

The UK Intelligence Community: Ineffective, Unethical and Unaccountable

Written by Annie Machon

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ANNIE MACHON, MAR 11 2008

The USA and the UK are enmeshed in an apparently unending war of attrition – sorry peacekeeping – in Iraq. Why? Well, we may remember that the UK was assured by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, in sincere terms, that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction which could be deployed against British interests within 45 minutes. Indeed the press was awash with “45 minutes from Armageddon” headlines on 18th March 2003, the day of the crucial war debate in the British parliament. The implication was that Britain was directly at threat from the evil Iraqis.

The US varied the diet. George Bush, in his State of the Union address before the war, assured his nation that Iraq had been attempting to buy material to make nuclear weapons from Niger. The American media and public fell for this claim, hook, line and sinker.

What do these two erroneous claims have in common? Well, both were “sexed up” for public consumption.

We all know now that there never were any WMDs to be found in Iraq. After 10 years of punitive sanctions, the country simply didn't have the capability, even if it had the will, to develop them. The Niger claim is even more tenuous. This was based on an intelligence report emanating from the British Secret Intelligence Service (commonly known as SIS or MI6), which was based on forgeries.

We have had headline after screaming headline stating that yet another terrorist cell has been rounded up in Britain. The Ricin plot? The beheading of a British Muslim serviceman? The liquid bombs on airplanes? Yet, if one reads the newspapers carefully, one finds that charges are dropped quietly after a few months.

So, why is this happening? I can hazard a few guesses. In the 1990s I worked for 6 years as an intelligence officer for MI5, investigating political “subversives”, Irish terrorists, and Middle Eastern terrorism. In late 1996 I, with my then partner and colleague David Shayler, left the service in disgust at the incompetent and corrupt culture to blow the whistle on the UK intelligence establishment. This was not a case of sour grapes – we were both competent officers who regularly received performance related bonuses.

However, we had grown increasingly concerned about breaches of the law; ineptitude (which led to bombs going off that could and should have been prevented); files on politicians; the jailing of innocent people; illegal phone taps; and the illegal sponsoring of terrorism abroad, funded by UK tax-payers.

The key reason that we left and went public is probably one of the most heinous crimes – SIS funded an Islamic extremist group in Libya to try to assassinate Colonel Gaddafi in 1996. The attack failed, but killed innocent people. The attack was also illegal under British law. The 1994 intelligence Services Act, which put SIS on a legal footing for the first time in its 80 year history, stated that its officers were immune from prosecution in the UK for illegal acts committed abroad, if they had the prior written permission of its political master – ie the Foreign Secretary. In this case they did not.

So, the assassination attempt was not only immoral, unethical and highly reckless in a volatile area of the world, but

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also illegal under British law.

In August 1997 we went public in a national British newspaper about our concerns. We hoped that the newly-elected Labour government would take our evidence and begin an investigation of the intelligence agencies. After all, many Labour MPs had been on the receiving end of spook investigations in their radical youth. Many had also opposed the draconian UK law, the Official Secrets Act (OSA 1989), which deprived an intelligence whistleblower of a public interest defence.

However, it was not to be. I have no proof, but I can speculate that the Labour government did the spies' bidding for fear of what might be on their MI5 files. They issued an injunction against David and the national press. They failed to extradite him from France in 1998 but, when he returned voluntarily to face trial in the UK in 2000, they lynched him in the media. They also ensured that, through a series of pre-trial legal hearings, he was not allowed to say anything in his own defence and was not able to freely question his accusers. Indeed the judge ordered the jury to convict.

The whole sorry saga of the Shayler affair shows in detail how the British establishment will always shoot the messenger to protect its own interests. If the British government had taken Shayler's evidence, investigated his disclosures, and reformed the services so that they were subject to effective oversight and had to obey the law, they may well be working more efficiently to protect us from threats to our national's security. After all, the focus of their work is now counter-terrorism, and they use the same resources and techniques as the police. Why should they not be subject to the same checks and balances?

Instead, MI5 and SIS continue to operate outside meaningful democratic control. Their cultures are self-perpetuating oligarchies, where mistakes are glossed over and repeated, and where questions and independent thought are discouraged. We deserve better.

Annie Machon was recruited by MI5 in 1991, having studied Classics at Cambridge and begun a career in publishing. Along with her partner, David Shayler, she worked for MI5's political and counter-terrorism departments in the 1990s. She is now a writer, activist and anti-war campaigner and is the author of the book *Spies, Lies and Whistleblowers*.