

Uneasy Locations: The Russian Embassy Site in Canberra

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They think we are mugs – and it's insulting. It's all fine for politicians to be swimming, swerving and tossing about in the goo of paranoia that is surveillance, chatting to the ghost called foreign interference; but to expect the rest of the citizenry to be morons is rather poor form. But the formula has always been such: We terrify you; you vote us in, and we increase the budget of the national security state.

Regarding the business of the Russian embassy site in Canberra, this is all the more stunning. Australia's parliamentarians rarely pass bills and motions at such speed, but the measure to ensure that the Russian embassy would not have a bit of real estate 500 metres from the people's assembly was odd, at best. On June 15, legislation was whizzed through, effectively extinguishing Russia's lease.

It was also prompted by a rather bruising matter: the Russians had already been triumphant in the Federal Court. They had been granted the lease for the Yarralumla site in December 2008 by the National Capital Authority. But the 99-year lease was cancelled by the same body [on the basis](#) that "ongoing unfinished works detract from the overall aesthetic, importance, and dignity of the area reserved for diplomatic missions."

Russia duly challenged the cancellation and won. In May, the court found in its favour, negating the cancellation of the lease. This seemed to have a curiously unifying effect in Parliament: agents of the Kremlin would be a mere stone's throw away from the elected chamber.

Members of the Albanese government were tediously, predictably, on message, claiming that their intelligence services were all cognisant of a threat no one else could possibly take seriously. According to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, [the government had](#) "received very clear security advice as to the risk presented by a Russian presence close to Parliament House." The whole parliamentary measure had taken place "to ensure the lease site does

not become a formal diplomatic presence.”

The cabinet’s most eager of beavers, Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil, [affirmed](#) the Prime Minister’s concerns.

“The principal problem with the proposed second Russian embassy in Canberra is its location,” she suggested. “The government has received clear national security advice that this would be a threat to our national security and that is why the government is acting decisively to bring this longstanding matter to a close.”

This entire comic episode also led Albanese to anticipate Russian stropiness and reference to precedents in international law. This prompted the remark that Russia was not “in a position to talk about international law, given their rejection of it so consistently and so brazenly with their invasion of Ukraine.”

Over stiffening, proud vodkas at the eventual Russian embassy site, Australian officials will be able to do a merry jig and say that they have been tearing strips off international law for decades. From race relations to illegal invasions, the good guys have been wondrously bad. Remember Iraq in 2003, when we deviously and cowardly subverted the United Nations Charter and aided the destruction of a sovereign country? (Oh, the laughter!) Or those negotiations with an impoverished East Timor over its access to natural resources? (We almost got away with bugging the negotiators – but for those insufferable whistleblowers well read in international law and principle!)

Such officials will also be able to recall the efforts of Australian intelligence agents to undermine international law during the Cold War, playing a starring role in overthrowing Chile’s democratically elected Allende government in the 1970s, at the very same time the Central Intelligence Agency was conferencing on how to get rid of that pesky Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. It was beautifully, if diabolically symmetrical.

Saliently stunning in this splutter of rage from Australia’s politicians is that any embassy position near Parliament House, notably from Russia, would make any difference at all. Two issues spring to mind.

The first is that Australia’s all commanding superior, the US government, tends to privilege technology to the point of childish obsession. For all their technological genius in specific, idiosyncratic areas, the Russians have tended towards the craft, cut and cultivation of human contacts in intelligence. The embassy’s proximity would not matter one jot.

The other aspect of the embassy debate is cringingly odd. Why bother listening to anything Australia’s Parliament has to say that might influence the events of the world? Vassal states are poor fare in the marketplace of intelligence and policy; their returns for any foreign power are junk food quality, limp cold chips and hardly worth bothering about. (Recently, the politicisation of sexual assault is all the rage – there is, what might be politely called in diplomatic channels, a woman problem in the great chambers of the capital.)

The true clearance stores for Australian intelligence lie in the bowels of the US State Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Agency. Yes, the fallback position is always that Australia is a “Five Eyes” member in the sacred Anglophone intelligence sharing agreement that makes it a target. But why go for the inferior imitation if you can get the original?

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