



16. Britain's intelligence and security services

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At a meeting on Friday, 10 July 1998, Richard Norton-Taylor spoke to the group about Britain's Security and Intelligence Services. Also present at the meeting were John Brierley, Tracey Hart, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby.

Presentation - [Richard Norton-Taylor](#) [2]

Richard began with a brief description of the structure of Security and Intelligence Services - the 'Agencies' - in Britain. Broadly, the Security Service, MI5, operated within the country and its task officially was to counter espionage, terrorism and other 'threats to national security'. The Intelligence Service, MI6 - also known as the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS - did similar work outside the country but also recruited and ran agents to spy on other countries. The distinction was similar to that between the FBI and CIA in the United States. The 'MI' in the acronyms stood for 'Military Intelligence', indicating the origins of the agencies in the Ministry of Defence. Finally, GCHQ, the Government Communications Headquarters, based in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, had the task of monitoring telephone and radio communications, again in the interests of national security.

MI5 had been set up just before the outbreak of World War I during a panic about German spies operating in Britain; MI6 was an offshoot of it. GCHQ was originally the Government Code and Cypher School which operated from Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire during World War II, and did important work deciphering German codes with the help of the German encrypting machine, Enigma, smuggled out of Poland to France and from there to Britain in the early part of the war. Those working at Bletchley Park were not the usual bureaucrats but all sorts of talented mavericks - chessmasters, mathematicians, linguists. They included the remarkable Alan Turing, who built an early computer, Colossus. He committed suicide in the 1950s as a direct consequence, according to his biographer Andrew Hodges, of being pestered and threatened as a gay when a new vetting system was introduced, under pressure from the US, during the Attlee administration.

MI5 and MI6 were not put on a statutory footing until the late 1980s and 1990s. Prior to that they operated under Crown Prerogative. The Security Services Act came into force in 1989 and provided a statutory basis for what MI5 had been doing anyway. The Act was drafted in broad terms. Thus the function of the Security Services were stated to be 'the protection of national security' - a term never defined - 'and in particular, its protection against threats from espionage, terrorism and sabotage, from the activities of agents of foreign powers and from actions intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.' This last phrase was vague and sweeping. What was an action 'intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy...by political means'? In a sense civil servants were doing this every day by not answering questions from Ministers, and Ministers were doing it by not answering questions from Parliament. The authorities insisted that it was necessary to keep this clause covering domestic political subversion despite the collapse of the Cold War and the fact that Communist Party and Trotskyists were acknowledged no longer to be a threat - if indeed they ever were. It was needed, they said, because of the EU framework.

One of the things not much written about was the creeping and unaccountable cooperation between the police, Security and Intelligence Services within the EU - and with the FBI also involved. The Maastricht Treaty, and other treaties, refer to a 'Third Pillar' of the EU. You had economic and political cooperation, and the third pillar was cooperation between law and order agencies. This was not covered in the normal policy-making processes of the EU institutions such as the European Parliament and Council of Ministers. Instead there was a whole network of committees with Kafkaesque names, such as KX, which referred to particular articles in the Amsterdam Treaty. Tony Bunyan's State Watch had done a good job monitoring this development. There was increasingly close cooperation between immigration officials dealing with people seeking political asylum, and big new data systems were being built-up. So the argument was that one needed the clause in the Security Services Act to cover Britain's responsibility as a member of the EU. Britain itself might not have dangerous subversives, but there were a lot of them across Europe, including right-wing fascist groups. However, the clause allowed them to target a wide



range of individuals and organisations which the Security Services considered to be subversive.

