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Both, this series and an interesting film. trouble

Allies →

The dark side of the US-Australian alliance is brought to light in *Allies*, a feature length documentary which delves into the murky depths of defence and intelligence relations between us and our great and powerful ally. Although surely -- as they say -- with friends like that who needs enemies.

It's an alliance replete with contradiction and drama -- a tale which should perhaps have been fictionalised as a love story. The sado-masochistic nature of the relationship between Uncle Sam and the little Aussie Battler would then have become so clear. The disgusting crimes (wholesale murder, arson, rape, theft, fraud -- you name it!) committed by the unhappy couple as they career through the Pacific, and she, down on her knees, opens herself completely to his greedy penetration, begging him for his love and protection, while he in turn laughs at her, deceives her and occasionally slaps her around -- create a scenario which would lead any sane audience to cry out as one: "Leave him, Sweetheart, leave him!"

But, alas -- this film being factual and not romance, the couple in question being only two modern nations, and the dead and injured numbering but a few million faceless Asians, I doubt that passions will become sufficiently inflamed to arrive at such a clearcut verdict. When it comes to audiences, truth is stranger than fiction.

In this interview, director Marian Wilkinson, *National Times* journalist, and producer Sylvie le Clezio, film distributor and former Director of the Perth Film Festival, talks to me about some of the very strange debates surrounding *Allies*. *Allies* has played successfully at the Hope Royal Commission and the Electric Shadows Cinema in Canberra, is opening in Sydney in October, and in Melbourne at The Brighton Bay Cinema on October 21.

How did you come to make the film?

SYLVIE -- The project originated in 1980 when I was doing the distribution of *On Company Business* and the director, Alan Frankovitch, came to Australia and met up with Marian, Bill Pinwell, George Munster and Denis Freney, people who had been doing research in the area of intelligence and defence relations for quite a long time. The idea was to deal with US/Australia defence and intelligence relations -- not the folkloric side, the side that is talked about and read about everywhere -- but the secret side of the relationship.

MARIAN -- Alan said that he had talked to various people, journalists and politicians here, and everyone seemed to think it was a good idea to do a film along the lines of *On Company Business* but no one actually had any cold hard cash or a great interest in pushing the project along, apart from Sylvie. We generally kept in touch but when Sylvie actually rang me one day two years later and said "we've finally got the money, we can start doing this". I was a bit shocked.

Now ASIO has alleged in the Hope Royal Commission that this money behind the film is actually Moscow gold. What in fact is the source of your funding?

SYLVIE -- It just shows you that ASIO is incapable of investigating even very simple facts, because if they had bothered to go to Home Affairs they would have found out that the money comes from Cinema Enterprises, a group in Melbourne that has financed seven ventures up to date, including two ventures with Film Australia.

The Russia series, perhaps . . . ?

MARIAN -- The China series actually!

Why is ASIO so interested in this film, aside from the fact that David Combe did mention it to Ivanov at that famous dinner?

MARIAN -- On the ASIO question I think there was probably an interest in the film even prior to its being mentioned in the famous dinner conversation between Combe and Ivanov, because we'd already had certain attentions by then, so to speak. For example, one person who dropped into the office claiming to be an archivist, turned out to be a security person from the Defence Department. Things like that happened. When it was mentioned in the Combe-Ivanov conversation -- again by two people who had no direct relationship to the film -- I suppose it was a hook for ASIO to get more involved. But rather than checking any of it, they went on their instincts and their own assessments -- which were pretty bad -- and came to the conclusion that it was KGB backed "disinformation" -- to use their own words . . .

SYLVIE -- And also they assumed that we would have the same view as Ivanov -- if he had any . . .

