

5. Power play in Whitehall

The final episode of Secret Society explored how governments manipulate information to reinforce and retain power. The programme, which was formally cleared for transmission by former BBC Director-General Alasdair Milne in January, was originally to have been shown in April. But the whole series was then postponed and now, although the programme was legally re-cleared this month, the BBC says that the Corporation 'would not wish' on 'editorial' grounds to show the programme in a 'pre-election period'. This account, by presenter DUNCAN CAMPBELL, is based closely on the script approved for transmission by Alasdair Milne

THE VERY HEART of the British government is as secret as MI5 or MI6. The central policy making apparatus — the Cabinet Office — does not handle any paperwork that isn't secret at some level. Mrs Thatcher, no less than her Labour predecessors, has resolutely pulled the iron curtain around the real decision-taking organisms of government — Cabinet committees. The committees themselves are further hidden behind cryptic initials — only one of the committees, 'OD' (Overseas and Defence), has any official public existence. Beyond some fairly obvious other groups, like 'E' (Economic Policy), are a complex hierarchy of hidden subgroups as well as countless dozens of 'MISCs' (Miscellaneous) committees, whose numbers and titles give no apparent clue as to their function or agenda.

Before the last two general elections, the outgoing governments involved such committees in unusual tactics which, like details of the committees themselves, have no place in the textbook account of the British constitution. *Secret Society* examined, at equal lengths, some activities by the Labour and Conservative governments which faced re-election in 1979 and 1983. The first example was the remarkable story of how and why, for a mere ten hours, it was British government policy to legislate for Freedom of Information.

The 1974-1979 Labour government's election manifesto had promised Freedom of Information, and laws to 'place the burden on the public authorities to justify withholding

information'. But Labour's prime ministers were less than keen to put that promise into practice. As a means of prevarication, James Callaghan set up a Cabinet committee called GEN 29, to look into official secrecy, and head off demands for FoI.

But when Liberal MP Clement Freud came top of the autumn 1978 poll for private member's Bills, and chose FoI, Callaghan was suddenly put very uncomfortably on the spot. His government could not oppose a Bill which reflected their own manifesto promise. With Home Office support, the government resolutely tried to water it down and indeed to convert it into the strengthened Secrets Act that GEN29 really wanted. It was thus a fairly eviscerated Official Information Bill that Freud took out of Committee stage early in 1979.

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One of Freud's most active supporters — the then Lewisham Labour MP Chris Price — tried to persuade Callaghan to offer the Liberals an unadulterated Freedom of Information Act in return for continued support during the 'winter of discontent'. Price told me that although 'Callaghan was very flexible in wanting to hold on to power, on Freedom of Information he had a 'very massive sticking point'.

A sudden crisis

A sudden crisis changed Callaghan's mind. On Wednesday 28 March 1979, Labour ministers faced an Opposition vote of confidence at 10

o'clock in the evening. The Liberal Party would be voting with the opposition, leaving Labour with no overall majority. Since Callaghan privately knew that one Labour MP was fatally ill and unable to attend, the government would, he knew, fall — in a minority of one.

In Downing Street, there were desperate political calculations. They knew that Clement Freud's Bill was just nine days away from its critical report stage. If Freud could just be persuaded not to vote, permitting Freedom of Information in the UK might no longer be too high a price to pay for power. So during the morning, Chris Price was contacted on Callaghan's behalf by government chief whip Michael Cocks. He was told that if he could save Callaghan's administration by getting Clement Freud to miss a train from Liverpool that night (where he was canvassing in support of David Alton) the government would have his Bill passed without further sabotage.

Price tracked down Freud in the Littlewoods Pools headquarters and told him that 'Number 10' had promised him his Bill — provided that he miss the train. Freud replied that he would think about the proposal, as Chris Price recalls:

It was a great shock to him. I don't think he was as used to wheeling and dealing in government as some other MPs and politicians. I think the problem was that he was incredulous, he wasn't certain whether Labour would have delivered.

Freud's uncertainty made the evening exceedingly tense for the government and its supporters. Freud made no appearance in the chamber, and did not emerge from the Opposition lobby until the very end. So Price watched with mounting hope as Freud failed to appear, and then saw him — and knew that 'we've probably lost'. For Freud, the affair had indeed been a shock, finding Britain's immediate political future temporarily resting in his hands alone. He told me how he felt:

Manipulated . . . I felt a sort of moral indignation that I should be brought into this. Its really very odd that having covertly opposed my Bill as they did, they should then, for the doubtful advantage of governing for a few more months, which is all they had anyway, offer to do something which they said they wouldn't do.