MI5 and the other agencies would never be short of targets. There might be fewer spies and double agents with the demise of the Cold War, and perhaps the prospect of peace in Northern Ireland, but there would always be new threats, real or imagined. Indeed the Cold War was now being talked about as a relatively tidy, nice time with two major blocs confronting each other. Now the world was completely different and far more dangerous, with a host of different enemies to be confronted - terrorist groups, drug traffickers, criminal organisations and so forth. Recently Robin Cook praised MI5 and MI6 and claimed they were now reflecting Labour's new priorities. In the early 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, MI5 took over responsibility from the Special Branch for operations against the IRA on mainland Britain. But they sought further statutory authority for a still wider role, and in 1996 a new Security Services Act gave them the added function of 'acting in support of the prevention and detection of serious crime, and for connected purposes.' The police didn't like this development at all. Scotland Yard and the Special Branch fought like mad against it. But MI5 were effective at winding up Ministers and Home Office Senior civil servants and never lost a bureaucratic battle in Whitehall. The police got laughed at and did lose battles, even though they were the people at the front, and more accountable. If a bomb went off, it was the police who were questioned about it. There were MI5 officers attached to police forces, usually stationed these days in large regional headquarters, and Chief Constables complained that their decisions were sometimes overruled as a result of MI5 lobbying in Whitehall.

So MI5 now had the ability to assist law enforcement bodies - the customs as well as the police - in the prevention and detection of serious crime. The definition of serious crime in the 1996 Act was extraordinarily broad and borrowed from previous legislation covering phone-tapping. Serious crime was defined as any offence which 'involves the use of violence, results in substantial financial gain or is conduct by a large number of persons in pursuit of a common purpose' - an extremely vague phrase - or an offence 'for which a person who had attained the age of 21 and has no previous convictions could reasonably be expected to be sentenced to imprisonment for a term of three years or more.' This was setting a rather low threshold. What MI5 was doing was cherry-picking. If it heard that there was a good case coming along like a yacht carrying drugs, or some other high profile case, it would get in on the act and claim the credit for the success in Whitehall. However, they claimed they did not have more than 20 or 30 people out of a total of 2000 permanently engaged on this side of their work.

The Intelligence Service, MI6, and GCHQ, were finally put on a statutory footing by the Intelligence Services Act of 1994. They operate under the authority of the Secretary of State - i.e. the Foreign Secretary - and their functions were 'to obtain and provide information relating to the actions or intentions of persons outside the British Islands and to perform other tasks relating to the actions or intentions of such persons.' These functions were to be exercised 'in the interests of national security, with particular reference to the defence and foreign policies of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, in the interests of the economic well-being of the UK, or in support of the prevention or detection of serious crime.'

MI6 worked with human agents. They acted aggressively as well as defensively. In a recent case an MI6 agent, Richard Tomlinson was sacked and arrested after sending the synopsis of a book he was planning to write to an Australian publisher. For some reason he pleaded guilty so there was no trial and he was sent to prison for a year. One of the things he had done, or knew about, was the disruption of an alleged Iranian attempt to obtain nuclear material. The order for the operation was signed by Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, even though he had been advised that it could kill Iranian civilians. The Intelligence Services Act of 1994 expressly protected MI6 agents from liability in the United Kingdom for any kind of action which, if committed in Britain by an ordinary person, would have been a criminal act. Their immunity extended to whatever they did abroad - even murder was not explicitly excluded. In the words of the Act: 'If ...a person would be liable in the United Kingdom for any act done outside the British Islands, he shall not be so liable if the act is one which is authorised to be done by virtue of an authorization given by the Secretary of State under this section.' In principle the authorization had to be given in advance but in practice it was likely that it was sometimes given after the event. What Foreign Secretary was going to dismiss MI6 people because he had not given an operation prior approval? Basically MI6 were covered for whatever they did.

MI6 had human agents abroad, normally attached to British Embassies. GCHQ intercepted through the airwaves - through satellites or ground listening stations. The Intelligence Services Act of 1994 defined their statutory position, exempting them from a lot of other statutes under the great catch-all phrase of 'national security'. Thus where national security was deemed to be involved they were exempted from the restrictions embodied in the Data Protection Act - as indeed were MI5. In the long promised Freedom of Information Act, they and the Intelligence and Security Services would have blanket exemptions - and the Home Office were fighting, with some success, to



have the police exempted as well. Moreover, Section Two of the 1989 Official Secrets Act prohibited any current, or former, member of the Security or Intelligence Services, or even any purported current or former members, from saying anything about the work of the services. There was no public interest defence, and they were not even allowed to tell their MP of any malpractice, even that someone had their hand in the till.

