

Sacked spy reflects badly on British Intelligence

By Duncan Campbell

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For the old and not-so-old boys and girls of British Intelligence, it has been a week of bewildering blunder and outright disaster. After a five-year battle with a dissident ex-undercover agent, the names of 117 senior Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) officers are now filed away in a million computers around the world.

Like the Spycatcher battle in Tasmania more than a decade ago, the British Government has achieved precisely the opposite of what it intended. Then, they tried to persuade Australian courts to ban the book written by spook-turned-farmer Peter Wright. After months of debate, they failed.

This time, in the new world of the Internet, the battle was over before Britain's Cabinet Secretary could even blink.

The one-time image of Britain's Secret Service as svelte James Bonds or impenetrably thoughtful George Smileys has gone forever. In place for the 21st century is a new image crafted by their ex-spy, 37-year-old New Zealand-born Richard Tomlinson. He has posed, cross-eyed, leaning in front of MI6's "Head Office" - the absurdly modernist, Aztec-like structure on the south bank of the River Thames that is now Britain's spy HQ. From a million Internet screens, Tomlinson now leers out at them. Meanwhile, the Internet plays the theme from Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The seeds of the catastrophe were sown five years ago when Tomlinson, a star Cambridge engineering graduate, was found to be a "loose cannon" and sent packing from SIS after an undercover stint in the Balkans. Tomlinson's principal grievance is that he was peremptorily sacked and then denied compensation. He was banned, on security grounds, from appealing to an industrial tribunal.

With each passing year since SIS blocked Tomlinson from going to the tribunal, its actions against him have seemed more and more spiteful, yet have been increasingly ineffective. Each has provoked new leaks.

In 1996, Tomlinson threatened to use his personal computer to publish memoirs on the Internet. When he then attempted to sell the memoirs to an Australian publisher, he was arrested and jailed for breaching the Official Secrets Act. Released a year ago, he returned to New Zealand in search of a media job. As a condition of parole, he was banned from using the Internet.

On Friday 7 August last year he was seated, ready to depart on Qantas from Auckland to Sydney, to meet journalists from Channel9. He was ordered off the plane by NZ officials and escorted back to have his Auckland hotel room searched by police and NZSIS agents. They told him that they had received a "fax from Canberra". All his computer equipment was seized.

The Auckland incident was the cap on a year-long series of incidents that Tomlinson calls "hounding". He had already been arrested in France. He was expelled from the United States at the end of August.

Ten days later, allegedly by "accident", some of his private computer files were "discovered" on computers in an Internet cafe in Geneva. The first file gave details of an alleged 1992 assassination plot against Slobodan Milosevic. Three methods were proposed, including staging a car crash in a Geneva subway tunnel. Tomlinson's dossier named six MI6 staff he said were involved in the plot.

Five days later another file "accidentally" left at the Swiss Internet cafe revealed a top-level British spy inside the German Bundesbank. This was part of a spying project against Britain's European partners, codenamed JETSTREAM by MI6. Yesterday, the two files were still on the Internet.

With the status of an international pariah, Tomlinson was forced to stay in Switzerland. In January, he tried again to enter France - and was detained again.

Since then, he and the British Government have waged ever more bitter and pettier warfare. This escalated to boiling point in March. He started e-mailing me then,

complaining that, during four months in the hands of the French police, his computer had been tampered with by MI6.

A month later, he wrote: "It might interest you to know that my computer self-destructed the other day. Every file on the whole hard disk, including all the system files, mysteriously compressed themselves while I was browsing the Internet."

He added: "I had just threatened the bastards to publish my database of MI6 officers on the Internet if they didn't stop harassing me. It may have been a desperation measure (sic). Anyway, they didn't succeed. I've got all that sort of stuff backed up."

A week later, after a computer technician had reportedly confirmed his fears, Richard Tomlinson e-mailed me again. He was very angry, and bitterly recounted the SIS interventions that had had him thrown out of France, Australia and the US. "I am currently therefore about to publish on the Internet my database of MI6 officers, which I know will upset them. I suspect that this threat was the cause of my computer crash - stay tuned for further news."

There was one more message: "I am trying to force them to negotiate, but I am deadly serious in my intent to carry out the threat. MI6 are obviously very worried as the Treasury Solicitor has been faxing all sorts of counter-threats and pleading missives. I certainly am going to give publicity to it. I'll keep you posted."

Tomlinson's now peripatetic MI6 website started up in Switzerland four days later, but was closed by British legal action within hours. It then launched, and re-launched, in the US. That site, called Geocities "Paris Jardin 8767" contained a short list of nine MI6 names whom Tomlinson alleged had been involved in plots to kill both President Milosevic and Princess Diana. These names had previously appeared on the Swiss Internet site, enabling Tomlinson to claim that they were "in the public domain".

But the long list of 117 names simultaneously appeared on a new Internet site, run by the Executive Intelligence Review, a US paper and Internet publication. The next morning, Wednesday, the list was spotted by MI6.

At lunchtime, the British Government moved to silence the national media. Using the D-Notice system that Australia similarly enforced, Rear Admiral David Pulvertaft warned editors that "a US-based website has today published on the Internet a list which identifies a large number of SIS (MI6) officers. Departmental officers are examining how the damage of this disclosure can be minimised. While this is in progress, I would ask that editors do not interpret the information in the website as being widely disclosed and do not, therefore, publish the address or the content of the website".

But the damage was already done, although the spooks didn't know it. A Canadian Internet enthusiast had already copied the list, and had sent it on to tens of thousand of computers around the world. By the time Admiral Pulvertaft had gone into action, copies of the list had long been automatically copied into computer databanks from Moscow to Melbourne - and Belgrade, and Baghdad, and Beijing.

The Foreign Office was not prepared to comment on why it decided to issue a warning, effectively ensuring that the list was found and disseminated.

The folly of the decision sank home in London this weekend as officials watched the list from Executive Intelligence Review (EIR) spread across the world.

EIR is no ordinary US magazine. It is run by Lyndon LaRouche, a wannabe US presidential candidate and convicted felon whose main thesis on world affairs is that they are secretly controlled by a drugs cartel run by British royalty. Even among conspiracy buffs, information emanating from LaRouche lies low on the credibility scale. Had the Government not drawn attention to the list, and said that it was true and damaging and from Tomlinson, it would never have been taken seriously and, in all probability, never read.

A day after the Government warning, the list was found. It then spread like wildfire. Distribution has now gone so far that the position is irrecoverable. The new list identified a string of officials in senior positions. They included the former controller of Middle Eastern MI6 activity, Geoffrey Tantom, and MI6's man in Zagreb. Tomlinson had previously leaked information about how this agent had interfered in

British politics by arranging to plant articles in the Spectator, the British political magazine. Two other names on the "short list" included former "C"s or chiefs, including Sir David Spedding and Sir Colin McColl.

The Tomlinson file, now everywhere on the Internet, repeats claims that MI6 developed a plan to assassinate Slobodan Milosevic. "The plan was fully typed, and attached to a yellow 'minute board', signifying that this was a formal and accountable document."

Although Tomlinson continues to deny that the EIR list is "his" MI6 database, no other candidate is available. One personal comment had been accidentally left in the list. In a sign of typically English disaffection, an agent said to have been posted to Lagos in 1995 is described as a "wanker". As the row blew up, Richard Tomlinson told me in an e-mail: "People are jumping to the wrong conclusion. My website does not contain any names, other than a few that are already in the public domain." All of this is true, but may not be to the point. The short list went on to his website. The long list, which also contains the names he admits publishing, was launched in a different way.

No wonder author John Le Carre called it "the Circus".