

## **KELLIE MERRITT. Wannabe Spy.**

*Kellie Merritt first met Bernard Collaery in mid-2005. She had not long returned from England, with three young children, recently widowed from the war in Iraq. She was still in shock and anxious about returning to attend a coronial inquest into the circumstances of the shooting down of an RAF aircraft, her husband was flying in. Bernard flipped through the pages of a dense, extensively redacted folder she couldn't make sense of. He put it aside and looking at her 2yr old he said, "I have a lot in common with your daughter, and I'm going to help you. I grew up not knowing my dad, my mum was a war widow, he was killed in action, flying an RAF plane, it was also shot down, its design diminished survivability too, and he was brave..."*

For as long as rogues become leaders, we shall spy. For as long as there are bullies and liars and madmen in the world, we shall spy. For as long as nations compete, and politicians deceive...your chosen profession is perfectly secure, I can assure you. (John La Carre, The Secret Pilgram.)

I think Alexander Downer has always wanted to be a spy. But there's not much money in putting your life on the line; spies aren't really that suave, don't much like martini's and 'the old' humanitarian aid disguise is so unsexy. Mastering the art of hiding in plain sight is difficult for the flamboyant Downer. Downer is out and proud of his political status, there is more money to be made. But don't be fooled, under the silky lined Burberry trench coat, Downer, the politician, is hiding a spy alter ego which has been crafting spook intrigue and deception for decades. Just enough to make any spy operative fearful... unless he crosses the path of witness K and his lawyer Bernard Collaery.

"I would like to introduce the longest-serving Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. In my opinion the best in generations much better than all his successors, including Kevin Rudd and Julie Bishop." Hold on 99, I mean Andrew Bolt, it's not the Logies. Bolt's 2018 Sky interview with Downer was a tryhard master class in counterintelligence. Concocted to downplay Downers dibba dobba antics which sparked the FBI probe into Trump's links with Putin to defeat Hillary Clinton in 2016 presidential election. "Yes I am the best, but, Andrew," said Downer, "it's not unusual for me to a soiree at fancy London wine bars. I accidentally entrapped Trumps advisor Poppadlopics. Who knows why he drank that gin and tonic spiked with my truth-seeking serum. I had no idea that Trump was sleeping with the enemy? I didn't use my Northampton made shoe to call the FBI, that's preposterous conspiracy talk." Downer concludes his nothing-to-see interview with a grandiose statement, that detours off the Get Smart script into Independence Day, but I do "regard myself as a WARRIOR for the western alliance". Calm down Downer, don't blow your cover!

Like James Bond, connections to the establishment is an essential asset in spy arsenal. Downer has this in spades. His links to the Clintons, intergenerational political status, aristocracy (albeit antipodean), various private intelligence agencies (like British Hakluyt and China Hawaii) and corporations (like Woodside Petroleum) go way back. Trump is a political outsider, ideologically illiterate, an intellectual doofus and won the presidency on an anti-establishment platform. Trump isn't in the team, can't keep a secret, nor twitter his way out of the interrogating gaze of impeachment. It's arguably likely that "Go Go Gadget" Downer's by chance meeting was to gather intel for the TrumpPutin dossier. If you, like me, think deep space is mind blowing...Deep State is even more so. Five Eyes Downer is a sneaky little thing.

The unreasonably self-assured Downer executes supernatural survivability and invisibility skills in the theatre of global espionage. His shagalicious Sky performance with Bolt is no one night stand gig. Their romance is enduring and date night shenanigans include how to shame intelligence officers, who don't toe the party line, is the stuff of the 2003 Iraq War. Back then, Andrew Wilkie resigned from the Office of National Assessments (ONA) because he knew the Howard government was spinning intelligence to justify war. Wilkie undermined the unfounded case to join Bush, Blair and Howard's war of choice. Downer, Foreign Minister at the time, allegedly leaked a secret classified document written by Wilkie about WMD to Bolt. With a little liquid paper, Bolt attempted to use it to shame, intimidate and discredit Wilkie. When the leak was investigated, Bolt acknowledged, that he had received Wilkie's top-secret document from the Foreign Minister's office, but didn't identify the source. Not sure how they wriggled out of prosecution? Sneaky little things.