As regards formal control, there was a Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the terms of the 1994 Intelligence Services Act. There was also a Commissioner and Complaints Tribunal dealing with the Security Services under the terms of the 1989 Security Services Act, and a separate Commissioner and Tribunal dealing with MI6 and GCHQ as provided for by the 1994 Act. Both Commissioners, and the members of the two Tribunals, were appointed by the Prime Minister.

The Parliamentary Committee comprised 12 members, MPs or Peers, from the three main parties. It produced an annual report which was vetted by the Prime Minister before publication. The Committee met in private and all its members were covered by the Official Secrets Act. If they said anything about their work they would be liable under the Act. It was a weak committee. Its reports were virtually unintelligible because of all the asterisks, never said anything of substance about the work and contained no hint of criticism of the services. Indeed the committee said they didn't take evidence from anyone wanting to criticise the services. About a year ago, David Shayler, a former member of MI5, laid into the MI5 bureaucracy in an article in the Mail on Sunday, and disclosed that there were files on some Labour Ministers including Peter Mandelson and the Home Secretary, Jack Straw - a suspected subversive because he was the former president of the NUS. Shayler was still abroad but was liable to prosecution if he came back. Possibly the authorities would be too embarrassed to prosecute him, but they could do so. When he tried to give evidence to the Parliamentary Committee they told him that they did not take evidence about individual cases and were not going to listen to people from outside the current management of these organisations.

Bob asked about the function of the Parliamentary Committee. Richard replied that its purpose, in the words of the Act, was 'to examine the expenditure, administration and policy' of the three agencies.' If you studied the small print of the Schedules attached to the Act you found that the Foreign Secretary or any Minister, or indeed the head of an agency, could stop the Committee getting information, which was deemed to be 'sensitive'. However, to head off the criticism that this amounted to political control, the next paragraph read: 'The fact that any particular information is sensitive information shall not prevent its disclosure ...if the Director-General, the Chief or the Director (as the case may require) considers it safe to disclose it.' It was purely presentation. The definition of sensitive information was also very broad. It was 'information which might lead to the identification of, or provide details of, sources of information, other assistance or operational methods available to the Security Service, the Intelligence Service or GCHQ; information about particular operations which have been, are being or proposed to be undertaken in pursuance of any of the functions of those bodies; and information provided by, or by an agency of, the Government of a territory outside the United Kingdom where that government does not consent to the disclosure of the information.'

The role of the two Commissioners was to keep under review the exercise by the Secretary of State of his powers in relation to the Intelligence and Security Services respectively. The Commissioners, all current or former High Court or Appeal Court judges, also worked with their respective Tribunals in investigating complaints.

The Commissioners produced annual reports. But these were about two pages long and an insult to the intelligence of the reader. They comprised bland statements to the effect that the Commissioners had looked at the operations of MI5 or MI6 and were satisfied that there were operating strictly in accordance with the law. There was no way of challenging these assertions.

The role of the Tribunals was to hear complaints from people, particularly people who believed they were being unfairly targeted. The problem was that it was impossible to find out if you were being targeted - and if anyone in the services informed you that you were they would render themselves liable to prosecution. In addition the Tribunals met in secret, would not tell you what evidence they had, and would not even confirm whether or not you had been targeted on the grounds that to do so would defeat the object of the exercise. There was no appeal against the decisions of the tribunals and they could not be questioned in any court.

Recently MI5 had started producing glossy brochures saying that all the allegations about their picking up Princess Diana's conversations and so on were untrue - they simply did not do that sort of thing. In a curious way MI5 benefitted from conspiracy theories. Firstly they made them sound quite exotic, and secondly they could deny them, and rightly deny them, whilst continuing to do much grubbier, all-embracing, things which were not at all



exotic and did not therefore get public attention.

