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# Unintelligent signalling: Howe was less than candid

IN EVERY SENSE, the government's decision unilaterally to remove GCHQ employees' employment rights and try to bully them out of union membership resulted from American pressure. Mrs Thatcher and Sir Geoffrey Howe know perfectly well that Cheltenham is effectively the local office of a US-based intelligence multinational.

Sir Geoffrey is also painfully relearning how the 'requirements of national security' are apt to rebound. Because those responsible for establishments like GCHQ never have to account publicly for what they do, they tend to get public reaction wrong. They got it wrong last week, just as they got it wrong in 1977, when they demanded that the ABC Official Secrets Act trial be launched against myself and others; and when they attempted to suppress the TV reportage of revelations of corruption within GCHQ by a former employee, Jock Kane, made here in 1980.

Direct pressure on the British government comes from the US National Security Agency, which is the senior partner in the multinational pact to gather 'sigint' or signals intelligence. But, despite the exotic nature of sigint, work at GCHQ is in general routine and ordinary; only a tiny minority of employees get involved in genuine undercover activities.

The Americans have been deeply involved in four recent events. They do not like the idea of strikes at all; some GCHQ outstations, such as Bude in Cornwall, are an integral part of the US network, in this case for monitoring international commercial communications satellites, and the strikes at Cheltenham three years ago did cut off further parts of the intelligence-sharing links. Geoffrey Prime's espionage directly compromised a major US satellite sigint gathering system; after his conviction, NSA's deputy director came to Britain *inter alia* to spell out the terms of continued partnership. As a direct consequence, the so-called submitting to 'polygraphs', or lie detectors, is to become compulsory requirement for employees.

Early this week, Cabinet Ministers — aggrieved at being caught unawares by Howe's announcement — were suggesting that the key item before Mrs Thatcher's cabinet sub-committee that decided the issue was neither the imminent forced introduction of lie detector tests, nor a more general political strategy against the unions, but the vulnerability of GCHQ's overall operations to disruption by a small group of computer operators. But message relaying computers have been in use at Cheltenham and its outstations for many years. The only new factor is a 52-station

international sigint communications network, which was installed last year, and includes a major centre at Cheltenham. Its codename is PLATFORM; it too is American, and centred on NSA.

The timing gives Mrs Thatcher's gambit away. It has not taken three years for GCHQ's directors to assess the impact of the 1979-'81 strikes. But Howe's announcement is timed exactly to fit with the intensified use of lie detector machines, starting in the next few months.

On 12 May 1983, the British Security Commission report on the Prime spy case recommended the introduction of the polygraph here as the 'only measure' that would have stopped Prime. This announcement followed by only two months a presidential order to widen the use of lie detectors in the United States. Last summer, the head of the civil service admitted to the civil service unions' council that US pressure had led to the recommendation.

NSA believes in the polygraph, for which it claims 97.7 per cent accuracy. Many disagree; six months ago, a memorandum from the US Defense Department's own health director and senior medical adviser, Dr John Beary, pointed out that the polygraph 'does not work'. Dr Beary's memorandum, which was obtained and published by the *Washington Post*, has not previously been reported in Britain.

The polygraph, Beary warned, was 'not a lie detector but an excitement detector . . . (it) misclassifies 30 per cent to 50 per cent of innocent people as liars in field tests . . . I suspect the proposed policy will stimulate a flurry of lawsuits'. Similar suspicions cannot be far from the mind of Sir Geoffrey and his advisers.

Much was made last week of the fact that the legislation Howe used to strip GCHQ employees of their rights was introduced by Labour and already applies to employees of two other intelligence agencies. But there is a fundamental distinction between a secret intelligence organisation and an organisation producing secret intelligence. GCHQ is in the latter category.

Of Britain's four intelligence agencies, two — the Secret Intelligence Service (M16) and the Security Service (M15) — are wholly covert. Their headquarters and employees invariably have 'covers'. Not so Cheltenham. There are signs outside and entries in local telephone directories listing all its scattered listening stations. Jobs there are advertised in the orthodox way by the Civil Service Commission and trade unions have operated at Cheltenham for more than three decades without their loyalty or the security consciousness of

their lay or full-time members being impugned.

The unions have also been performing their routine duties with equal lack of drama. Three or four union magazines, such as the suggestively-titled *Monitor* of the Association of Government Supervisors and Radio Officers, have been coming out for years. It has never been suggested that these journals threaten security. They are, however, packed with ordinary, everyday, humdrum, industrial relations activity — negotiations about meal breaks and overtime pay — and give the lie to the impression the government has tried to create that industrial relations at Cheltenham proceeded smoothly until the moment when, in support of national pay negotiations, GCHQ members were called out on strike.

During the course of the week the government sought to fortify its unattractive position with successively wider disclosures which, only a few years ago, they themselves would have regarded as constituting 'grave damage to national security'. By Tuesday, Howe's colleagues were listing world events into which, we are invited to infer, GCHQ's electronic sensors are normally plugged.

But the unions have also to grasp one nettle — is it true that the 1979 and 1981 strikes did disrupt GCHQ operations, as they claimed then and Mrs Thatcher claims now? Or is it not, as John Nott claimed then and the unions say now? The present conflict of accounts is damaging to all concerned.

The reasonable view is that John Nott was fibbing and that the unions' 1981 claims to have disrupted operations were right. But it is also reasonable to assert that it didn't much matter, since (and as we have argued here in the past) GCHQ's output is now primarily economic and commercial intelligence.

The civil service unions cannot, however, seek to escape the dilemma about the presentation of their past activities by derogating the value of GCHQ's work. Thus caught, the intended compromise of offering a 'no-strike' agreement for a few workers, whose task is acknowledged to be critical by both union members inside GCHQ and the government, seems sound. This latest banana skin has already damaged the government's image and the unions need to preserve their credibility to help keep the humiliating and pseudo-scientific cult of the lie-detector from sweeping into other parts of the civil service — and to keep alive their employees' basic rights. □

*Peter Kellner will be back next week.*