

The MI5 affair: can the spooks be trusted?

Would a Kinnock government face secret treachery from Britain's security services? DUNCAN CAMPBELL, PATRICK FORBES and JOLYON JENKINS report on the implications of the MI5 affair

HAVE BRITAIN'S security and intelligence services plotted against an elected socialist government? The answer is yes, on both of the last two occasions when Labour has assumed power. Rumours of a 1975 'MI5 plot' against Wilson have long been rife. But now the government has been forced to acknowledge that the plot did happen. The admission came from Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong in the course of his evidence in the case to stop ex-intelligence officer Peter Wright publishing his MI5 memoirs.

An earlier plot against the first Wilson government — in 1968 — has already been acknowledged by some of those who knew of it. So far as its goals were concerned, that plot was little short of a plan for a coup d'état. The plot originated in the armed forces, and key figures who discussed the moves against Wilson have been identified. On that occasion, MI5 too identified some of the plotters, and informed the Home Secretary.

But the 1975 plot originated in MI5 itself. Full details of the episode have yet to emerge, although much is known to be in Wright's as yet unpublished manuscript. In court in Australia, Sir Robert Armstrong admitted that there was a plot, and that it involved a handful of officers — 'perhaps without the knowledge of the top management of the service'.

In court last month, Armstrong said that there would probably have been an inquiry afterwards. But he hadn't seen the results of any such inquiry. So, conveniently, he couldn't offer any details. He did tell the court that 'I don't want you to think I approve of MI5 plotting against the Government of the day'.

The situation facing a future Labour government will, if anything, be worse than that Harold Wilson faced in the 1970s. It's already been confirmed in the Australian case that leading Labour figures — such as Kinnock's Press Secretary Patricia Hewitt — have been fallaciously branded by MI5 as 'communist sympathisers'. Armstrong wouldn't say what the results of an inquiry into those slurs had been — or whether they had now been removed.

Clive Ponting, who had to work with MI5 officials when he recently headed the Ministry of Defence's legal secretariat, says he found senior MI5 staff he met to be far to the right: 'They're utterly reactionary, tucked away in their little world of their own'. Intelligence officers who've recently left MI5 describe the lower levels in MI5 as

being more broadly based and professionally distant from politics. But no one doubts that the service is biased well to the right of the British political spectrum; that much seems to be built in.

Ponting found no evidence of individual ministerial control of the Security Services, through the Defence Ministry or anywhere else:

Essentially what they don't choose to tell (the Prime Minister), he cannot know about. It all works on the traditional Whitehall assumption that there are reasonable men in charge.

In effect, MI5 were not supervised in their duties, and would be free to change direction again at whim: 'If they were like that with Wilson, think what they're going to be like with Kinnock'.

The threat a Kinnock administration might face is the fallout from MI5's general change of direction in the mid-1970s, when its sights shifted from the KGB to radical domestic targets. MI5 then categorised the National Council for Civil Liberties and other left-wing groups as registered 'subversive organisations'. The Service's resources were diverted from monitoring Soviet

bloc intelligence activity into spying on left-wing politics in Britain.

THE EXACT DETAILS of the anti-Wilson 'plot' are still unclear although its elements are not. Suspicion was focused on the loyalty of several of Wilson's friends. So they felt free to make the Leader of the Opposition a surveillance target, and to continue operating even when he became their titular director.

Sir Frank Cooper, who was until 1982 a member of the only intelligence oversight body Britain has (PSIS — see below), says that MI5's work at the time didn't amount to a 'plot'. But some intelligence officers certainly did not trust Wilson, and he might well have been put under surveillance. He told us this week: 'I think there's always been doubts as to who Wilson associated with, there's always been worries about that'. Mentioning some of Wilson's friends, Cooper added: 'I think if you've got a Prime Minister who has got friends of a doubtful character, then you've got to be careful'.