MI5 acknowledged that the number of files they held on people and organisation ran into the 'low hundreds of thousands'. They argued that they couldn't reveal who these people were because they might include members of the KGB or IRA. Some of the files, they said, would be destroyed, others would be retained. There was an interesting debate, cutting across party lines, as to whether or not any files should be destroyed. Some Tories insisted that files should be kept so that in 30 years time one would be able to see who were the people posing a threat to democracy. Others argued they should be kept to provide evidence of how neurotic the Security Service were and how it targeted perfectly innocent people because they were lefties. In January of this year, Jack Straw told the Commons that MI5 files would be preserved where they involved:

- a) major investigations.
- b) important subversive figures, terrorists and spies.
- c) individuals involved in important historical events.
- d) causes célèbres in a security context.
- e) files which contain original papers of historical interest
- f) major changes of Service policy, organisation or procedures.
- g) files which contain original papers of historical interest, major changes of Service policy, organisation or procedures, files which are in some way 'period pieces' e.g. they illustrate clearly Security Service attitudes/techniques of the time.
- h) milestones in the Service's history.

'It would be contrary,' Straw concluded, 'to the interests of national security to confirm or deny whether the Security Service holds records on any particular individuals or organisations'. So the names would never be revealed though maybe in 30 years time if there was a new kind of archival policy something might be revealed in broad terms.

On the issue of cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies, in the old days cooperation with the US on nuclear bases was evident because the bases were there for all to see. Today there was not the same visible manifestation of US-UK intelligence cooperation except in the case of Menwith Hill and one or two other places. In GCHQ there were five or six people permanently in place from the US National Security Agency (NSA). British taxpayers' money was spent there on what were acknowledged to be US requirements but this was considered good value because of what British intelligence received in return. And it was true that Britain got information from US satellites which the French or Germans wouldn't get, and which even the Australians wouldn't necessarily get. In exchange, the Americans benefitted from information coming from GCHQ in Cheltenham, and the bases in Cyprus and Ascension Island. If you asked people in Whitehall about the US-UK intelligence cooperation, even quite politically alert people, the response was that it was much cheaper than having an independent British arrangement, or a European arrangement. This was how they had been able to convince the Ministers.

To return to the point about Intelligence and Security Services always finding new threats and therefore new targets, some records that had come out recently as a result of the so-called policy of openness under Labour were revealing in this respect. They showed that even before the end of the First World War, MI5, which had been set up in 1914 to counter the threat of a German invasion, was already identifying a new target - the suffragettes. It was not that MI5 were outstandingly clever, more that they were outrageously self-confident. No-one questioned them, partly because of the lack of evidence until after the event about what they were doing. Ministers, too, were reluctant to confront them. It would take a very courageous Minister to say no to them or to start questioning them. They would be worried about being accused of not taking national security seriously, or about the different ways they could be smeared by the Security Services. Today the Security Services had front men, not quite press spokespeople, but approaching that. The people in both MI5 and MI6 were political animals. MI6 were interested not only in getting the latest information from Iraq about chemical weapons but also in whether Robin Cook was going up or down politically, or whether his marriage problems were going to affect him. Similarly MI5 was interested in what was happening politically in the ordinary conventional sense as much as they were in what threat IRA active service units posed in Britain.

NARP Discussion

Size, budget and location of the agencies



In answer to a question about the numbers involved in the three agencies, Richard said that MI5 and MI6 employed approximately 2000 people each, GCHQ around 4500. It was interesting to note that MI5 employed a large number of women, particularly at senior level. Some people claimed that women were especially suited to this work because they had a greater sense of loyalty to institutions than men. With the emerging new threat of 'cyber wars', GCHQ was likely to have an increasingly important role. The threat was of 'electronic bombs' which would cause a break-down of communications' systems and computers; some people in the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford were researching this development. It had emerged only that week that the Americans were developing an aggressive capability to zap the enemy's computer systems. There was, of course, a problem of how you targeted the enemy's computers without disrupting your own but there probably were ways of doing that and cyber warfare was now a real possibility. Special Branch also employed about 2,000 people. For people who were around in the 1960s, it was Special Branch who were the enemy. Now the latter were getting thoroughly fed up because they were losing out in the bureaucratic fights with MI5.

