

Tory wet dream

Duncan Campbell chats with his mum—and breaks the new Official Secrets Act?

Phyllis Chesler: is she a surrogate mother or only a uterus?

Stuart Cosgrove tells you how to buy a cheap Renoir



A Tory reformer takes over. He dumps Parkinson and Baker. Raises taxes. Invests in schools and hospitals. Is a good European. And wins the next election? R W Johnson sees a way out for the Tories



have required a bulkier battery pack). A cleverly misleading elaboration was to record a tone on a tape recorder and transmit it by holding the tape recorder up to the transmitter.

The first tests, at 156 MHz, were a failure. No signal was received despite matched aerials being used. Finally, by using a slightly lower frequency, voice signals and the tone were picked up, again using matched aerials.

Capt Edwards was asked by a disbelieving (and technically competent) juror: Am I to understand that you did not perform any digital encoded message and [use] a decoded digital receiver at the other end?" He could only reply: "No. The only equipment I had available were the hand-held marine-band radios, and I went just for a voice test and the signal tone put down a voice audio frequency."

Mr Feraday was then recalled. He stoutly maintained that it was easier to transmit, receive and digitally decode a tone signal than it would be to transmit, receive and comprehend a noisy voice signal: "If one can establish speech transmission, then the bomb will work." I demur. So did a persistent juror who pressed Mr Feraday with some 48 questions on the quality-of-signal issue. (Gibraltar is a very radio-literate society, being a major communications centre.)

So really am I right in saying that, unless you attach an encoder to the transceiver at the other end, you could not really perform a realistic test, only going by voice transmission?

I think they are realistic tests in the sense that if voice communication is established the bomb will set off. I do not think there is any doubt about that...

But the juror persisted and Mr Feraday's confidence began to wilt.

If someone tells you that he has done tests and identifies voice signal deterioration, that still makes you think that it would work?

I think there is a possibility that it would work.

Later on he was asked to estimate the frequency for which the 30-inch car aerial would be the correct length. Mr Feraday hazarded a guess—30MHz? At that frequency the aerial would have needed to be over eight feet long.

So there it is. The three IRA members were shot dead because it was believed they were carrying "buttons" (which they weren't), which if pressed wouldn't have detonated a car bomb, which didn't exist anyway.

Two other points are relevant. First, the "car bomb" could have been effectively defused by simply unscrewing the aerial or cutting it off.

Second, to cause the required transmission from an ICOM IC-2E, the power must be switched on, the tone encoder must be switched on, the frequency must be set using three thumb switches, three other switches must be in the correct position and, finally, the "transmit" button must be depressed.

The instrument could have been deliberately set in advance to work on a single push of the "transmit" switch. But the "transmit" switch, which has no guard, could easily have been pushed by accidental contact—or by its holder being shot and falling to the ground. ●

This article first appeared in Fortnight, Northern Ireland's independent monthly review.

Mum's the word

This week, Duncan Campbell challenges the new Official Secrets Act—by talking to Mary X

Miss Mary "X" was employed by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) for three years. Three days after the 1989 Official Secrets Act became law, I interviewed her about her intelligence work. She told me that, as a 22-year-old junior ATS (women's army) officer, she was posted to the top secret Special Communications Unit 3, where she plotted radio signals from continental Europe.

Special Communications Unit 3 (SCU-3), at Hanslope Hall, Bucks was then commanded by Colonel Ted Maltby. It lay at the centre of a web of listening and direction-finding stations spread across the British Isles from St Erith in Cornwall to Thurso in Caithness. The heart of SCU-3 was a map room where bearings were plotted on two giant displays.

Mary X passed the results to another secret base at Barnet, north London. There, teams of analysts including Hugh Trevor-Roper assessed and disseminated their results. Radio transmitter sites were usually located overseas, but if a newly found hostile transmitter was found in Britain, there was a "flap"; had an enemy agent set up operations?

Near Hanslope Hall was Whaddon Hall, SIS's own communications centre and emergency headquarters, known as Special Communications Unit 1. Staff from Whaddon and other secret bases were occasional visitors to Hanslope Hall. On 14 April 1943, one of the visitors was a rather important person, General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, deputy Chief of the Secret Service.

Two weeks later, General Marshall-Cornwall sent Miss X a typed document, via SIS intermediaries. The document bears the names of other members of the secret service who passed it on, or commented on its contents. It is, therefore, either "information" or a "document relating to security or intelligence" in Miss X's possession, the disclosure of which has been made illegal by the new Act. This is what the document says:

Meet our Megacycle Mary
Where the dipoles cluster tall
Blond and blue eyed as a fairy
(Though her timbre is Sauciehall)...
Would I knew the grid potential
Of our Mary's thermionic
Calculate by differential
Why her voice is supersonic
If her frequency reaction
Could but oscillate with mine
It would give much satisfaction
For she's SUPER heterodyne
"Perhaps the future Lady Marshall-Cornwall",
penned one SIS wag. But had this flirtatious

interchange between the deputy Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service and the young woman subaltern with a Scots accent blossomed further, you would not now be reading it. "Megacycle" Mary is my mother.

I first heard this poem many years ago. We have discussed these details of her wartime career many times. SIS's radio listening network has been described in many books. Yet now, with the new secrets law, such reminiscences—"Mummy, what did you do in the war?"—are branded criminal.

Where revelations by those knowledgeable of security and intelligence matters are concerned, there are no exemptions in the 1989 Official Secrets Act for defences of public interest, harmlessness, prior publication, family reminiscences, or even fiction. What the critics of the Act tend to forget is that most such defences did not exist under the old law. According to Clive Ponting's trial judge, there never was a defence of public interest in the old catch-all Section 2. Ponting was acquitted in the face of this very ruling. The government can have no certainty that, whatever the new law says, a new Ponting will not also be acquitted "perversely" by a jury who finds his action public-spirited.

The unfairness of the new law will restrain the government's hand in prosecuting harmless disclosures or those about which there is clear public concern. To take the most recent and obvious example, neither Colin Wallace nor those who know about his involvement with MI5 are going to stop talking about and investigating his case, 1989 Act or not.

There are important advantages to the new law. For example, the mere receipt or possession of official information or documents, which has long caused journalists extra difficulty and concern, is no longer an offence. The very activities for which I and *Time Out* reporter Crispin Aubrey were prosecuted in the 1977/78 ABC trial are no longer illegal. The "jigsaw puzzle offence"—of learning too much about government secrets from open sources—for which I once faced a 14-year espionage sentence, has not been made law. Yet James Callaghan, David Owen, Merlyn Rees and the first Thatcher government were all ready to put into law such an offence, custom-designed to criminalise much investigative journalism.

In the white paper prefacing the 1989 Act, the Home Office explained the deficiencies of Section 2 thus: "Because Section 2 goes so much wider than what is necessary to safeguard the public interest, its necessary role in inhibiting harmful disclosures is obscured." Nothing has changed. ●