

Secret embassy cables cast the Bob Hawke legend in a different light

Papers show Hawke as a unionist said one thing to his members, and something quite different to his US embassy friends



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Jeff Sparrow
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Does it matter that, according to a new paper by Federation University's Cameron Coventry, Labor legend Bob Hawke regularly informed for the United States?

Former ALP national president Stephen Loosely (who now works for the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre) thinks not.

"He was an Australian first, last and always," Loosely told the Australian newspaper.

Many Labor supporters will not be so sanguine, struggling to reconcile the Hawke they thought they knew with the figure revealed in secret embassy cables.

The documents uncovered by Coventry date from 1973 to 1979, a period of bitter industrial and political conflict during which Hawke, as leading trade unionist, often featured in the press as a stalwart militant.

We now know he said one thing to his members and something quite different to his US embassy friends.

In August 1974, for example, Hawke told diplomats that the wage demands for which Australian unionists thought he was fighting were actually to blame for Australia's rampant inflation.

In public, he backed an "independent non-aligned Australia" (a popular stance in the aftermath of the Vietnam war); in private, he told US officials he wanted the Anzus co-defence pact extended beyond a "purely military alliance".

Coventry says the Americans valued their relationship with Hawke because he "helped protect [US] defence installations, provided information about union disputes and warned officials that installations could be targeted".

In 1973, the American Labour Attaché (a figure quite probably connected to the CIA) contacted Hawke about a potential union dispute at the joint American-Australian facility at North West Cape. The cables record that Hawke "volunteered to intervene informally", saying he felt "concern and surprise at the militancy" of the workers.

The Americans particularly appreciated Hawke's willingness to deradicalise the labour movement. As Coventry puts it: "Hawke proved useful in pre-empting and pacifying union disputes."

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On another occasion, he informed them about industrial tensions within the Ford Motor Company and other multinationals, warning the ambassador that such companies might be "targeted" by activists and unions. The US officials also thanked Hawke for, as they said, "mastermind[ing]" the "erosion" of popular anti-uranium policy by playing on a "break in union solidarity".

The ties between Hawke and the embassy were such that, during the ACTU conference of 1973, one diplomat wrote: "[C]onsidering ... Robert Hawke is personally involved, [the US Labour Attaché] expects to be deeply involved [in the event]".

After Hawke's death in 2019, pundits celebrated him as an authentic, strine-speaking ocker, devoted to "unionism, labourism and the Labor party".

The Americans thought different. For them, Hawke was "an experienced chameleon", a man who "successfully played down his academic record and bookish background" to present himself as "the ideal Australian Labor leader".

In one cable, they record Hawke discussing an invitation from his good friend the industrialist Sir Peter Abeles to embrace "political realignment" in response to the crisis of Whitlam government. Citing a separate supporting evidence from another cable, Coventry concludes that "Hawke appears to have contemplated – and advocated – abandoning Labor in 1974 to pursue a British-style national government in order to face the economic crisis".

That didn't happen. Famously, though, after becoming prime minister in 1983, Hawke implemented the prices and income accord, a project in which the labour movement embraced wage restraint as part of an ongoing collaboration with employers and the state. In her important 2018 book *How Labour Built Neoliberalism*, Elizabeth Humphrys argues that Hawke's accord – with its commitment to market principles, privatisations and user-pay mechanisms – brought into Australia the neoliberal strategies that were elsewhere implemented by the parties of the right.

The cables show that as early as 1974 the US was suggesting to Hawke that he foster a "tripartite committee of unions, employers and government" to reach agreement on wages and other industrial issues.

Not all of Coventry's evidence is new. But, assembled as a package, it deals a blow to the Hawke legend.

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Furthermore, the context in which it has emerged makes the material particularly significant. The high court recently upheld the constitutional legitimacy of Australia's new foreign interference laws.

One challenge came from John Shi Sheng Zhang, a political adviser to NSW Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane. The second challenge, however, came from a rightwing US group called LibertyWorks, which objected to the new legally requirement to register a conference featuring Tony Abbott and Nigel Farage.

That's because, on paper at least, the new laws criminalise the kind of meddling in which the Americans have gleefully engaged for decades.

In the 1950s, for instance, the US Information Service dispensed "leader grants" funded by the US Information Service to tutor Australian politicians and unionists in rightwing principles. Around the same time, the CIA launched the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which handed out funds to anti-communist intellectuals. The literary magazine *Quadrant*, the outlet of choice for generations of rightwingers, depended on CIA money to get off the ground.

Later, the American Chamber of Commerce established the "Australian trade union training program", a course that created a tame cadre of pro-business unionists.

Coventry provides a brief roll call of Australian politicians who, in the 1970s, maintained what he calls "discreet relationships with United States officials": foreign minister Don Willesee; Liberal leader Billy Snedden; Barrie Unsworth, who became New South Wales premier; Don Dunstan, the South Australian premier; the anti-communist crusader BA Santamaria; and others.

Had today's foreign interference laws been in place in the 1970s, Hawke's conduct would certainly have invited legal investigation.

As the tension between the US and China continues to grow, this new research reminds us that it's not just one state that intervenes in local affairs.

- *Jeff Sparrow is a Guardian Australia columnist*