The published budget for the three services was about £800 million a year. The government did not say how this was divided up between the three agencies, but probably GCHQ was allocated around £600 million, the others about £100 million each. But they played around with figures and you could never tell the true costs including their rent, their buildings and other expenditures

If you went down the Thames on a winter's evening after dark the scene was vaguely reminiscent of Bucharest. On the south side of the river at Vauxhall was the astonishing MI6 building designed by Terry Farrell, a Babylonian type construction with an Islamic green glass curtain going over honey coloured stone. And you could just see from there on the opposite bank the MI5 building, Thames House, at Millbank. This was an old Grade II listed building but they just blocked off an arch and told Norman St. John Stevas, Chairman of the Fine Arts Commission, to get lost when he complained! On the outside, the building was grey but inside there were atriums and wonderful gymnasiums, squash courts and god knows what else. It cost about £250 million to refurbish. The lights remained on all night in both buildings and when you went through London late at night the House of Commons, the seat of democracy, was in darkness, but the two buildings of the Security and Intelligence Services were like beacons. Meanwhile at Cheltenham they were designing a new, bagel-shaped, building, again at a cost of around £250 million. So in these agencies people had these tremendous working conditions whilst in the geriatric great-grandmother of parliaments people had to work in the most awful conditions.

Recruitment

Andrew asked whether the services would have their agents trying to recruit graduates at degree ceremonies like the one that day at Bradford (the Degree Ceremony). Richard replied that obviously MI5 did have to recruit undercover agents to infiltrate organisations like the IRA. But they now also had a more open recruitment policy and advertised for candidates in the newspapers. GCHQ was more open than the other services, reflecting their greater self-confidence. They needed staff with computer and linguistic skills. All the agencies also recruited through the normal civil service procedure. MI5 and MI6, however, tended to accept graduates whose degrees were not quite good enough for a normal civil service post. The head of MI6, Sir David Spedding, went to the same college as Richard doing exactly the same degree and came away with a 3rd class degree in modern history. If he had got a better degree, he would probably have ended up as a regular diplomat.

Phone taps

Carol asked about the extent of phone tapping. Richard replied that clearly not everybody's phone was tapped as this would lead to a bureaucratic nightmare as people struggled to monitor and transcribe all the conversations. However, the technology was getting quite sophisticated. Not only was there word recognition, which meant that certain words or phrases would trigger the monitoring, but voice recognition. One should not get paranoid about the extent of eavesdropping. It was the ability of the services to do these things if they wanted to, and without anyone knowing about it, that represented a genuine threat.

Tracey asked whether GCHQ were required to have warrants to intercept telephone conversations. Richard said that in theory they did. But a warrant lasted six months and could cover a general issue, or a broad target, rather



than a particular individual. In the old days of physical taps, one warrant could cover a whole organisation such as CND. So when Ministers claimed that Menwith Hill did not tap phones without a warrant, this was virtually meaningless. The official procedure was for a warrant to be signed by the Secretary of State, or, in an urgent case, by the hand of a senior official of his department. But could one really imagine GCHQ getting a warrant signed by the Foreign Secretary for every single thing they did? They probably would make a point of doing so for an operation which might lead to publicity like a major operation against the IRA, or any operation which was likely to lead to a court case. The automatic packet switching centre near Oswestry provided opportunities to monitor and record many telephone calls. Explaining the function of this centre, Richard said that if the normal lines from say Bradford to Australia were busy, a call could be routed through the packet centre which would automatically find another route for it. You could tap many more calls through the centre, especially if you deliberately pushed communications through it.

Tracey said that the evidence from Menwith Hill was that all the telephone companies, not just BT, cooperated with the authorities in the tapping of calls. Richard confirmed this was the case and said when the telephone system was privatised a national security exemption clause obliged the telephone companies to vet calls if requested to do so by MI5. When they did so they were also prohibited by the Official Secrets Act from making this public. Even with mobile phones, when Security Service or law enforcement agencies asked say the Vodaphone operator to trace a telephone number they would be expected to do so, since the regulations required this. Tracey added that the telephone companies also had the capacity to cut off the line and that she had experienced this during some actions.

