

MI5: Building empires, ruining careers

The Guardian (1959-2003); Sep 6, 1988;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Guardian and The Observer (1791-2003)

pg. 8

In extracts from their new book, Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor trace the long tentacles of the security service

MI5: Building empires, ruining careers



Harriet Harman: once considered a potential subversive both as NCCL legal officer and wife of a union activist

EVERY country needs a security service. It should help to protect the community from known and potential terrorists. But MI5's role does not make it immune from the temptation facing any bureaucracy, especially one that is protected from outside scrutiny and not held to account.

The temptation is to empire-build, to spread its tentacles into areas which have little to do with national security and monitor individuals for their political views and trade union activities.

MI5 began to divert significant resources into monitoring leftwing groups and organisations it considered subversive from the early 1970s. Within a few years it had amassed hundreds of thousands of files on target groups and individuals. The Special Branch, which works closely with MI5, also began to compile more records on dissidents and trade union activists.

It is too easy to confuse legitimate targets posing a genuine threat to the country with other groups or individuals deemed to be subversive. There is no crime of subversion; there is no law defining what is meant by it. Subversion, under the Government's 1985 guidelines, is

what a minister says it is.

The former Labour Home Secretary, Roy (now Lord) Jenkins, told the Commons on December 3, 1986, in a debate prompted by allegations of a plot by a group of MI5 officers to undermine the Wilson government in the mid-1970s that he had already come to the view that MI5 "should be pulled out of its political surveillance role."

He added: "I had been doubtful of the value of that role for some time. I am convinced now that an organisation of people who lived in the fevered world of espionage and counter-espionage is entirely unfitted to judge between what is subversive and what is legitimate dissent."

MI5 and Special Branch records form the basis of a secret vetting system — described by Miranda Ingram, a former MI5 officer — which, may ruin someone's career.

Assessments on individuals are sometimes made only because of records held on their relatives. Files are also kept on established trade union leaders regardless of their political views.

In the eyes of MI5, for example, active trade unionists like Jack Dromey are potentially subversive. Dromey is a national officer for the

BLACKLIST THE INSIDE STORY OF POLITICAL VETTING

Transport and General Workers' Union and an active supporter of the Labour Party. During the 1987 general election campaign he worked at Labour's headquarters, playing a key role in projecting the party's new moderate image. He has little time for Marxists or what he calls the ultra-left. To this day he is unaware that the state has branded him a potential security risk.

MI5 has compiled a permanent file on Dromey, chiefly, because of his union activities — he co-ordinated picketing during the bitter 1977 Grunwick dispute. But it was during his chairmanship of the National Council for Civil Liberties that the security service first saw him as a potentially dangerous subversive. In the mid-1970s, according to former senior MI5 officer Cathy Massiter, the NCCL was targeted as a subversive organisation because of its criticism of the police

and other state institutions. Files were opened on its senior personnel, including Dromey, who was also on the executive committee, and its legal officer Harriet Harman.

While he was at the NCCL Dromey met and later married Harman, now a Labour MP. Even had she not been the NCCL's legal officer, Harman would be considered a potential subversive — because she was Dromey's wife.

Dromey and Harman are just two entries on MI5's computer of subversives based on imprecise criteria.

Terms like "security of the state" and "national security" are, like "the public interest", extremely vague, and give ministers and the security service an enormous amount of power.

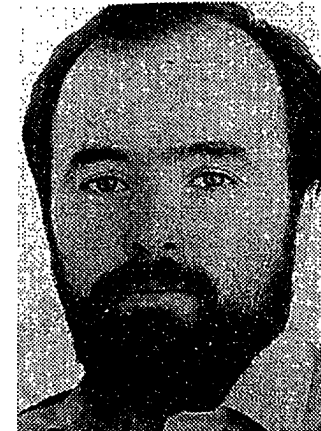
As John Ward, general secretary of the First Division Association, which represents senior civil servants, said in January 1988: "Civil servants know at first hand

that it is no longer acceptable for a government minister alone to be able to decide unilaterally what constitutes national security." Just how vaguely national security is defined is evident from the answer Mrs Thatcher gave to Labour MP Ken Livingstone in January 1988.

"This term," she said, "is generally understood to refer to the safeguarding of the state and the community against threats to their survival or well-being. I am not aware that any previous administration has thought it appropriate to adopt a specific definition of the term."

The current definition of a subversive is now so vague that it is dangerously open to abuse. It is interesting to note that, while the British Government was extending its definition, the Australian administration was doing precisely the opposite.

The Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the equivalent of MI5, dropped the term subversive and replaced it with "politically-motivated violence" — a more specific phrase. The public, ASIO's director-general Alan Wrigley said, does not expect its security services to be concerned with leftwing trade unions. The definition of the word subversive, he warned, could be endless.



Jack Dromey (top) labelled a security risk and Cathy Massiter, former MI5 officer