CALLAGHAN DULY departed Downing Street, and Mrs Thatcher arrived. She showed less interest in Freedom of Information — and adapted the Cabinet system so that small ad hoc committees would deliver her desired results. It was the response to the decision of one such committee — MISC-7 (the 7th 'miscellaneous' committee under Mrs Thatcher) — to replace Polaris with Trident, followed soon by government permission to station US cruise missiles in Britain, that was to

lead to a campaign every bit as desperate as Jim Callaghan's last ditch bid to hang on in power at Number 10.

The two decisions triggered public protests, and aroused grave Conservative fears about their re-election chances. What happened next inside Conservative Central office was recounted to *Secret Society* by a former Tory party official, Piers Wooley:

At the time nuclear issues were regarded as quite a large problem as far as the election was concerned. The Conservative Party was worried that the momentum that CND and the Labour Party had gained so far was going to accelerate and that the disarmament issue would really fall out of their hands at the time of an election.

Private polls had told party managers how badly government popularity had slumped. So a co-ordinated campaign was to be planned against disarmament groups. Inside the government throughout 1982, there was no doubt that ministers felt desperately anxious to stop losing the public debate.

The actions which ministers and Conservative MPs then took include a remarkable catalogue of Whitehall improprieties. One of the groups who joined this campaign subsequently broke the law; government and foreign money was channeled into other groups; and the government is accused of more than once flouting constitutional rules about not involving civil servants in party politics.

One of the first moves was the formation of a special sub-committee led by junior defence minister Peter Blaker. As usual, the junior minister was backed up by a working party of civil servants, the 'Working Party on Nuclear Weapons and Public Opinion'.

Here, the government's civil defence programme was an early source of anxiety. The issue of official civil defence advice like the 'Protect and Survive' pamphlet in 1980 had been a disaster. People had become more worried, not less. Could the mistakes of 1980 — including a civil defence rehearsal which had shown the public the frightening prospect of how Britain might fare under nuclear attack — be avoided when another such exercise was to be held in 1982?

It proved beyond the sub-committee's power. The ministers asked civil servants to list the parliamentary constituencies in which each bomb would land. Then they decided that it would be unwise for bombs to land on marginal constituencies. These bombs should be moved, civil servants were told. But the exercise plans were now such a mess that it had to be cancelled by the Home Secretary, who blamed opposition from 'nuclear free zone' local authorities. There's never been a national civil defence exercise since.

Battle for hearts and minds

Other parts of the battle for hearts and minds had to take place both inside and outside the government. To co-ordinate a range of anti-CND groups, the Conservative Party set up a special committee of its own — the 'Committee for Peace with Freedom' — under backbench MP Winston Churchill.

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Winston Churchill's committee paralleled the special structure that Peter Blaker operated inside the government. The government in fact already funded one group, the British Atlantic Committee, which was explicitly regarded as a convenient 'government front organisation' according to former Defence Ministry Permanent Secretary Sir Frank Cooper. Former MoD official Clive Ponting recalled that inside the MoD 'it was a matter of trying to pick organisations were thought to be the most effective' as 'front organisations' with which to counter-attack against CND. BAC's Foreign Office grant was quickly trebled, to £58,000 — until the election was over.

But as a registered charity, BAC wasn't supposed to be running political campaigns. After receiving complaints, the Charity Commissioners investigated — and found that BAC had stepped over the permissible line for so-called 'educational' work. So BAC had to found a new non-charitable organisation called 'Peace through NATO', to use the extra government cash for anti-CND work.

Another, much more vociferous group was even less restrained in its campaigning methods against CND. The Coalition for Peace through Security was run by three Conservative parliamentary candidates and an American businessman. All the members of the Coalition, bar one, were Conservative Party activists, including Edward Leigh, now MP for Gainsborough, Tony Kerpel, now a government political adviser, and Julian Lewis, who continues to run right-wing activist groups. Piers Wooley recalled that their attendance at Churchill's meetings caused some disquiet:

These were the street wise kids. They were mainly involved with heckling at public meetings, organising anti-CND rallies [and] finding any opportunity where they could have a direct attack at street level on CND.

