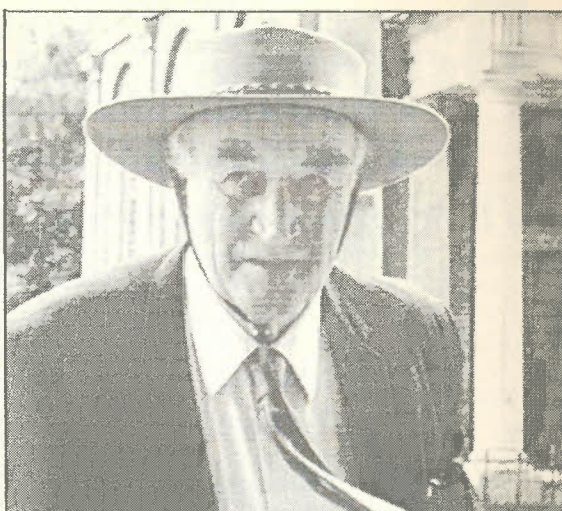


## FRONTLINES



Walsingham to Wright—400 years of arrogance

### The secret service unchecked for four centuries

The remarkable feature of the plot against Harold Wilson, revealed in the *Spycatcher* affair and much examined and re-examined in its immediate aftermath last week, is not that it happened. It would be more extraordinary if it hadn't happened—many times over. The surveillance of Wilson and his friends, and the depth of the security service treachery directed against him, were a likely if not inevitable consequence of the security service's institutional independence—and arrogance.

Security surveillance has always been maintained over political leaders and MPs of all parties. According to several former intelligence officers, information is regularly passed on about the personal life and politics of all likely appointees to government office. Neil Kinnock has had a personal file at MI5 since the early 1970s, according to one intelligence officer who has worked on it and to whom I have recently spoken. Until he became Labour Party leader, however, Kinnock's file contained (in apparent contrast to MI5's decades-long obsession with Wilson) relatively little information.

In the months before a general election, the security service always calls up and reviews its files on existing and likely new MPs. Peers are also kept under the same, usually passive, surveillance. Most of the material in the files that would not also be found in newspaper files or party archives concerns their intimate private lives. Such information

does not of course affect national security (unless the person has consequently been compromised by foreign intelligence services) but it does place MI5 in a particularly powerful position to influence events. Smear, as the 1975 Wilson plot showed, is one of their most potent extra-constitutional weapons.

According to former MI5 staff, one particularly valuable source of information about MPs and peers was a large archive of telephone intercepts which were operated against the Kray family and their associates. Through these, MI5 were able to learn fact and gossip alike. I was given the example of one prominent peer, now deceased, who became vulnerable in this way. The Kray intercepts had disclosed his interest in "leather" (sodomasochistic) sex, and the twins' role in helping supply his lordship with partners.

The security service, MI5 in popular parlance, owes no allegiance to constitution and parliamentary democracy. It was not created by law and its role and activities are neither recognised nor circumscribed in any act of parliament. Only in the Court of Appeal during some of the earlier *Spycatcher* hearings did the public get a first glimpse of how the security and intelligence services have, for centuries, regarded themselves as above and beyond the reach of either law or parliamentary democracy.

New indoctrinees at MI5's Mayfair headquarters are taught from the moment of entry that they are

"crown servants" and not "civil servants". The distinction is important, as the service claims that its antecedents and role leave it independent of accountability to parliament.

The service relies on the royal prerogative to break the law and disregard citizens' rights and liberties in "defence of the realm". In the Court of Appeal, last year, Lord Donaldson largely supported this view. Clearly, murder would be beyond the pale but invasions of privacy were not.

The tradition of an autocratic and autonomous secret service, answering only to the monarch, goes back at least as far as the first Elizabethan spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham. But it is striking how determinedly British parliaments of a much less democratic hue than the present body tried to make the monarch's secret services account for what they did, and spent. In 1742, a Treasury Solicitor called Scrope was sent to the Tower of London for refusing to answer a parliamentary committee's questions about the use of secret funds by the Walpole administration. In 1782, a Civil List Act limited the amount of money the crown could spend on secret service to £10,000.

The government of the day immediately created the new, independent and unlimited Secret Service Vote, which continues to this day. During the 18th and 19th centuries parliament made repeated attempts to force ministers to account for the money.

In contrast, 20th century public

accounts committees have examined the issue only twice in the last 50 years. The most recent examination, in 1980, came in two answers taking up just 50 lines in *Hansard*. The PAC's role in scrutinising even the audited sections of the security and intelligence services' £1 billion-plus budget could not be more complacent, as was recently illustrated by the Zircon affair.

The line given to MI5 recruits is as revealing as it is chilling. The lecture on these matters is usually given by the service's legal adviser, Bernard Sheldon, at their Grosvenor Street training centre. Asked by new trainees if one day MI5 officers are not certain to be caught in acts of burglary (or worse), Sheldon merely asserts that they have always got away with it up to now.

Duncan Campbell

### CIA hires NSS's spycatcher

Despite owning the world's second largest fleet of spy surveillance satellites and one of the larger global networks of communications interception and monitoring stations, the US Central Intelligence Agency this week asked *New Statesman and Society* to help out with an intelligence-gathering mission.

Their request, in the form of a letter prominently marked "Central Intelligence Agency—Official Business" arrived in the office last week, sent on to us by the CIA's London station. Inside was a CIA contract—and an offer of money.

What the CIA is looking for is a copy of the Secret Society "Zircon" tape, converted to US TV standards. It seems that ever since a bootleg of the Zircon video was shown at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco over nine months ago, CIA agents have been trying to track down a copy.

First, they asked at the Center for Investigative Reporting in San Francisco. Eventually, officers of the CIA's Visual Media department asked NSS if we'd help them out. Obviously, we'd have preferred to trade our spy satellite movies for theirs. But eventually we said yes (just this once, mind you) for a modest \$150.00. This situation was a bit like the position of *Spycatcher* until the Lords' judgment. Everyone else in the west has their copy of the Zircon movie, so why shouldn't the CIA? Duncan Campbell