

# State of insecurity

Preoccupied with terror, refugees and national security, Australians' obsessions are becoming disturbingly like those of the Eastern Bloc in the Cold War days, according to a former top diplomat. **Norman Aisbett** talks to Tony Kevin, in Perth this weekend for the Writers Festival.

**A**USTRALIA is in danger of becoming a state obsessed with Soviet-style national security, according to one of our former Cold War diplomats.

Tony Kevin, 59, draws alarming parallels between Australia today and the societies of the former Eastern Bloc.

He remembers that one of the first things he noticed on arrival in Moscow as a junior diplomat in 1969 was the Soviet government warnings to its citizens that people like him were dangerous enemy aliens.

"We were tolerated as a necessary evil but kept under surveillance and at arm's length.

"Soviet people who fraternised with Western diplomats fell under immediate suspicion and could expect an early visit from the state security service, the KGB.

"Western diplomats were conspicuous, whether we wore visibly smarter Western clothes or tried to dress like Russians.

"In fact, the latter made us more suspect — for why would we try to pass ourselves off as Russians? Surely we were up to no good."

Russians only relaxed with Westerners when conversations were struck up spontaneously, such as when travelling on inter-city trains moving them between their normal, controlled environments.

In the friendly anonymity of such journeys, warm and intimate conversations were often possible but it was understood there should be no effort to meet again. Prudent Russians sensibly avoided contact with Westerners in day-to-day life.

It all took some getting used to.

"I'd always thought of myself as a fairly decent sort of person working for a decent government of a decent country," Mr Kevin says.

"So what made me, and other Western diplomats like me, so deeply dangerous, when I knew that neither I nor my government was any kind of threat?"

Part of the answer was found in contemporary Soviet films, plays and novels, which caricatured Western diplomats as deceitful and ruthless.

The constant repetition of such images had to affect perceptions, or at least remind citizens of how the state expected them to regard people like him.

The Western diplomats, meanwhile, felt besieged in their fenced and guarded compounds. Surrounded by "enemy" territory, the Cold War became very real and personal for them, especially the Americans.

The parallel with terrorism-conscious Australia is clear as Muslims in their unfamiliar garb come under general suspi-

cion and feel increasingly marginalised and vulnerable.

Mr Kevin puts a lot of blame on the Howard Government for causing Australia to begin to slide towards a national security state.

That is, he explains, "a state whose government has decided that it faces a serious threat to its political security from outside, and possibly also by disloyal elements living within, and therefore considers it has a duty to mobilise its citizens in defence of the state and its claimed national values".

The Soviet Union was the fully developed form of such a state but he says it is only in wartime or in some other heightened state of alertness, such as the Cold War, that democratic states temporarily follow this path.

"In such times, citizens and other residents are asked to freely agree to accept sacrifices to their normal freedoms for the sake of meeting the national security emergency: 'There is a war on you know'."

So we've been told — against the shadowy, external threat of international terrorism. Soon, for reasons still unclear, there could be another, against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

It raises crucial questions: How do people survive in a national security state? How do they maintain private spaces? How is control maintained by the state? How do such control mechanisms affect people over time?

And how easily or completely do people recover afterwards, when the pathologically suspicious national security regimes that framed the context of their lives for so many years are dismantled?

"A few years ago, public expression of these issues would have seemed entirely inappropriate, far-fetched and even ridiculous," says Mr Kevin.

"Sadly, it is a measure of how rapidly Australia has started to change over the past few years that (it is) now relevant and timely."

Mr Kevin was a diplomat from the age of 25 to 55. His Moscow stint was from 1969-71, after which he became ambassador to Poland in the immediate post-communist (Soviet bloc) years — a job which also made him ambassador to the neighbouring Czech Republic and Slovakia. He held the latter post until 1994.

From 1994-97 he was ambassador to Cambodia, also emerging from dark times that included the horrific Pol Pot years of 1975-79. Today, he lives in Canberra with his Cambodian-born wife, Sina, and their three young children. He has two adult sons from his first marriage.

Since February 2002 he has been independently investigating the sinking on October 19, 2001, of an overloaded asylum seeker boat on its way from Indonesia to Christmas Island. A total of 353 men, women and children drowned.

The tragedy happened during the last Federal election campaign and at the height of Operation Relex, a forceful Australian military operation to repel "suspected illegal entry vessels" or SIEVs. He gave the craft that sank on October 19 the name SIEV-X (the unknown SIEV) and this term has become general usage.

