

# Spying on your calls

Review by Brian Martin

**S**pying thrives on secrecy; this is nowhere more true than in the world of signals intelligence or SIGINT. Every time you make an international communication by phone, fax or e-mail, it is likely to be intercepted and end up in a giant database that can be accessed by spy agencies in several countries. This entire process is so secret that even most politicians know almost nothing about it.

*Secret Power* is a tour de force of investigation and revelation about the secret world of SIGINT. Nicky Hager, a veteran peace activist and researcher, painstakingly pieced together bits of information about the Government Communi-

cations Security Bureau (GCSB), the New Zealand SIGINT organisation.

He extracted information from the scarce public documents and, most impressively, was able to contact numerous GCSB employees, winning enough confidence to obtain further information.

The Australian equivalent of GCSB is the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), which is much less well known than ASIO. The most powerful SIGINT organisation by far is the US National Security Agency (NSA), itself far larger than the CIA.

The spy organisations of the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are tied together by the secret UKUSA agreement.

The detail in *Secret Power* is

amazing. It includes names and duties of numerous GCSB officials, locations and floor plans of spy stations, budgets, work routines and political history.

This wealth of information is unknown even to most GCSB employees, most of whom are restricted to their own specialist areas, much less to politicians or citizens. It is the most detailed exposé of any SIGINT body.

The book spells out the basic operation of the highly secret ECHELON system — so secret that even its name is secret. Any information sent via global communications satellites is pulled down by one of the main UKUSA spy stations around the world and automatically decoded by computer.

The messages are put into bundles according to key words. Workers at GCSB and its UKUSA partners type in a category and then are able to download a bundle of documents which they can read, translate from a foreign language or summarise. Reports prepared in one agency are available to others.

## **Secret Power: New Zealand's Role in the International Spy Network**

By Nicky Hager  
Nelson, New Zealand: Craig Potton, 1996. 299 pp., NZ\$34.95

The basic framework is set by the NSA and largely serves US spy interests.

When the New Zealand government banned visits of nuclear ships in the 1980s, the US government supposedly retaliated by cutting off spy links (so-called "intelligence"). Actually, this was a facade for public and political consumption.

Spy links continued just about as before. Indeed, during this period the new Waihopai station was set up to monitor the Intelsat communications satellite at 174 degrees east. This cemented New Zealand into the five-nation spy network. New Zealanders were misled, being told the reason for the station was to provide New Zealand independence.

In one way, Hager's insights are reassuring. SIGINT is remarkably useless. It is hard to point to a single benefit to society that would justify the expenditure on this sort of spying.

In the one major instance of terrorism in New Zealand — the French bombing of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985 — GCSB provided no information at all. In the 1987 Fiji coups, GCSB provided

little useful information before or afterwards.

It seems that covertly sifting through vast volumes of electronic communications seldom provides any insight beyond what is available from publicly available sources. This suggests that the best way to develop real "intelligence" is through an open system.

By all means let us have an "intelligence" agency, but let all its methods and results be public, open to scrutiny. This would be much more democratic. A regular process of scrutiny and debate would undoubtedly produce better insights into world affairs.

Hager says, regarding the ECHELON system, that "the secrecy surrounding it makes it so impervious to democratic oversight, that the temptation to use it for questionable projects seems irresistible".

This is the crux of the matter. Highly secret spy operations are not appropriate in a democracy. Hager quotes a GCSB officer: "The secrecy is not for the Russians, it is for the general public. If they knew what the bureau does, it would not be allowed to continue."

*Secret Power* is the best window yet into the secrets of SIGINT and clearly reveals the need for true public accountability. The book has generated considerable discussion in New Zealand. An Australian publisher is needed to distribute it on this side of the Tasman. ■