MARIAN -- . . . on the American/Australian relationship -- and then the whole thing really took off! In part we saw it as ASIO's incompetence but there was another more pernicious aspect and that was that ASIO saw the film as something that was going to be critical of the Americans. ASIO no longer does and perhaps from their inception, never did identify themselves with Australian interests. They have always identified themselves with American security, intelligence and foreign policy interests and they felt, as Harvey Barnett said on the stand, if it was critical, anti CIA and anti American, as he put it, he would therefore regard it as anti the Australian security services. Therefore, they took that line and persisted with this before the Hope Royal Commission, despite the fact that the people who worked on the film had made available any information they wished. Even when we were making the film, we went out of our way to persuade Australian intelligence and security people to give interviews and put their point of view, which they rejected, didn't want to do. I think it has got to the stage now where they are persisting to undermine the film itself.

But, in fact the film is a very effective attack, isn't it, on the US/Australian alliance?

MARIAN -- Well, I think what it is doing is saying to people: "Okay we have had this relationship that has flowed in and out of our lives for however many years, and there has not been enough attention given to actually scrutinising it." When you do scrutinise it, complicated and important political and moral questions emerge which deserve to be analysed and deserve to be criticised. Certainly, we do look at things like the Vietnam War and the involvement in covert operations in Indonesia, the attacks on the Whitlam government by people in the American security services, but I think the one line running very strongly throughout the film is that the Australian people have allowed their politicians to get away with pursuing these courses. Part of it is because of the lack of information and part of it is the fact that the Australian public (and that includes the press and the people in general) have not put the demands on Australian officials and politicians for greater knowledge about what they are doing. In fact, what they do did lead to many, many deaths in South East Asia, particularly, and also resulted in interference in our own domestic politics. The real tragedy is that all these things go on and they never really penetrate public consciousness.

So was your object in making the film to contribute to the necessary public knowledge?

MARIAN -- Yes, personally I always saw the film as a first step if you like, that someone needed to break some ground filmically in Australia in terms of security relations, and that it may encourage others to say "okay, this is important and people do want to know about it, so let's bite off another section and really examine it thoroughly".

Do you really feel that film is the appropriate place for this kind of presentation? I know your work Marian, and the work of Brian Toohey and other investigative journalists on the *National Times* and there you are able to go into great detail, people can read it all, take it in, go back and read it again -- I'm interested in why you have chosen now to work in film?

SYLVIE -- I think film is a much more accessible medium. People might go and see a film for an hour and a half who would not follow an issue in the newspapers that closely. Also, film can have a great emotional impact. When we are dealing with Indonesia, for example, the film shows the human consequences of backroom manipulations, of acts of government and agencies which are not being properly controlled.

MARIAN -- One of the things that we sought to do in the film was to hear from the people who were actually involved in operations and intelligence dealings and in making foreign policy and carrying it out. We tended to avoid academic, journalistic or outside observations on the issues but rather presented the men (and it always was men, of course) making the policy and executing the policy. And when you sit there and see someone like Col Fletcher Prouty or Bill Colby or Ray Cline talking to you directly about what they were doing in Vietnam or Indonesia or wherever, the impact of that on film is so much more than you could ever hope to achieve in a newspaper article. On the other hand, with film, you can't go to some intelligence officer or foreign affairs officer and get them to give you a good story off the record as you can in the newspaper because they can't protect their identity. That avenue is closed to you. But for an Australian audience to sit there and actually see these former senior intelligence officials talking about their country and their country's actions and how important it was -- well, there is a hell of a lot of difference between this and the newsprint journalist telling readers that these matters are of interest.

I imagine you found it pretty interesting interviewing people who really have been at the centre of the practical implementation of foreign policy -- did you have any unexpected experiences?

