



Australian rules . . . Peter Wright arriving at the Supreme Court in Sydney where he defeated the British Government's attempts to block his memoirs

PHOTOGRAPH: RUSSELL MCPHERSON

Wrights and wrongs of spy author still stir controversy

Richard Norton-Taylor

THE death of Peter Wright, the former MI5 agent and author of *Spycatcher*, has renewed controversy over his allegations of treason and Soviet penetration into the agency.

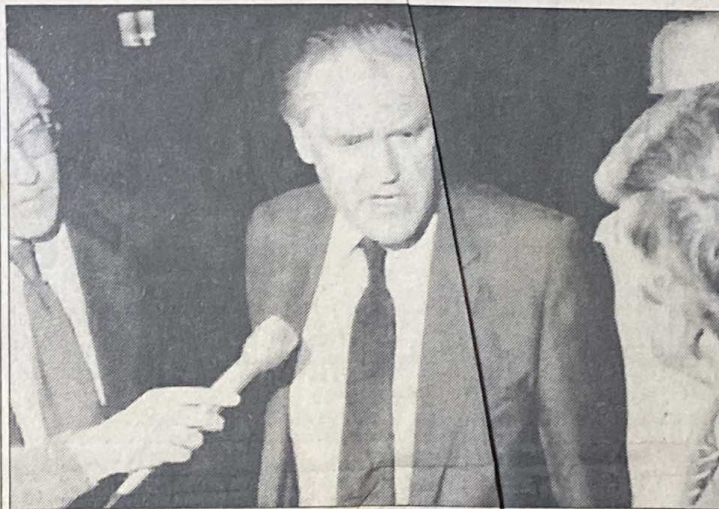
Wright, who had Alzheimer's disease and died of pneumonia in Tasmania on Wednesday, aged 78, was dismissed by some as an eccentric old conspiracy theorist, while others made clear his ghost will continue to haunt Whitehall's secret world.

Christopher Andrew, a Cambridge intelligence historian, said Wright had become "deluded by his obsession with conspiracy theories" and the accusations at the heart of his *Spycatcher* memoirs, notably that Sir Roger Hollis, former head of MI5, were false.

"Because of bungling by Her Majesty's Government [which tried to suppress the memoirs in court], the book based on these wholly false allegations became a best-seller."

Rupert Allason, the Tory MP who writes spy books under the name, Nigel West, said Mr Wright should be given credit as a relentless hunter of Soviet moles. "It is a mistake to regard him as a paranoid old obsessive. I think there is a very good case that there was Soviet penetration of the security services."

A former colleague who did not want to be identified said Wright was correct in suspecting that MI5 was penetrated by an unidentified mole. The suspicion rests on the way Anthony Blunt was allowed to end his role as a



Lord Armstrong arriving at court in Sydney during the case in which he became notorious for the phrase 'economical with the truth'

Soviet agent after the war. According to this assumption, Moscow had someone else in place.

The *Spycatcher* affair leaves another unanswered question: the identity of the go-between who was assured by MI5 that Chapman Pincher, the author of *Trade Is Treachery* — a book based on Wright's allegations and inspired by the late Lord Rothschild — would not be prosecuted.

Evidence that the Government had secretly allowed the publication of books about the security services, while trying to suppress *Spycatcher*, was a key weapon in Wright's success in persuading the Australian courts

that his memoirs should be published. It seemed at the time to be a victory for openness which led in turn to a succession of humiliating Government defeats in the English courts where Lady Thatcher was still trying to impose injunctions preventing the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers from reporting the contents of Wright's book.

Sir Richard Scott, appointed by John Major five years later to adjudicate on the arms-for-Iraq affair, told the High Court in December 1987: "The ability of the press freely to report allegations of scandals in government is one of the bulwarks of our democratic society."

The law lords dismissed the injunctions, but attacked Wright for "heinous treachery". They confirmed the principle that all former security and intelligence officers were bound by an absolute duty of confidentiality.

The earlier ringing phrases, the success in the Australian courts, were pyrrhic victories as far as the media was concerned. The Government introduced a new Official Secrets Act which imposes an absolute, life-long, duty of silence on serving and former members of the agencies.

That has not stopped other old spies and spy-hunters from following Wright's example, if more discreetly. Sir

Dick White, his former boss, talked freely to Tom Bower for a biography which was scattered with unattributable disclosures from former members of MI5 and MI6.

The *Spycatcher* affair provoked Lord Armstrong in admitting to being "economical with the truth", a phrase with which Whitehall has since been consistently branded.

There is another legacy of Wright. His account of a security service out of control, trying to destabilise a Labour government helped to prompt the Government to introduce legislation placing MI5, MI6, and GCHQ on a statutory basis. It also encouraged the Government to

set up a committee of parliamentarians to oversee the administration and expenditure of the security and intelligence agencies. But it will not investigate Mr Wright's allegations.

The agencies do not appear to have learnt from another mistake. Wright wrote *Spycatcher* in part because of his meagre pension. The small pension awarded to Olej, Gordievsky, the former KGB double agent and one of Wright's erstwhile targets, was one factor behind his decision to make allegation against British politician including the former Labour leader, Michael Foot.

Bugger for Britain, G2 page 2

