

What 'fascist mob'? *Overland* and the IPA

Chris Berg: Opposing government

interference in the economy and society is hardly support for 'fascism'. An attack on the Institute of Public Affairs in the latest edition of *Overland* by Shane Cahill shows just how far the socialist literary magazine has strayed off the ranch.

Just the title of the piece—'This Fascist Mob'—indicates *Overland's* relaxed approach to scholarship. 'Fascist' is a word with a very specific meaning. But its use in this case is drawn from an anonymous critic complaining about that the IPA's opposition to the Curtin government's heavy-handed approach to regulation during the war meant that the IPA was probably a Japanese sympathiser.

In 1944, a furious letter written by an anonymous air force officer complaining about the IPA was sent to the Deputy Prime Minister. In this letter, he accused the IPA of sabotaging the war effort by producing a wartime radio programme. This programme, *The Harris Family*, was a scripted radio play where a family discussed and debated the dangers of over-regulation, price controls, and centralisation. The show, as the airman pointed out, was rarely very friendly to the Labor government.

This letter made its way to the Commonwealth Security Service (CSS)—the precursor to ASIO—and provoked a minor investigation into its allegations. The CSS commenced the serious task of finding out whether the IPA was, as the letter writer claimed, 'more vile and sinister than any Jap'. In early 1944, the CSS collected reports from its state divisions on the activities of the IPA across the country, but nothing surfaced to indicate that the IPA's activities were anything outside of the normal political debate.

The scripts for *The Harris Family* had been duly submitted to the Commonwealth wartime censors and approved; the IPA's constitutions and executive officers were public record, and apart from an inclination to 'discredit the Labor government'—hardly a crime in a liberal democracy, even during the war—the

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investigation turned up nothing incriminating.

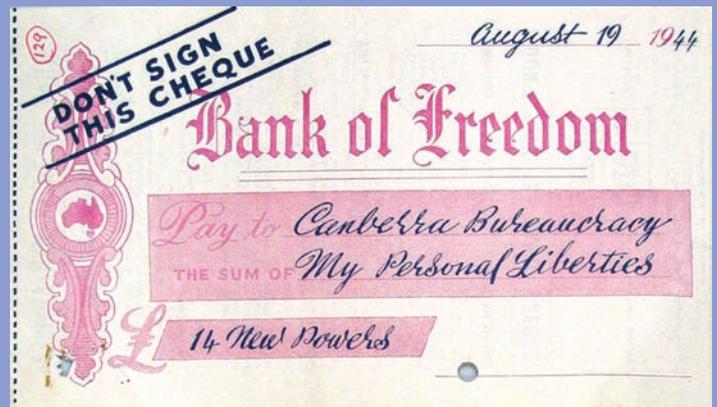
Indeed, the CSS file is replete with scrawled notes doubting the necessity of the investigation—'this appears to be to be just a political matter'. And the CSS Deputy-Director dismissed the investigation with the comment that 'the committee and others sponsoring the Institute are well known representative people in Melbourne whose integrity and loyalty should be beyond reproach'.

The rest of the Cahill piece tries to tie this small sidenote in the history of the IPA to broader investigations about sympathy for Japanese fascism in Australia's business community. Two senior businessmen and members of the IPA council were recorded as members of the pre-war Japan-Australia Society. In the 1920s into the 1930s, Japan was an important trade partner of Australia. By the time of the IPA's foundation, the Japan-Australia Society was history.

But nevertheless, in Cahill's hands, this represents the 'compromised and murky milieu from which the IPA emerged'.

The implication of the *Overland* piece is that, while the IPA may nowadays claim to be a vigorous defender of representative government and liberal freedoms, its founders would have found a fascist dictatorship just as nice. As Cahill writes, 'In the 1930s and the 1940s the link between freedom and the "free flow of capital" didn't seem so apparent'.

Perhaps not for the intellectual ancestors of *Overland*, who, in the mid 1940s, were still debating whether democracy was necessary in a socialist paradise. But the reality is far more mundane than Cahill's conspiracy theory of fascist Japanese sympathisers undermining the Curtin government from within the business



IPA material produced in 1944

community.

What was the IPA doing during the later stages of the war? The IPA was the first free market think tank in the world. As it had no clear international parallel or precedent to give guidance, each state division of the IPA took a different view of how engaged the think tank should be with the day to day political fray. The Queensland and New South Wales divisions were prolific propagandists—*The Harris Family* was complemented with imitation cheques which were slid into Queenslanders' pay packets asking them not to sign away their freedoms to Canberra in the 1944 constitutional referendum. (See picture above.) The Victorian division by contrast was more interested in longer-term, and more sober, policy analysis.

In 2008, the IPA is accustomed to abuse from the left, and is too often accused of 'fascism'—as if the IPA's mantra of free markets and free societies is the equivalent of totalitarianism and militant nationalism. The tone of *Overland* is too quasi-scholarly to openly accuse the IPA of fascist sympathies, but, through a careful manipulation of the historical record and abuse of political terminology, Cahill tries to let the anonymous air force officer speak for the modern left. About the only accurate thing in the *Overland* piece is calling the IPA of 2008 'prolific'.

The IPA's wartime CSS file is online at the National Archives of Australia:
www.naa.gov.au

