

Reading this open book of British spies

I can now scroll through the 115 senior names on the MI6 staff list

By Duncan Campbell

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By late last night, it was clear the British government had got itself into another war with a clever adversary who wasn't going to give up without a fight. Richard Tomlinson, the ex MI6 man who has now revealed the names of top intelligence officers to Internet sites all over the world, had already been locked in battle with Whitehall for five years, threatening to use his personal computer and the Internet to create another Spycatcher battle that would be over before the Cabinet Secretary could even blink, let alone dissemble.

Now, it has happened. Many MI6 staff holding key and dangerous posts in the Balkans are on the list of 115 names I found on the Internet yesterday morning, together with a shorter list of nine MI6 names which I had seen before. Both lists had been already distributed automatically to hundreds of thousands of computer 'news servers' around the world. The long list was also sent to everyone who had subscribed to a particular channel on Usenet, which is the Internet's discussion area. There are more than 20,000 such groups, catering for every subject under the sun. Once a message is sent to Usenet, it automatically copies itself around the planet.

D-Notice secretary Admiral Pulvertaft's warning to the British media about the existence of a single web site was out of date before it was written. As the row blew up, Richard Tomlinson told me in an e-mail that 'People are jumping to the wrong conclusion. My web-site does not contain any names, other than a few that are already in the public domain.' All of this is true, but may not be to the point.

Only the short list went on to his web site. The long list was launched in a different way and took a different route round the world. Tomlinson's principal grievance is that he was peremptorily sacked and then denied the right to compensation at an industrial tribunal. In a series of e-mails to me over the last few months, and on his now departed web site, he described how his life since being a secret agent has been a saga of arrest, jail, and expulsion from a series of countries.

The secret battle of computers between Mr Tomlinson and MI6 went red hot late last month. In an e-mail from Switzerland three weeks ago, he told me of his mounting anger that what he saw as harassment continued unabated. On 19 April, he wrote 'I just threatened the bastards to publish my database of MI6 officers on the Internet if they didn't stop harassing me (illegally getting foreign intelligence services to ban me from their countries - eg France, Australia, USA, Canada, even though there is no warrant out for my arrest).'

A week later, he wrote to say that his computer files had been wiped. He believed that that this had been caused by a hidden computer virus put there months before, when his computer was held by the French secret service. He wrote 'I can only return fire using the same tactics. I am currently therefore about to publish my database of MI6 officers, which I know will upset them. I suspect that this threat was the cause of my computer crash - a last ditch but futile attempt to destroy this database.'

Four days later, he revealed the shorter list of names.

Tomlinson's now peripatetic MI6 website started up in Switzerland subsequently, but was closed by British legal action within hours. It then launched, and re-launched in the US. That site, called Geocities 'Paris Jardin 8767' contained the shorter list and by the time it had been closed down last night, a well-known and highly regarded US site specialising in intelligence, called www.jya.com, contained replicas of all Tomlinson's 'Paris Jardin' files. It is now ubiquitous.

Other re-publishers used the Usenet system to replicate the MI6 short list on a number of widely read channels. The distribution has now gone so far that the position is irrecoverable so as the government is concerned. In this short file alone, Tomlinson names the Head of Balkan Intelligence, previously well-known to journalists in Brussels; his deputy and head of planning, (who he says developed a plan to assassinate Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic), and the controller of Eastern European activity. Also named on the Internet is SIS chief Sir Colin McColl's personal assistant.

Those officers have had six months warning of what might be coming, since Tomlinson first included their names in statements he then made about MI6's alleged involvement in the death of the Princess of Wales. Others including a senior official in a sensitive position in the Balkans, might also have expected to be on the list because they were well known to Tomlinson. On Tuesday night, he and a hundred others were not disappointed. That is the damage that SIS now has to cope with. In the first bloodless war of the information age, Britain has lost to a deadly first strike.