Abu Quassey, a notorious Middle Eastern people smuggler operating out of Indonesia has admitted organising the voyage with the help of unnamed Indonesian accomplices.

Mr Kevin's investigations have led him to believe Abu Quassey was a people smuggling disruption agent, or "sting" operative.

He alleges Quassey worked with special Indonesian police units recruited, funded, trained and equipped by the Australian Federal Police to disrupt the people-smuggling industry and deter the mounting flow — in 2000 and 2001 — of mainly Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers.

After the sinking of SIEV-X the flow of such boats quickly stopped.

AS a young diplomat in Moscow, Tony Kevin's job was to cover Soviet domestic affairs and learn how the communist system achieved such staying power and such firm control over the people.

There were two key control strategies. Firstly, the exploitation of genuine patriotism and the fear of external threats to security; and secondly, a tight and active management of information.

The brutal coercion of Stalinism was over but the state retained unlimited powers and exercised them subtly.

People who had suffered terrible losses in World War II were taught that America and NATO posed real threats of invasion and nuclear blackmail. Propaganda rammed these messages home constantly.

KGB secret police were not noticeably pervasive and were seen as a necessary public security agency — like Australia's ASIO.

In fact, ordinary people did most of the

surveillance through their everyday living, social and workplace structures. They had been taught since 1917 to watch each other and report any sign of deviance.

They lived in a world of political slogans and public campaigns.

There was a relentless assertion of patriotism — "we are the greatest, our values and achievements are superior to any other in the world".

Loyalty oaths and patriotic ceremonies were commonplace, plus a constant reassurance and cloying sentimentalisation of how uniquely lucky Soviet citizens were.

Only a few, brave souls became dissidents and sustained it, because of the enormous price to be paid.

While Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn were viewed in the West as heroes, many ordinary Russians resented and detested their activities.

The general view was that they were discrediting Soviet society and giving ideological ammunition to the nation's enemies.

Would Australians go so far in enforcing political conformity and suppressing dissidence?

Mr Kevin claims the ASIO Bill which nearly passed the Senate last year would have given ASIO and the Australian Federal Police enormous Soviet-style powers to intimidate political dissidents.

"If Howard had not finally demanded too much, the law would have passed. Labor had already assented to 90 per cent of this deeply undemocratic and totalitarian Bill. Such a law may still be adopted."

CONTROL of the past meant control of the present in the former Soviet Union. Many Russians well knew the horrors of Stalinism — the purges, the genocidal treatment of mistrusted minorities, the cruelties of the gulag system — but did not want to dwell on such matters.

Soviet history was not allowed to tell how they had hurt one another. It was always about what those terrible foreigners had done to them.

The society was built on lies. The intelligentsia — academics, journalists, public officials — were expected to help sustain the deceit.



## Let's look out for Australia

Protecting our way of life from  
a possible terrorist threat

*'If you are asking, do we need to have an ASIO — of course we do. But does one need to bash down people's doors and terrorise their small children, or does one knock on the door and say: We would like to search your house, please, and we have a search warrant?'*

Every intellectual worker was ultimately dependent on the state for a job, so there could be no open, philosophical or moral inquiry, except behind closed doors.

In the media, news always had to be correctly interpreted and armies of obedient, theoretically independent commentators were engaged in packaging and spinning the government messages of the day.

Debate on social issues was only allowed if the right language was used and discourse stayed within bounds that did not challenge the basic premises of the system. Sanctioned media campaigns on issues like alcoholism or youth delinquency created the illusion of lively, public debate.

"When I see the way our large, corporate media increasingly try to manage news and to shape opinion through public awareness campaigns of their own choosing, I see disturbing echoes," says Mr Kevin, who was also struck by the mediocrity and moral emptiness of the Soviet leadership elites.

"The men who ran the Soviet Union in its last three decades were not personally, particularly evil. They seemed a pretty banal and colourless crew on the whole, with no great villains among them.

"Yet they were clearly prepared to be ruthless and homicidal when necessary, in defence of the national interest as they saw it — as in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The big picture ruled. The end justified the means.

"The principle was one of whatever it takes. There was no higher moral compass and no sense of accountability to citizens for state action. The personal responsibility of political leaders was diffused in collective decision-making.

"Everyone was either following orders or giving them in terms of thematic directives, and therefore not responsible for any 'mistakes' in how they were carried out."