Accountability and Control

Andrew asked how Security and Intelligence services were managed in other countries. Richard said some had tighter systems of control. Germany for example, because of what was euphemistically referred to as 'their recent history', had three really serious committees in their parliament, the Bundestag, monitoring their agencies. These committees produced annual reports, and until recently the agencies could not take any physical action, such as phone-tapping, or recruiting outside agents, without informing them. Now the agencies were becoming more powerful and more like those in Britain. In the US you had the Congressional Committee, though even there the CIA found ways round it as they did in the case of the Iran-Contra affair. Andrew commented that the scary thing about the Iran-Contra affair was that if it had happened in Britain we might never have found out about it. Richard agreed and said that at the time of Watergate Lord Armstrong asserted that it could never happen in Britain. He meant that the MI5 would never have broken into a flat - though this was rubbish. But he evaded the question of what action would have been taken against MI5 if its agents had been discovered doing such a thing. The Establishment here had moved a bit, introducing legislation with nice-sounding words, but it was full of loopholes

Michael asked whether one could ever hope to devise an effective system of controlling the agencies given that there would always be pressure to find ways round it. Richard said that you could not have a foolproof system of control, especially given the expansion of technology. However, if you had a more energetic and committed parliamentary committee this could greatly improve the situation. If there was a real threat that unauthorised activities, such as acting without a warrant or failing to give reasons for a particular operation, would be found out, this would have some effect. In the US and elsewhere things were found out. In Britain very few things came to light and then only as a result of whistle-blowers like Peter Wright or Cathy Massiter. And when they did come to light, how much did the general public care? The disclosures had affected MI5 up to a point, for instance Cathy Massiter's revelations, were part of the pressure that led to the passing of the Security Services Act in 1989.

Andrew said you would be hard put to it to argue that there should not be some kind of security agency to counter genuine threats, like someone putting a bomb in Leeds city centre. Could one imagine a security system that would be democratic and accountable and would not act in disregard of individual liberty and human rights? Richard responded that much depended on how rigorous was the system of control and accountability. In Germany, if the Security Services tapped your phone they were obliged to inform you of this fact after the event, i.e. when the warrant to do so expired. This was not the case in this country. MI5 made claims about the number of IRA attacks they had foiled, but we had no way of judging the truth of these claims. Why couldn't we be told after the event?

Andrew drew the conclusion that the problem was that the Security Services were not accountable and we could not guarantee that they were not involved in a whole lot of nasty operations in addition to their legitimate activities. Richard said that MI5's argument was that they might be involved in some dirty things but at the end of the day it



was better to be safe than sorry. According to Shayler, MI5 spent £730,000 targeting the liberal journalist Victoria Brittain because she was helping a Ghanaian friend of hers to fight libel case and some of the money came from a Libyan bank. Assuming Shayler's story was true - and there had been no denial - this was crazy. But MI5 would say - 'ah but this might have been a Libyan plot!' However, if the incident had involved not a well-known lefty journalist like Victoria Brittain, but someone whom MI5 regarded as 'responsible' it was much more likely they would have approached the person privately and asked them if they realised that money was being put into the account by the Libyan government.

It would be silly, Richard said, to maintain that nothing would work. People would think twice about doing things if they knew they were going to have to explain them. OK, they might get away with some operations whatever the system of control, but there would be fewer excesses if the control was more rigorous, and if there was more debate generally about the issue. This would be in the interest of the Security Service itself since it would mean their activities would become more acceptable to society.

Culture of the Agencies

Bob said that if the Security Services were completely out of control - and Richard had tended to highlight the ways in which they were out of control - wouldn't there be more evidence of excesses? Richard said it was a question of degree. There was a degree of self-control, but the statutes for monitoring and controlling the activities from the outside were weak - not totally ineffective but weak in the ways he had described. The culture of the organisation was important - which was why the decision of the Thatcher government to ban unions at GCHQ was so retrograde. The culture of an organisation also depended on management, and on the strength of civil society. But he accepted that if the Security Services were acting in a completely outrageous way, this would probably come into the open at some point.

Bob said he worked for a large bureaucracy which was supposedly accountable. However, it functioned to a large extent on the basis of inertia. People pursued their different projects for many years and it was extremely difficult for anyone outside to control the bureaucracy, whether or not it was formally accountable. Under current management science there was an attempt to control it, so you had all this stuff from the United States about mission statements, core business, re-defining priorities and so forth. Presumably there was also a lot of that stuff going on within these intelligence and security agencies.

