

Secrecy, sure, but they have erased me: Witness J on his anonymous reality

Witness J -*The Canberra Times* - 30 May 2020



Witness J at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Picture: Supplied

Secrecy is not synonymous with evil. Functioning and modern democracies must have systems in place to protect certain kinds of information, to preserve human life and critical infrastructure or to promote economic success in the international arena. Australia is no exception, and our nation's sensitive information is classified from the lowly "Official Use Only" up to the top secret "Extremely Compartmented Information" level, where codewords are assigned and people are specially briefed on a need-to-know basis. In my last career, I was briefed into around 30 of these compartments, including the most sensitive information as it related to Western intelligence operations in China.

Australia is sliding into authoritarianism at an alarming rate. I am not someone to condemn secrecy for its own sake; I have worked in counter-terrorism. I have seen networks of terrorists with imminent plans to kill be disrupted and destroyed, and good and quiet intelligence work has been at the core of these successes.

But the insidiously increasing abuse of secrecy and national security is alarming to me, and not least because I now have the ignominious distinction of being this nation's first secret prisoner. The police raiding of journalists, and the ongoing Commonwealth prosecutions of Bernard Collaery, Witness K and David McBride, are becoming an alarming new normal. These cases - mine included - are not evidence of an increase in national security-related criminality; rather, they are evidence of secrecy being abused without proper oversight. It is scandalous that the inquiry into my situation by Dr James Renwick, the head of the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor, has been abandoned. So, too, is the delay

in an investigation by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security into a complaint about my treatment, which I first made from prison in May 2019.

The real story is not one former spy's account of secret imprisonment, or the secret agency he once worked for; rather it is how this came to be in Australia, and what we can all do to stop this slide into the shadows.

To my mind, the only thing scarier than a lack of accountability is the illusion of it. It is akin to scaling a mountain with a rotten climbing harness, providing a false sense of security that only makes a fatal error more likely, and more disastrous. It is my assertion that the secret agency I once committed my life to is truly unaccountable, and that neither self-regulation, nor the various inspectors nor ministerial oversight, is sufficiently addressing the kind of scandalous behaviour that results in outcomes such as a secret trial. The fact that the ACT Minister for Corrections was unaware of my situation as I was imprisoned under his nose should give you pause.

I have trouble believing this is the country I once had so much faith in; a country whose flag I wore as a soldier at war; a coat of arms that was stamped on to my passport when I worked abroad as a spy. We are being marched into the shadows and towards something that the lessons of history warn us should be avoided at all costs. Why aren't you allowed to hear where I worked, and hear from me - not as an anonymous shadow - about how I was failed after 15 years serving a nation?

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After denying me mental health support, my former employer chose to strip me of my name and initiate a secret trial. I cannot tell you who I am, and I cannot tell you who my former employer is, regardless of the fact that the latter is, I am told, one of the worst-kept secrets in Canberra. They have their headquarters in Canberra and masquerade as public servants. Their decision to so highly classify my name (there is literally not a higher level possible) and their culpability in this fiasco is designed to prevent embarrassment and accountability, and not for the spurious reason of national security and the protection of human life, as claimed by some politicians. These decisions were made by bureaucrats who stamped an obscene and arrogant level of classification on everything to protect their own backsides.

This secret agency continues to elude accountability, and is now frustrating my attempts to restart my life professionally and personally through draconian measures and delaying tactics. Such is the farcical secrecy that even the court orders to protect you from learning about my case are themselves suppressed. For as long as this secret agency chooses to stand in my way, my voice will become louder until such time as my waning patience evaporates. In the interim, I am telling those segments of my story that I can, which for now is limited to my time in prison living among a most hideous cohort of sexual offenders, despite not being one myself.

However, the real story is not one former spy's account of secret imprisonment, or the secret agency he once worked for; rather it is how this came to be in Australia, and what we can all do to stop this slide into the shadows. Secrecy is not synonymous with evil, but you, the public, have a right to know what is being done in your name.

- *Here, There are Dragons*, by Witness J, is published today ([lulu.com](https://www.lulu.com); Amazon).