

Patriotic Snitch: Australia's Long Serving Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke as US Informant

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Larrikin is a word often, and inaccurately used, in Australian political lingo. Australia's longest serving Labor Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was known as one such figure. He was praised as the great communicator and healer between the forces of labour and capital, enjoyed imbibing, his sports and varied female company. He could also be vain and ruthless.

In June, a rather unremarkable revelation was made that Hawke had been something of an errand boy for the US imperium, a spiller of the beans and something of what Australians would call a “dobber”. Cameron Coventry, in an [article](#) published that month, makes much of embassy and diplomatic cables covering the late Hawke between 1973 and 1979. “During this time, he divulged information [to the US] about the Whitlam government (1972-75), the Fraser government (1975-83), Labor, and the labour movement.” What is less than flattering for the Australian establishment is that snitching and informing on colleagues and their various circles was more than an errant pastime: it was entrenched practise.

The image of Hawke as an eager informant for US officials had already attained form in the release of US state department cables by Wikileaks. During the turbulent times of the Labor government of Gough Whitlam, Hawke, according to embassy accounts, [speaks](#) of a party left in “bad financial shape” by their leader, one afflicted by “stupidity”. The acrimony between Prime Minister Whitlam and Hawke also registers with some frequency. This was of interest, given the very specific concerns from Washington that Whitlam was going wobbly on the alliance due to pressure from within his own party. His growing weakness was particularly troubling given “his basic moderation and support of US defence facilities and other US interests”, as [one embassy cable notes](#) in August 1974.

Hawke, for his part, was happy to pile upon Whitlam in his disclosures to the embassy, often with intense colour. An embassy official notes, [in one cable](#) in 1973, that, “Direct quotations in this report will be difficult as Hawke used short words of emphasis not suitable for family newspaper.” Whitlam, according to Hawke, was “egocentric” though a poor judge: having sought voting and funding support from the Jewish community, he proceeded to treat Jewish

elders in a “completely unsatisfactory and humiliating way”.

Two versions of Hawke emerge. There is the Hawke who publicly believed that Australia could find much in the context of independent non-alignment. (Even then, this would have been laughable, given the firm security cord binding Canberra to Washington.) Hawke the US informant and snitch [preferred](#) deeper and closer integration into the American machine, wishing to expand the ANZUS alliance beyond its “purely defensive military” character.

Given that Australia had become a rather nice bit of strategic realty for the US, there was much appreciation for his efforts to take the sting out of any potential threats posed by the Left in general and the trade union movement in particular. An important component to this was the relationship with the US Labour Attaché, a position long occupied by intelligence officers. The occupants of the position took much interest in the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), of which Hawke would become president. With his election, things got rosy, with US diplomats [keen to push](#) the ACTU into a sympathetic political orbit with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

The Labour Attaché would also contact Hawke on various occasions to intervene in industrial disputes. In 1973, Hawke was asked about a potential disagreement at the Harold E. Holt Naval Communication Station in Western Australia. Hawke, [the cable reports](#), “volunteered to intervene formally”, having felt “concern and surprise at the militancy” of workers on the site.

What emerges in the cables scrutinised by Coventry is a concerted strategy from Washington to encourage Hawke to abandon Keynesian economics in favour of more neoliberal policies. By the end of the 1970s, in Coventry’s [assessment](#), Hawke came to “believe the maintenance of full employment was secondary to controlling inflation; that wage restraint was pivotal to the inflation fight; and that tripartism [an accord between unions, employers and the government] was needed to enact macroeconomic reform.”

It did take some time to warm up to Hawke. Initially, as historian David McKnight [writes](#), US officials “were unnerved by his militant aspirations and his association with communists.” When he threw his hat in the ring for ACTU leadership in 1969, Labor Attaché Emil Lindahl [observed that](#), while he was “brilliant and effective”, detractors had taken issue with his “subjects to flights of irresponsibility, including drunkenness, playing around with women, and brawling”. Despite this, he could be counted, along with then ACTU President Harold Souter, “friends of the US”.

In 1978, Hawke the great defender of US interests and neutraliser of threats to Washington was appraised [in another cable](#). “Hawke has a lively and sometimes critical interest in the United States and has been a friend of Labor attaches and US officials in Australia [...]. [I]n 1973 he told a US official that Australia and the US must remain close for a long time to come.” A few years later, the cable further notes, Hawke “said that his personal attitude on foreign policy questions was very close to the United States.” No wonder that Hawke, on becoming prime minister in 1983, made any criticism of the Australian-US relationship an offence worthy of political stoning.

These latest, ably compiled revelations should be damning. But like long spells of selective amnesia, heroes in the pantheon of politics will be spared public scrutiny. Hawke hagiographers will simply find, in their hero, a straight thinking fellow keen to stay in the

good books of a great power in order to protect Australian interests. That this seemed almost treasonous will never be countenanced.

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Featured image: Hawke and US President Ronald Reagan at the White House in November 1984 (Public Domain)

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