MARIAN -- Yes, there were always the ones that got



ALLIES
Frank Snapp
Senior CIA Officer, Saigon, 1969-1975



ALLIES
William Colby
CIA, 1950-1976. Director CIA, 1973-1976



ALLIES
Dr Ray Cline
CIA 1949-1969. Deputy Director for Intelligence, 1962-1969



ALLIES
General Edward Lansdale
Assistant Secretary of Defence, Covert Operations, 1957-1963



ALLIES
Dr John Burton
Secretary, Department External Affairs, 1946-1950

away, the ones that you never got on film and there was a rather spectacular one Sylvie and I went to see: a guy who lived in Washington for many, many years, used to work for the security services as a fairly big time arms trafficker and was a former partner of Ed Wilson, who is now in gaol. Sylvie and I spent quite a number of hours talking to him in his little office, with him in his jungle greens talking about arms trafficking and how it is not really something to get upset about, how it is like trading in rice or any other commodity, but how he was interested in megabucks and getting away with making megabucks. It was just fascinating to listen to . . .

SYLVIE — He would have brought a lot of colour to the film, I think, but in terms of information he went so far as to say that, as he put it, he was instructed to use Nugan Hand by some of the most senior official levels in Washington . . . and just as he was saying this, the phone rang and he said "Yes, Senator . . .".

MARIAN — We got to the stage where he promised us an interview to talk about his arms dealings activities with Nugan Hand and then we turned up the next day at the office with crew and equipment all ready to go and Joe, the guy, had disappeared, just wasn't there. Sylvie tracked him down on a phone call some days later and he virtually said that he had spoken to some of his colleagues in Washington and had decided that it would be a really bad idea to give us an interview.

What made all these extraordinary people, the top people, prime ministers, ambassadors, CIA chiefs, actually give you interviews?

