Force, as with each branch in its respective state, co-operated with ASIO at a state level. This allowed the Special Branch resources to be utilised by ASIO.
55 The Honourable Mr. Acting Justice White, Special Branch Security Records, Initial Report to the Honourable Donald Allan Dunstan, Q.C., LL.B, M.P., Premier of the State of South Australia, December, 1977, p14
nothing adverse is known’. Along the same lines as the Hope Royal Commission’s findings, Justice White also highlighted how much of the Special Branch collection was without identifiable purpose. Australians had a right to be involved in peace campaigns, environmental campaigns and anti-conscription protests with being accused of subversion.

Many of the reports make note of observed conversations or impressions, but occasionally the informer also becomes a character in the report. Following a VMC meeting in 1970 recorded by ASIO, the agent’s comment reads: ‘So ended a most boring meeting that dragged on and on, and got virtually nowhere’. This reflection reminds the reader of the agent’s partial position in the narrative, prompting the questions – what was missed, misinterpreted or misconstrued? And what details were seen as important by each individual agent?

ASIO drew intelligence from publicly available documents, the Police Force and through its own employees. Its collaboration with the Special Branch of the South Australian Police Force provided more resources to be utilised, particularly during public protests. The number of Special Branch reports featured in Medlin’s files show that, in this instance, targeting

56 White, *Special Branch Security Records*, p. 4 & 14. The report states that records valuable to national security make up a minor part of the collection. Along with this, of the records considered to be related to ‘non-terrorist’ suspects half pertain to communist activities and the other half pertain to figures on the left.

57 White, *Special Branch Security Records*, p21

58 Brian Herbert Medlin, A6119, 4000, volume III, NAA, p30
figures on the left saw high levels of co-operation. ASIO’s own officers were also deployed into public protests and university circles, enabling the compilation of intelligence from various angles.

The value of ASIO’s dossiers on Brian Medlin

The monitoring of Medlin produced few pieces of revelatory information. ASIO justified its surveillance based on the false assumption that any person who did not toe a conservative line was worthy of surveillance, continuing to act with a clear political bias. Furthermore, ASIO interests did not seem to stretch beyond a shallow record of Medlin’s political involvements. Observations were made from afar, and data collected remained unanalysed. Medlin’s files are largely a collection of his attendance at meetings and events, along with publicly available or ‘gratis’ news stories. More than anything, these documents are an overwhelming array of methodically recorded details – names, meetings and gossip. However, this surface level surveillance can also be viewed as a positive aspect of the files. Apart from a few telephone conversations, the information gathered did not intrude into Medlin’s personal life. The first Royal Commission on Intelligence and Security even recommended this type of surveillance be employed and utilised, stating that much information can be gleaned from published or otherwise overly available sources. Open sources should not be lightly passed over by ASIO. In an open society like ours, a lot of people have their say in the media or are reported by it. A scholarly, routine and sustained analysis of
these materials will yield a great deal of information relevant to security.  

Yet it was precisely the ‘scholarly, routine and sustained analysis’ that was missing from the selection of publicly available information included in Medlin’s dossier, and very few pieces of information were relevant to Australia’s security concerns.

Far from finding anything shocking, Medlin’s ASIO files reveal little to set him apart as someone worthy of great concern. The only indication of Medlin’s poem mentioning the use of guns against authorities was, for ASIO, indicative of a violent turn in his politics, revealing more about ASIO’s wish to discover a violent streak than Medlin’s demonstration of one: seek and ye shall find. An informant sitting in on one of his classes about the Vietnam War or communism may have done more to shed light on his beliefs, if indeed they had any interest in doing so. Yet, ASIO seemed to steer clear of Medlin at Flinders.

Clearly, ASIO’s political motives were front and centre when it came to conducting surveillance, and in this instance they were right on track. Medlin was an outspoken and radical educator, vying for change and improvement within the university setting. However, far from covertly influencing student thought, he openly and actively promoted equality and

59 ‘Royal Commission on Intelligence and Security’, Fourth Report, 1976, NAA: A8908, p76
change. He in no way warranted the attention and resourced spent on surveillance.

It is curious that informants on campus reported on Flinders’ student politics, but only observed Medlin off-campus. His dossier contains news stories of radical politics at Flinders – including his political philosophy subject and draft resistance activities – but no agent or informant provided first-hand accounts. If ASIO was already working on campus, it would seem logical to have Medlin watched too. However, as the Flinders volume III suggests, students were not steadfast contacts. 60

Not much intelligence gathered by ASIO on Brian Medlin was inaccessible to the public. The peace organisations were open to new members and demonstrations were held in public. The story of suspicion which characterised Medlin’s file was padded out with newspaper clippings and opinions. These bits and pieces form a narrative of Medlin’s political involvement during this period. However, like all other files released to the public, these have been audited and edited to present and conceal certain details. At first the redactions are obvious – black lines obscuring key words, persons, places and details – then it becomes apparent that entire pages are missing. Details recorded and transcribed as seemingly accurate recollections are in reality second or third hand accounts. By chance, many of the missing documents relating to the CPV were available in

60 Flinders University SA, vol III, NAA A6122, 2369, p124
personal papers left by a former member, but these reveal only additional correspondence about the already available political agenda. Yet because an ASIO agent does not seem to have infiltrated the organisation, these are not included in Medlin’s dossier.

Conclusion

ASIO’s monitoring of Brian Medlin was extensive but seemingly drew few conclusions. The surveillance he was placed under is another example of the ASIO gathering intelligence on an outspoken political activist, rather than a valid security threat. Medlin’s involvement in democratising the university, advocating for Australia’s withdrawal from Vietnam, and opposing conscription, made him an active member of society with a social conscience, not someone to be considered a person of interest. The infringement on Medlin’s personal privacy saw ASIO record his attendance at political events, telephone conversations, personal interaction and details. This fits the intelligence organisation’s unjustified agenda of recording outspoken opponents on the political left. As Justice White wrote:

The rights to privacy and to freedom of political opinion demand that more specific and cautious evaluations should be made of situations, organisations and persons before information is collected and stored. The criteria for identifying subversion must be reasonable and realistic, and

61 John Tregenza (1931-1990) Papers, MSS 0049, Adelaide University Rare Books & Special Collections.
those thought to be involved in such subversion must only be treated as suspects where the suspicion is based on reasonable grounds.\textsuperscript{62}

Medlin’s surveillance was not built on these reasonable grounds. Fortunately, ASIO’s monitoring does not seem to have hindered Medlin’s personal or professional life greatly. Due to his active participation in Adelaide’s protest movement, it is no surprise that he was under surveillance by ASIO, however its resources would have been more effectively spent on surveillance of individuals relevant to its security brief.

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**About the Author**

Anna Kovac is a history research assistant at Flinders University. This piece is drawn from her honours thesis titled ‘Under Surveillance: The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation at Flinders University, 1969-1983’.

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\textsuperscript{62} White, *Special Branch Security Records*, p22