Reviews

National Security and the D-Notice System

Pauline Sadler

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Reviewed by Dominic Wring

This is a competent study that provides valuable historical insights into the so-called D-notice, the system of ‘voluntary’ (ie self-) censorship that originated in Britain and has been exported to Australia, the other country considered here. There is a wealth of detail on offer, much of it about the legal operations and implications of the process. However, a more sustained analysis of the wider implications for the workings of the media and democratic systems would have been a valuable addition to the book. That said, the narrative painstakingly takes us through the development of an activity that, by definition, its instigators hardly wanted publicising.

Sadler reveals an interesting and at times fascinating story, in which it is revealed how the term ‘D-notice’ originated as an administrative quirk and only became ‘Defence’ when later used by journalists, ministers and censors involved in the process. The book recounts how the system came about in 1912 in order to complement the less ambiguously restrictive Official Secrets Act. It further describes how the existence of the D-notice, and the fact that it was virtually unknown for two decades, reveals much about the complicity between the political and media elites. This latter point, though touched upon, warranted greater development. Specifically, the reader would have been served by gaining further insight into the changing journalistic context which operated under the leadership of the press barons who dominated the inter-war British newspaper industry, and who had enjoyed formal as well as informal roles as state propagandists during the First World War.

The later sections of the book focus on the Cold War era and take more account of the political context. The way policy is developed in relation to ‘deviant’ minority interests says much about official wisdom. Specifically, by revealing how virtually every national publication bar the official Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* was deemed admissible to the D-notice system, Sadler identifies the high level of collusion that went on between the British state and the country’s much lauded ‘free’ press. It has long been acknowledged that practices of this kind arose from paranoia about the ‘red menace’ and a belief that editors of subversive papers like the *Worker* were would-be fifth columnists prepared to send the contents of notices abroad. The more uncomfortable point developed, and not lost sight of here, is the degree to which most other media outlets were prepared implicitly to compromise themselves and restrict their own activities on grounds of ‘national interest’.

The limitations of the book’s legalistic perspective are perhaps most obvious in describing a process that originated as a code but developed into something more informal, but nonetheless powerful, in its exercise—there are obvious parallels with the workings of the parliamentary

lobby system. That said, the cosy complicity of the arrangement did not, as Sadler argues, resolve the irony that observance of a D-notice could still result in prosecution and similarly defiance would not automatically lead to legal sanction.

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