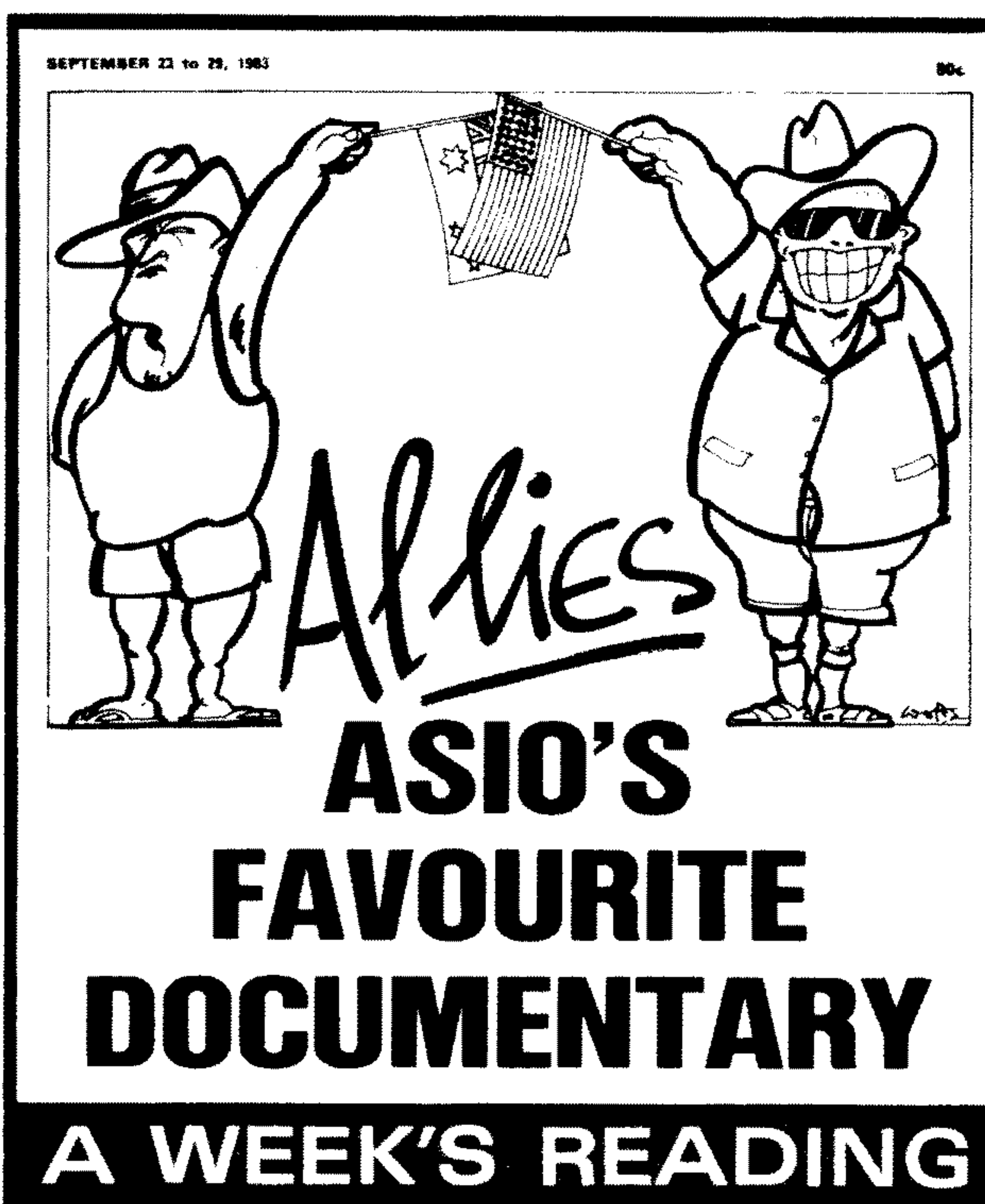
MARIAN — There was a very distinct difference between the Americans and the Australians — the Americans were a million times more forthcoming. Victor Marchetti, Frank Snepp, Ralph McGeehy, Daniel Ellsberg, all these former defence and intelligence officials, who during the '70s and the Watergate era decided that they felt a great obligation to inform the American public about what American intelligence and foreign policy was really about, seemed to feel a strong obligation to tell us what they knew about Australia's role in American foreign policy and the aspects of American foreign policy and intelligence operations that affected Australia. One thing that was very very clear to us and very sad in a way was that in Australia we just haven't had those sort of officials. We have never had an Australian Daniel Ellsberg or an Australian Victor Marchetti and you think why the hell not? Ellsberg had to fight the entire Nixon Whitehouse, and the plumbers and the FBI and everyone else in a major court case and he did it and came through. Victor Marchetti, Frank Snepp, all the others, were heavily scrutinised by the CIA and the government, put under enormous pressure, but they came through, they still talked, still provided documents and they still are doing so something like eight years later. In Australia that just never happens. Then, on the other side, the men who still either work for the US government or who are very sympathetic to the government's aims or to what was done in Vietnam or Indonesia at least feel — an and again it seems to be much more of an American thing — at least feel that they are confident enough to go before a camera or a journalist and explain themselves, to explain the policies as best they can. Even if they feel obliged to cover up a lot, they still feel confident enough that they can put a case to the public, that the public will listen to them. Again, in Australia that never happens, not with people from the heart of the bureaucracy. For example, we tried to get Spry, the former head of ASIO, we tried to get Tangye, the former head of the Defence Department and incredibly influential in security relations between Australia and America, but none of those men would come forward and justify their positions.

Do you think they were afraid that their words would be put in a context that was hostile and would present them in a poor light —which sounds like a very intelligent assumption from their point of view?

SYLVIE — Yes, however we made a number of agreements with people that they would approve the transcript of their interview before we went ahead and used it; there is no reason why that would not have applied to some of the Australians had they asked for it.

I wondered why you didn't have interviews with Whitlam and Hawke; because the implications of the film as

The National Times



regards the role of these two prime ministers are really surprising and serious?

MARIAN — Both were approached for interviews and both refused. Bill Pinwell approached Hawke's office and admittedly it was a very hectic time in that, unbeknownst to us, Malcolm Fraser had decided to pull on yet another early election in the middle of filming which we couldn't do very much about, and this obviously put Hawke in a more difficult position than Whitlam. But we were very disappointed about Whitlam. We made quite a number of approaches to him and, more importantly, we gave Whitlam access to a number of interviews with American intelligence officials about him and about that 1975 period that really did break new ground in terms of how the CIA and the Nixon Whitehouse reacted to Whitlam, and he still declined to give an interview. It is interesting that while Whitlam has talked somewhat on the loans affair and while he has written his own book on the 1975 crisis, he has never publicly talked about things like the security crisis of 1975, the Stallings affair, and all the very intense activities that were going on at the time that his government was sacked. He has never broken his silence on those and he clearly was not prepared to do it for this film either — why? I suppose your guess is as good as mine.