The manipulation of intelligence to assert political power and moral authority spearheaded the war in Iraq. Any intelligence officer who tried to put the brakes on that war machine was going to get run over. Like Wilkie, David Kelly, a senior British scientist, never leaked classified intelligence to the media, only his concerns about the BS that was leaking from Prime Minister Blair. He didn't survive the closed rank mentality and the covert intimidation that ensued. If Wilkie was to receive cuts and bruises, David Kelly was to have a fatal head-on collision. The then MI6 chief Sir Richard Dearlove, Downer's mate, was probably at the wheel of this disgraceful smear campaign. MI6, along with the British government was criticised by Chilcot (who headed up the Iraq War Inquiry) for providing flawed, sexed-up intelligence. By then David Kelly had committed suicide but had he lived, Chilcot's overwhelming affirmation may have brought him some solace.

While duplicitous double agent Downer was overtly framing Australia's axis of evil narrative, he – allegedly – had eyes on a covert operation which involved bribing the dictator Saddam Hussein \$300 million to secure commercial deals. These bribes ensured the Australian Wheat Board (AWB) held 90% of the market, contravening the United Nations Oil-for-Food Humanitarian Program. At the Cole Inquiry, established to investigate the scandal, Downer said, "What you don't know, you don't know. And you can't get to the heart Of what you don't know." The old plausible deniability trick illuminated a complex chain of deceit. Warren Reed worked for ten years as an intelligence officer with the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) and can spot an open secret when he sees one. In an interview with ABC, he said that Downer (Foreign Minister) "absolutely knew" about it and it was "absolutely impossible" for him not to have known about it. Reed goes on to say he'd be prepared to say this under oath. You see a war on terror is one thing, but commercial gain from terror is better.

The cone of silence is as useful as some politicians ethical behaviour. An article by John Gardene in the Guardian (UK) 2004, illuminates the Australian bullying tone, into the early oil and gas negotiations between Downer and Timor Leste Prime Minister Akitierie. Downer is reported to have said, "we are tough...your claims go almost to Alice Springs. You can demand that forever for all I care, but if you want to make money, you should conclude an agreement quickly. We will not care if you give information to the media. Let me give you a tutorial in politics — not a chance." Oh dear, Downer would instead give a tutorial in black ops. Tinkering and tailoring principled diplomacy and democracy is too boring for Downer. But you see soldiering, and spying works best that way. It ensures that politicians have adhered to ethical and moral standards before assigning those on the frontline to their operations. Stay in your lane, mission creep Downer and don't take the piss.

New battle lines have been drawn, and they're not so black and white. Pushing the envelope in the absence of effective control over reckless money mongering political agents is problematic. When politicians are unfit for purpose, leaks serve as an accountability mechanism. Witness 'K' knows all too well about this type of political overreach. It's not witness K's sense of morality that jeopardises the integrity of Australia's Intelligence Agencies, its politician's lack of morality. Former ASIS spy Warren Reed thinks so too, "the misuse of ASIS for personal gain. In a liberal democracy, that is not just a travesty and criminal; it is also one way in which our political system can be gutted at its heart".

Today I'm looking at memorabilia on Bernard's mantelpiece above the open fireplace. Photos with Xanana Gusmao, dressed as a guerrilla fighter and other Timor artefacts that reflect his deep connection with the country. At the back is a photo of a young Bernard dressed in what looks like an all-black jumpsuit, "what's with the Anglo ninja look, were you going to a fancy dress party at the French embassy or something?" He was a 'diplomat' to France at the time. "Well, Kellie, that's a period in my life I can't really talk about." I think Bernard and witness K are brave but perhaps they have more than this in common. And unlike the wannabes, value selfless service above self serving service.

*Kellie Merritt is a social worker for a non government organisation. She has been a committee member with the campaign group, Australians for War Power Reform. Kellie's husband was killed in Iraq in 2005.*