



Perspective

Perspective 10 May 2004 - Dr Brian Martin

[This is the print version of story <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s1101634.htm>]

Over the years I've talked to hundreds of whistleblowers. I'm on the national committee of Whistleblowers Australia and whistleblowers come to us from all over: teachers, police, public servants, private sector employees, churches, you name it.

These admirable individuals speak out in the public interest. For their efforts they suffer harassment, ostracism, reprimands, assignment to petty duties, referral to psychiatrists, demotions, dismissals and blacklisting. Their lives are made a living hell.

To compound the disaster, few whistleblowers are effective. Their disclosures seldom lead to any beneficial change in policy or practice. Therefore I was delighted to meet Andrew Wilkie when he spoke at the Whistleblowers Australia annual general meeting in December. In my judgement, he is one of Australia's most effective whistleblowers. He resigned from the Office of National Assessments just before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, condemning the government's use of intelligence to justify going to war.

Wilkie did nearly everything right. He resigned, thereby avoiding debilitating reprisals at work. He skipped all the formal reporting processes that give only an illusion of justice. He chose the ideal moment to speak out about dubious claims concerning Iraq, and he went straight to the media, the most effective tool for dissent. He spoke calmly and accurately, a remarkable performance for someone who had just sacrificed his career for his beliefs.

Wilkie is only one of a number of Iraq-policy dissenters from within intelligence and policy circles in Australia, Britain and the US. Wendy Errey, an Australian defence adviser, recently claimed to have been sacked for refusing to write media briefings on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Katherine Gun was a translator at a British intelligence agency. She leaked a memo to the press about the agency spying on United Nations Security Council members before a vote about Iraq. Gun was charged with violating the Official Secrets Act, but the British government subsequently backed off — the publicity was too negative.

David Kelly, a British expert on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, spoke to the BBC's Andrew Gilligan. Kelly did not set out to be a whistleblower, but suffered the same sort of hostility as if he had. After being grilled in government inquiries, Kelly was later found dead.

Joseph Wilson, a former US ambassador to Iraq, was asked by the CIA to investigate claims that Iraq was trying to buy uranium from Niger in Africa. Wilson found the allegations had no substance. But then Bush included the claim in his State of the Union address. Wilson wrote in the *New York Times* about his findings, embarrassing the White House. The reprisal came in the form of media exposure of Wilson's wife as a CIA agent, blowing her cover.

Anonymous leaking is far safer than openly speaking out, but is still risky. The government pursues sources of embarrassing leaks with furious diligence; in contrast, those who leak as part of the government's public relations efforts are given a free ride.

Double standards abound in the treatment of dissent.

Leaks and whistleblowing within the intelligence services over the Iraq issue seem much more common than during the Vietnam war. During the 60s and 70s, there was one prominent whistleblower: Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked to the media the so-called Pentagon papers, a history of the Vietnam conflict written by defence experts.

If the treatment of dissenters hasn't changed much over the years, what's different about Iraq? Two things stand out. Firstly, even before Iraq was invaded, there was enormous popular opposition. That means there's a receptive audience for revelations — people want to know what dissenters have to say, so it's harder for government to mount reprisals. Andrew Wilkie says that he has not encountered a single member of the public who has criticised his actions.

Secondly, intelligence agencies were blatantly used as political tools by Australian, British and US governments in making the case for the conquest of Iraq. For professional analysts, that can be uncomfortable. You can bet that for every public dissident, there are ten or a hundred who have dissented on the inside or who wish they could.

Much of the debate and discontent about Iraq revolves around who is telling the truth. Whistleblowers and dissenters believe that the truth is so important that they are willing to risk their reputations and careers to reveal it. Listen attentively to them, because they have the most to lose by saying what others don't want you to hear.

Guests on this program:

Dr Brian Martin

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