The Coalition was financially supported by a foreign right-wing pressure group, the Heritage Foundation in Washington. Heritage offered at least \$60,000 to support the Coalition's attacks on the peace movement, according to copies of correspondence obtained by *Secret Society*. One letter, dated February 1982, confirms that \$10,000 was being provided to the Coalition for so-called 'charitable and educational purposes'. Another letter, dated October 1982, shows that just as the Conservative counter-attack on CND gathered speed, the Heritage Foundation allocated a further \$50,000 for what was described as 'Anglo-American Public Education work on various timely themes of a non-political nature'.

Last year, we asked a leading member of the Coalition, Dr Julian Lewis, to explain why he felt it important to take such an active stance against CND. First, he agreed to be interviewed. Then he changed his mind. Finally, he and Winston Churchill launched an intensive campaign to try to prevent the BBC showing the programme at all.

The anti-CND campaign intensified at the start of 1983, when Michael Heseltine was transferred to the Defence Ministry, and expected to make a vigorous attack on CND. He created a new department, DS19, which was officially supposed to provide public information about government nuclear policy. DS19 and Heseltine were also interested in private information about leading members of CND. M15 intelligence staff were asked to trawl their files for information the minister could use. Then, in a letter to Conservative Party candidates just before Easter, Heseltine circulated details of the background of leading CND officials.

The most serious criticisms of constitutional impropriety has been made about a special Liaison Committee which met from September 1982 onwards to prepare for the 1983 general election. The meetings took place in the Cabinet room of 10 Downing Street. But these were party political meetings, so its secretariat consisted of party officials, not civil servants.

Yet despite a firm civil service rule that civil servants have to keep their distance from party political matters, the Prime Minister's press secretary, Bernard Ingham, took an active role in planning how the Conservative Party should ensure its re-election in 1983, in attending the Liaison Committee.

To senior civil servants, such behaviour by Ingham was a gross and unacceptable breach of



propriety. Sir Frank Cooper gave me a clear account of the Whitehall view:

I think it would be very unusual for any civil servant to attend a gathering of that nature which, by definition, must be a party political occasion . . . I think it would be fundamentally wrong for any civil servant to go to a purely political decision making gathering which is purely a party political occasion.

At one point in their defence discussions, the Liaison Committee studied an official Defence Ministry pamphlet, 'How to deal with a bully'. The pamphlet shows a British bulldog facing a vicious bear, a theme which had been devised by Peter Blaker and MoD public relations advisers. It was a remarkably aggressive pamphlet, Sir Frank Cooper recalled:

It was a bit more extrovert than the stuff which normally comes out of government departments . . . Certainly that leaflet was viewed as sort of slightly way out, if that's the right phrase, within the Ministry of Defence.

Alarmed civil servants hoped that the idea would be abandoned by more experienced senior Ministers. But Defence Secretary John Nott had then suggested that the only change needed was to make the bulldog wear a Union Jack waistcoat! Piers Wooley recalled Mrs Thatcher's reaction to it at the Liaison Committee:

The Prime Minister herself was very enthusiastic about it — even though she had slight problems about what colour the bear was. But apart from that little problem there was quite a lot of enthusiasm for the pamphlet.

Mrs Thatcher visibly demonstrated her enthusiasm by banging on the committee table, and repeating that 'we've got to use that bear'.

PERCEIVING THAT defence, once again, might be a major election issue, the propaganda machinery as cranked into action again. A new Conservative Party committee was formed last autumn to campaign against Labour and Alliance defence policies. Just as before the 1983 election, the Ministry of Defence put together a new film on defence policy, which was launched in February.

John Ledlie, who used to run DS19 and is now the Defence Ministry Director of Public Relations, told me last year that the £200,000 half-hour film indeed would work to the political advantage of the Conservative Party. 'We'll try to steer a middle course, but it'll be difficult. It does give the rationale for defence and deterrence as practised under this administration'. It would be a view from one side only, he acknowledged:

Oh, sure. Its not meant to be an objective view. Its putting the government case, its not the whole picture. its made on behalf of the government. You could say its using government funds for party purposes. But its distributed by the COI, not Conservative Central Office.

Like other parts of the secret government committees apparatus, the factors behind the decision to commit £200,000 of public funds to an avowedly 'one-sided' view of a political argument will remain officially secret for a minimum of 30 years — if they ever become accessible at all.