The conduct of an official inquiry into the anti-

The woman in the know

THE WOMAN in the picture, taken earlier this week, is a senior MI5 officer. Her name is Stella Rimington. Her job puts her at the heart of the current spy controversy, since she's the woman across whose desk pass MI5's reports to Whitehall on 'subversives' in Parliament — together with those on other political figures, 'subversives' in the media and education. If Kinnock's phone was tapped, she'd know it.

Mrs Rimington heads 'F2' division, part of 'F' branch, which handles all domestic subversion. A part of her division, 'F2R', produces what Whitehall calls 'Box 500' reports, which give details of what MI5 chooses to tell Whitehall about its targets. It also writes reports using material from 'C' branch, which deals with Whitehall's protective measures to stop government leaks. Among the trade union leaders who have been the subject of 'F' branch surveillance in the past have been Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon — reports on them went to Harold Wilson; more recently, it has monitored the activities of Arthur Scargill.

Stella Rimington was born Stella Whitehouse in Croydon in 1935; her father was a mechanical engineer. The family later moved to Nottinghamshire, where her mother still lives. When she was 12, Stella went to Nottingham High School for Girls. She went on to Edinburgh University and graduated in 1958 with an MA. Four years later, aged 27, she married John Rimington, who is now equally distinguished as director of the Health and Safety Executive. John Rimington's family also hail from the county; he himself went to Nottingham High School. At the time of the marriage Stella Whitehouse described herself as an 'archivist'. John Rimington was then working in the Board of Trade, but was on secondment to the Treasury, researching the implementation of decimal currency.

The couple have two daughters and live in a large house in the more fashionable part of Islington, North London. Despite his wife's sensitive job, Mr Rimington has until recently been happy to list his address in *Who's Who*. When they moved to a new house around the corner, however, he took it out. In his spare time Mr Rimington walks, gardens, and watches cricket. She shops at Jaeger.



Wilson operation appears to be confirmed by a 1976 letter the then MI5 Director-General Sir Michael Hanley wrote to Peter Wright, then still in MI5. Hanley wrote: 'It would take some imagination to say that things are improving here, but they are certainly no worse than when you went away'. Then, in an apparent reference to the investigation of a group of officials who had taken it on themselves to investigate Wilson, he added: 'The firm is doing quite well and passed the recent examination.'

Underlying the elements of high farce in the Wright saga are more serious issues. Wright's book will add new weight to the evidence of consistent lawbreaking by Britain's security and intelligence services. Wright plans to detail his involvement in phone tapping in Britain, and in the extensive bugging of London's embassies. The lawbreaking goes as low as driving offences for swapping vehicle registrations, to the now well-established plot to murder President Nasser.

The most recent publicity has cast light on one of MI5's most shadowy corners — the work of MI5's Whitehall 'fixer'. Most of the press has been coy about properly naming Bernard Sheldon, who is officially MI5's legal adviser. But Bernard Sheldon's name, and role, needs to be brought more fully into the limelight. Every time a security fiasco threatens to cause political embarrassment to MI5, Sheldon is on the scene. He is a regular visitor to the government Law Officers, and the Home and Defence Ministries. He has attended most major spy cases, and intervenes with the police or prosecuting authorities if their work might threaten MI5's interests.

In a separate report (see box), we've also identified the work and career of the Assistant Director of MI5's 'F' Division, whose special section circulates MI5's reports of 'domestic subversion' to a select few in Whitehall.

THE RESULT of 'F' Division's work is that many of the future generation of new Labour parliamentary candidates are already likely to be on file with MI5, although their loyalty is not in doubt. Organisations such as NCCL or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament have for years been bracketed as 'subversive'; 'subversive front'; 'subversive dominated'; or 'subversive penetrated'. All but the last designation empowers MI5 staff to open files on all national and local officials and leaders as being — at best — subversive 'sympathisers'. Militant and other Trotskyist groups are regarded, like the Communist Party, as fully-fledged 'subversives'.