Richard responded that the first thing to say was that these agencies were bureaucracies; they had a corporate self-interest and behaved in many ways like any other bureaucracy. But they were uniquely unaccountable for specific reasons. Clearly they must have some management system and career structure. They also said they wanted to recruit people from different walks of life, and the more they insisted on this, the clearer it was that they did not have these people at present. If you sat outside Thames House at lunch-time and watched the people going in and out you saw a lot of people who looked like army officers.

MI5 also employed people for surveillance work with criminal records who would not be allowed into the police force. In some IRA cases, MI5 witnesses could not be called because the defence knew they had criminal records. Probably MI5 did want to attract different kinds of people, but what sort of people would go into such an organisation? What we knew about the history of MI5 came mainly from whistle-blowers. It had not been given out in reports apart from a bit of historical stuff from the First World War. MI5 was now beginning to put out some papers relating to the period of the First World War and there was talk of its doing so in relation to the Second World War - but not for the period between the wars. The reason for this was apparent. They could say that in the Second World War it was understandable that they had to do certain things when the country was at risk. They also had some successes turning German agents who had come here. But what were they doing between the two wars? They were targeting all sorts of lefties - the suffragettes, NCCL, Hunger Marchers, strikers. That was why they did not want to put out any papers for that period.

Richard said the services were responsive to a new bureaucratic system or state, but not really accountable. With the end of the Cold War they emphasised the new dangers, suggesting that the world was a far more dangerous and unpredictable place than ever. You did not have to be a genius to put that in a mission statement, and put in front of the Home Office civil servant or ministers - who also had their own departmental interests to protect. Ministers would also get a thrill from being praised by MI5 or MI6 and were surprisingly vulnerable amongst these permanent bureaucracies.



Andrew said that some of the road protesters and other nonviolent activists would argue that they had a different understanding of security - that one could not divide one's own security from that of one's neighbours. Some of that thinking was also present in the Labour Party, with people like Clare Short in DIFID. The notion of Common Security was current not just in intellectual think-tanks but amongst some ministers. When you used to get a British Council grant they would ask you in the questionnaire afterwards what you had found out of economic benefit to Britain. Now different kinds of priorities were coming through. Did that filter through to the Security and Intelligence Services?

Richard thought it could, just as the priorities of the Thatcher period were reflected in the culture and activities of these Services. When Thatcher identified Scargill as the enemy within, that sent a clear signal to MI5. However, whereas the Joint Intelligence Committee in the Cabinet Office which met every week would 'task' MI6, indicating to them what should be their priorities, the management of MI5 tasked itself; it decided what were the threats and what should be the priorities. So MI6 and GCHQ were responding to what their political masters were requesting, but MI5 did its own thing. However, MI5 were developing the notion of acting for particular 'clients' and met regularly with committees from various ministries such as the Department of Trade and Industry, the DSS and the Home Office to discuss how they could assist them. GCHQ too now had a marketing director, in effect a salesman. Increasingly we were seeing the privatisation of war as reflected in the activities of Sandline and some mercenary companies. The Americans, for example, were not interested in getting involved in Kosovo/a so why not let Sandline and some of those other companies do it more cheaply? In the case of Sierra Leone, the British government knew perfectly well what Sandline had been up to.

Finally, another difference between MI6/GCHQ and MI5 was that the former gathered information and passed it on to Whitehall, whereas the latter kept and stored intelligence for its own purposes. He questioned whether we even needed a Security Service that was separate from the police. The Danes did not have one and nor did several other countries.

MI5, Richard, concluded, was a kind of mini-state, a cocooned entity - not completely cocooned but much less answerable than other institutions in a parliamentary democracy. The police at least had lines of accountability. In the case of MI5, and to some extent also MI6 and GCHQ, the secrecy of the organisation, the weakness of the formal means of control, and the threat of prosecution hanging over any current or former member of the services who disclosed information about their workings meant they were less accountable, less penetrable than the other bureaucracies of the state.

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