Now, in the forthcoming general election, politicians once again offer a commitment to openness. Once in power, it has always been a rather different story. □

MEDIA

Not the right feeling in the fingertips

Rainer Gatermann

The NS has asked a group of experienced London-based foreign correspondents of differing views to comment on the election. The first of these is from the London correspondent of the West German daily, Die Welt.

AFTER MRS Thatcher's decision to call a general election I got from my colleagues in Germany two questions: 'How do you explain the Tories' lead in the opinion polls?'; and 'What has happened to Neil Kinnock?'

Eighteen months ago, after Labour's 1985 party conference, I was strongly convinced that Neil Kinnock had got his party under control. The Militant Tendency was smashed and humiliated, black sections were not a serious issue, nobody talked — especially not in economic terms — about socialism. The party seemed to me to be united and had moved to the political centre, where the next general election had to be won. The fighting spirit was high.

Furthermore, I got word from Tony Benn that the left would not jeopardise Neil Kinnock's prospects to replace Mrs Thatcher in 10 Downing Street. Only after he had moved in, would the internal fight start . . .

Today the Labour Party has lost a lot of its momentum, despite the enthusiasm shown by its leader and despite some political programmes which should easily find the support of a majority of the electorate. Why the radical change? It can't be just the allegedly hostile attitude of Fleet Street. One reason might be, and here I have to quote my predecessor in London, that it is more or less impossible to bring the Labour Party under one hat. Another reason might be the inability of the leadership to attack the government in an effective style. The strong Tory position of today depends more on the weakness of the opposition than on the excellence of the government.

However, the main reason why the people are still sceptical towards Labour's policy is, from my point of view, the fact that they believe Neil Kinnock and his team are not able to succeed with all the changes necessary for Britain's economic recovery. All European industrialised countries had to go through painful changes when they moved away from heavy industries and old technology into the era of plastics, computers and minichips. But they started gradually in the mid-sixties while British governments, mainly Labour ones, didn't dare or were stopped by the unions from doing this.

Undoubtedly, the fact that the Prime Minister set Britain on the new course is up to now her most important achievement. The way she managed that is impressive and because of that

she is respected and admired abroad, in West Germany probably more than in Britain. I have my doubts whether in 1979 Labour would have been able and willing to introduce these changes which were inevitable. Today, even Neil Kinnock has to recognise that only a Tory government and — most important — one led by a person with all the Thatcher attributes was in the position to force Britain into a new direction.

Hitherto, I had the view that Mrs Thatcher was not typically British. However, some weeks ago, after an intensive discussion with an experienced professor, I changed my mind and adopted largely his version. It is, especially for a foreigner, easy to classify Mrs Thatcher as unBritish; but she is an extremely good representative of her class: to be resolute, to be economical (sometimes even with the truth), to trust in your own capacity and ask your fellow citizens to do the same, only to ask state support in emergencies and to spend just the money you have earned and not live on credit.

Out of this description the Prime Minister's distant position towards the social and health services, and towards deprived parts of the community, is more explainable. It will be very interesting to see whether Labour will be successful in getting these issues into the centre of the election campaign. The same applies to the problems of older people, schools and housing. Compared with other West European countries, the conditions in these areas are appalling. And I think the government could have done more to solve these problems. I do miss what in German is called *Fingerspitzengefühl* (the right feeling in the fingertips).

The Prime Minister told us her ambition for her second term was to put the national economy right. She, her ministers and some companies have delivered impressive results. Anyhow, one has to take into account from what level this progress started: more or less from scratch. An international comparison shows that Britain is still far behind many of the other industrialised countries. Big Bang and today's profitable City can't cover up the weak position of manufacturing industry as well as the lack of investment in research and development. Obviously, there is no lack of capital. Why is it to be invested abroad? Is there perhaps a fundamental mistrust in the capability of British industry?

Writing for a foreign paper brings one inevitably to a dilemma: how to explain to your readers that in this country, the mother of all democracies, a party with 27.6 per cent of the votes, like Labour in the 1983 election, got 209 seats while another with 25.4 per cent, like the Alliance, has to be content with 23 seats? How does this correspond with the famous British sense of fair play? I really would enjoy seeing a hung parliament in Westminster and in a longer term a successful attempt by the Alliance for PR.

English friends told me that would be impossible, one couldn't change such a traditional (and they emphasise successful, while I have some doubts) system. However, Britain participated very actively in the creation of West Germany's parliamentary system. And most Germans believe it is more democratic than the Westminster model. I know at least one Englishman outside the Alliance who agrees: Ken Livingstone. □