I was very impressed with the way in which the allegations that are made in the film are backed up by evidence from the people who made the decisions that are under discussion. But when it comes to Hawke, I felt that the film seemed to be implying, at a minimum, a certain dubious leaning towards the United States which didn't seem backed up by evidence in the film.

MARIAN — This has come up on several occasions. Hawke's relations with some of the labour attaches, American labour attaches in Australia is gone in to in a bit of detail . . .

You mean the CIA attaches?

MARIAN — Well, this is the complicating factor: some of those labour attaches were CIA backed people, some in fact were not. It depended on what decisions were being made at the time as to what their status was and

who was in what job when. It has been established certainly that one of the labour attaches that attempted to cultivate Hawke, a guy called Bob Walkingshaw was in fact a CIA officer and when the facts of Walkingshaw's background and that of another labour attache were put to Hawke by Laurie Oakes, Hawke said he had absolutely no idea that these people were CIA people, had absolutely no idea of their background, despite the fact that he was very close to them. You get into a very interesting proposition there, interesting in terms of the Prime Minister himself and interesting in terms of CIA trade union policy. I think it is quite feasible for the CIA to conduct their labour operations without the direct knowledge of the people that they are attempting to cultivate, get information from and manipulate. But, equally, one has severe worries that someone at the apex of the trade union movement, with many, many contacts and a lot of knowledge would not be able to pick up either the activities of a foreign intelligence officer or their interest.

There is a very pertinent parallel here which the film did not go into because of a lack of time and interviews; but if you take the fact that now, before the Hope Royal Commission, David Combe is being destroyed financially, personally, emotionally, politically, through the fact that he had a number of contacts with a Russian in order to carry out a trade agreement as a lobbyist, and has been hauled before the Royal Commission and spent eleven days in the box as a security risk for his dealings with this foreign intelligence officer, well, these labour attaches in Melbourne went a lot further in terms of cultivating trade union leaders, with absolutely no repercussions politically, financially or any other way on someone like Hawke or on themselves.

Of course, this is because it is assumed that the Americans are our friends and the Soviet Union is our enemy and if you are with friends, of course there is no problem. I suppose this is what the film is questioning.

MARIAN — Yes.

What are your hopes for the film's distribution and exhibition and how does this tie in with your aim of making an impact on the Australian public?

SYLVIE — The film is playing in Canberra at the moment. It will start in Sydney and in Melbourne in October. We chose Canberra as the place to open the film because we wanted the film to be seen by the politicians, the people who make decisions, and also because the national press is in Canberra.

MARIAN — By aiming it at Canberra, initially, there was a hope of having it treated as an important political film and certainly there was some reaction from Labor politicians and Labor staffers and of course the Canberra press gallery that turned up. Frankly, I was disappointed that more Labor politicians didn't come because the film deals with so many of the things that the Labor Party has gone into very intense political and emotional debate over: like the US bases in Australia; the Vietnam policy which was so important for the Labor Party in the '60s and is still important in terms of aid to Vietnam; Indonesia, which is having repercussions in the Labor Party's policy towards East Timor; and of course the incredibly dramatic way it all impacted on the Whitlam government. And I was very sad that particularly at a time when security intelligence questions are back in the political arena with the Hope Commission, more Labor politicians feel more of a necessity to see the film.

Perhaps they are sneaking into the theatre in the dark where the people they are afraid of in their own party won't see them?

SYLVIE — Maybe half of ASIO will be there as well and hopefully one of them will now come forward. ■