Such classifications were, for example, the justification for MI5 opening files on two recent NCCL senior officers — Patricia Hewitt, the former General Secretary, and Harriet Harman, the former Legal Officer (now the Peckham MP). In testimony this summer former intelligence

officer Cathy Massiter has said:

NCCL has been of interest to the Security Service . . . since the 1940s. In the mid 1970s, it was reassessed as a subversive organisation largely because of a decision by the Assistant Director of the section in which NCCL was being studied.

This view was not based on the normal MI5 rule that, at least, Communist Party members should be numerically dominant in the leadership of such a group. It was just that NCCL had taken a similar stance on such issues as police and security service accountability to various far left groups. On this basis alone (and personal bias in MI5) it was classified with them.

The result was that not just Hewitt and Harman, but every other NCCL national official, employee, and branch secretary went on file in Curzon Street as a 'communist sympathiser'. Indeed, for the period that NCCL and its like were regarded as subversive, 'any member may and usually would be placed on record by the Security Service'.

Declining interest in NCCL — but surveillance continues

By the time Cathy Massiter had become the MI5 desk officer responsible for watching NCCL, real interest in the organisation had declined. Nevertheless, the cachet lingered, so that even though Massiter says that some of the files on officials at the level of branch secretary were then destroyed, local police Special Branches continued to penetrate and report on NCCL local groups' activities. National level surveillance didn't stop either. In 1982, an MI5 agent attended NCCL's national conferences, and reported directly back to the Curzon St headquarters.

The CND and NCCL cases for illegal surveillance have revealed that:

- Harriet Harman has been on record with the Security Service since she became NCCL's legal officer. She is recorded as a 'communist sympathiser' — although there is no evidence that she had any sympathies with the Party.
- Patricia Hewitt was recorded in the same category. And although her phone wasn't itself tapped, her file would contain intercepts of conversations she had with those who were intercepted.
- That included intercepts of conversations with one of the present writers (Campbell), whose phone was covered by an interception warrant.

With independent journalists and lawyers, however, MI5 have been in even greater difficulties about the appropriate category in

which to justify starting a file. Eventually they settled on the all-purpose bureaucratic fiction of 'unaffiliated revolutionary'.

Security assessments on newly elected MPs like Harriet Harman are passed on to the Cabinet Office. If the Cabinet Secretary thinks such information should be used to prevent their appointment to government office, or to certain select committees, he can pass the derogatory information on to the Prime Minister or other senior party leaders.

Politicians from across the spectrum acknowledge the dangers. Tory MP Jonathan Aitken has long had good connections with the intelligence services, including the MI5 faction now known as the 'Young Turks'. He said this week that MI5

should be under tighter democratic control. They have a tremendously introspective posture (and) this leads them to believe any kind of passing rumour. The kind of fishing trips that went on, I regard as dotty.

THE ORTHODOX lines of control to MI5 (and the other three intelligence services, MI6, GCHQ and the Defence Intelligence Staff) are not to individual ministries as is normally supposed in the press. Accountability stops with the Cabinet Secretary and the Permanent Secretaries committee on the Intelligence Services that he chairs, PSIS. PSIS oversees the secret intelligence budget of almost a billion pounds a year; and through a co-ordinator of intelligence approves the agencies' overall targets. The top man in all this is thus Sir Robert Armstrong.

Last week, Armstrong was asked his view of a future day when Labour came to power. What would happen when people like Hewitt and Harman occupied senior positions in government. 'Was he living in terror?', Wright's lawyer asked. 'I don't think I live in terror of a future Labour government,' Armstrong replied. Did he mean that a Labour government with radical policies really caused him no concern — or merely that he was satisfied that Whitehall could bring it under control?

The contrast between the government and MI5's treatment of Peter Wright and the tolerance extended to acceptable exposés by Chapman Pincher and Nigel West has yet to be explained — as does the length to which the government is still prepared to go to try and stop him. It suggests that more than the general principle of Security Service confidentiality may be at stake. The difference is that Wright is not pulling punches to avoid showing that elements of MI5, at least, would be the enemies of a democratic socialist government that they didn't like.

For interview with Dale Campbell-Savours MP, see p18.

