

POSTAL VOTING FRAUD IN THE POSTAL WORKERS' UNION

exposed by journalist Paul Sheehan in his book, *Among the Barbarians*

As prize-winning journalist, Paul Sheehan, wrote in Chapter 10 entitled *Vote Eaters* a culture gave rise to electoral fraud:

'Australia's first assassination of a political figure occurred at 9.30 p.m. on the night of September 1994, when a member of the New South Wales Parliament, John Newman was murdered at his home in western Sydney. The assassination of a political figure is a frontal assault on the democratic system.

'Newman's killing may prove to be a political aberration but a more insidious assault of the democratic system – electoral fraud – was also carried out that same year by Vietnamese and their Australian allies inside the union movement. The election fraud took place, ominously, inside the major mail centres, which had predominantly immigrant workforces, especially Vietnamese and Filipino.

'More than 1000 workers had their votes manipulated or improperly gave their ballot papers to fixers. It was a major fraud. A key element in the rotting of the system was ethnic politics, specifically the manipulation of workers with poor English skills who were culturally susceptible to pressure from ethnic group leaders. Prominent among the people who illegally collected blank ballots and intimidated voters were a group of Asian fixers.

'The Australian Federal Police obtained the names of a number of those believed to be responsible for illegal vote gathering and many of them were Vietnamese but the police were not brought into the case until long after the events. None of the fixers was ever prosecuted or reprimanded.

'The year 1994 was not a good one for grassroots democracy in Australia. Not only was John Newman assassinated, but the election for the postal workers' branch at the Communications, Electrical, Plumbing Union (CEPU) was found to be so tainted that it was declared void after a court challenge before Justice Michael Moore of the Industrial Relations Court of Australia. The electoral irregularities took place within a culture of bureaucratic inertia that worked to the advantage of the then federal Labor government, which was aligned with the same Right faction controlling the CEFU.

'Justice Moore expressed dismay at the problems which escaped the notice of Australia Post, the Australian Electoral Commission (which ran this election) and the investigating arms of the government. Of all the hundreds of union elections that took place in all the Labor government years, I was not able to find evidence of a single prosecution for union election manipulations.

'Control of the postal workers union has always been one of the prizes of intra-Labor fighting. Control translates into Labor Party delegates and faction power in Cabinet and shadow Cabinet. For political zealots, political power in mail centres means some degree of potential influence, however small. In all elections. Australians believe their basic institutions, like the postal system, are free of political influence. They are not. They are, and always have been, a one-party state. It is revealing to see what befell the two men who, through their court challenge to the 1994 election, successfully revealed the scandal.

'One of them was an ordinary postman, Quentin Cook, working in the Blue Mountains area west of Sydney, in the midst of what would prove to be a successful court challenge that would eventually lead to reforms of the entire Australian system of industrial elections, Quentin Cook was sacked by Australia Post. When the new election was held in 1996 to replace the one he helped overturn, he was barred from standing for office by the Australian Election Commission because he had been an unfinancial member for several months. So the man, who helped expose the tainted election was barred from standing in the new one. Cook sued Australia Post for unfair dismissal and won a delayed but emphatic victory.'

Paul Sheehan quotes the speech in the federal Parliament of the then Minister for Workplace Relations, Peter Reith, on 11th September 1996:

'The electoral fraud consisted of multiple voting by a limited number of persons. The court found that members of the union had been approached by other members to hand over their uncompleted ballot

papers, which had been completed by a limited number of other persons. In all, some 930 ballot papers were tampered with in this fraudulent election.'

Paul Sheehan continued:

But a window had been opened. The public inquiries into the Newman assassination and the CEZPU election revealed some of the extent and the interconnectedness of the branch stacking, vote-rigging and ethnic vote-trading operations inside Labor politics.