LOOKING back, Mr Kevin says it is disturbingly clear that ordinary, basically decent Soviet people coped pretty successfully with the communist government. They did so through "defensive disengagement" and by choosing to avoid political activity.

People of decency tried to stay out of politics, which they saw, quite reasonably, as an amoral sphere of life.

"They understood it would inevitably taint them by presenting impossible moral choices," Mr Kevin says.

"A moral person could have no safe future in politics. Decent people channelled their creativity into other kinds of careers: the arts, science, medicine, teaching, the military and the police.

"This left politics to an apparatchik class, a self-perpetuating, career political elite,

whose main skills lay in spinning words and ideas, the organisation of displays of public support, shrewd networking and intra-party factional activity.

"More and more I find echoes of this kind of culture creeping into our political parties. And more and more I see the same kind of distaste for politics among Australians outside the political arena that I saw in ordinary Russians. It cannot be healthy."

Also, under 1960s and 70s communism, people took pleasure in their steadily improving standards of living.

They were grateful for better accommodation, bigger living spaces, more cars, more imported goods and access to privatised vegetable plots in country getaways.

Many took Voltaire's maxim quite literally — "in the end, one must cultivate one's own garden". It was a survival mechanism for those feeling unable to change a political system that seemed impregnable and immutable.

It was easier to retreat into private life and become an "internal emigre" in Eastern Europe than in the Soviet Union, which had experienced greater social dislocation.

People mostly just got on with life while making the necessary compromises to avoid too much moral contamination. They felt the state was not their business, and took no personal responsibility for what it did.

However, they paid a price for their enforced "quietism" over so many years — apathy, depression, loss of self-respect — and often sought solace in alcohol.

Mr Kevin reiterates that there is a lesson here for Australians in terms of "our moral accountability for the state-sanctioned cruelties being inflicted upon asylum seekers and the sense of fear and vulnerability in our Muslim communities. It's very easy to say it's not our problem."

HE ACKNOWLEDGES the risk of international terrorism to Australians, especially given the outrage in Bali, but points out that there have always been international threats of one kind or another.

The issue is how to deal with it. He favours a mix of intelligent self-defence and judicious diplomacy — as opposed to an aggressive stance that stems from "a vastly over-inflated sense of our own importance" and makes us an unnecessary target.

"We lead with our chins and certainly not with our brains . . . Howard is just compounding past stupidity with more stupidity in putting us into a small camp (the US, Britain, Australia, against the world).

"We have to get back to the idea of a non-threatening, non-belligerent diplomacy combined with a reasonable level of intelligent self-defence."

But after what happened in Bali, isn't the Government justified in tightening internal security?

"Look, everything is a question of degrees," says Mr Kevin. "There are no black and white questions. If you are asking, do we need to have an ASIO? — of course we do.

"But does one need to bash down people's doors and terrorise their small children, or does one knock on the door and say: 'We would like to search your house, please, and we have a search warrant'?"

"Does one pass a law that says minors can be held incommunicado for three weeks, or does one say: 'No, that's a violation of human rights'?"

"These are all questions of judgment and degree and all I am saying is that, consistently, our Federal Government goes over the top on all of these things. Consistently.

"This includes everything that has to do with internal security, including asylum seekers."

He accuses Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock of having tried from the outset to conflate the issues of asylum seekers with the issues of terrorism and drug smuggling.

"The fact that no terrorist or drug runner has been detected among the thousands of asylum seekers who have come here over the last four years on these boats, speaks for itself," he says.

"Unfortunately, the cruelty towards asylum seekers just continues, and the majority of Australians seem to be accepting of that cruelty — or simply don't want to think about it.

"Until now, the Australian Government has ignored two Senate motions passed in December, the first calling for an independent judicial inquiry into the sinking of SIEV-X and the second calling on the Australian and Indonesian governments to bring Abu Quassey to justice for his role in the tragedy.

"The Australian law enforcement authorities have reportedly not responded to a public offer by the Indonesian Justice Minister on January 28 to seriously consider any demand for Abu Quassey to be deported to Australia to stand trial.

"The question must be asked: do Australian authorities fear that Abu Quassey's testimony at trial in Australia might ultimately incriminate the Australian people smuggling disruption program in Indonesia?"

■ Much of this article is based on a speech Tony Kevin was scheduled to give at the University of WA last night in conjunction with the WA Refugee Alliance and the Perth International Writers Festival.