## Film director Roland Joffe was refused clearance to work on a BBC play. Threats from an angry producer finally got him the job

Brigadier Ronald Stonham, the BBC security official who

has ligised with MI5 in vetting employees since 1982

# Defying the man in the mac

POLITICAL vetting by MI5 is not restricted to civil servants. It also affects employees in private companies like British Telecom and independent corporations like the BBC.

In this second extract from their book, Blacklist, Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor reveal how MI5's vetting of BBC staff extended well beyond "people who require access to sensitive information". In fact, the blacklist was used against drama and arts producers and directors. The authors also disclose the secret structure of British Telecom's vetting procedures.

probably Britain's most distinguished film and television director. His track record includes The Killing Fields, for which he received an Academy Award remindien Academy Award nomination, and The Mission which won top prize at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.

In the spring of 1977 he was commissioned by the BBC to direct The Spongers, a new play about the failures of the welfare state and the desperate struggle of one woman caught in the poverty trap. The play's author was Jim Allen and its producer was Tony Garnett. Garnett told the BBC's drama department that he wanted to hire Joffe as director. But there was an unusually long delay in confirming his appointment.

Eventually, Garnett was summoned by Shaun Sutton, head

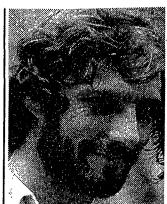
of drama, to his fifth-floor office at the Television Centre, Wood Lane. Garnett had always had a frosty relationship with the corporation's top executives. Sut-ton looked distinctly uncom-fortable that afternoon. "There is a problem with Joffe's contract," he said. "He hasn't got BH (Broadcasting House) clearance." Astonished, Garnett asked why. Sutton refused to give a reason except to mutter: It was the man in the mac in Broadcasting House."

OLAND Joffe is Milne, then managing director probably Britain's of BBC TV. Milne tried to pla-most distinguished cate Garnett but he was seething, and said he would go public if the veto on Joffe's appointment was not withdrawn: "If you want all this business to come out then it's in your hands. If you don't hire Joffe then I'm off as well and imagine what it would look like if I walked out in the middle of my

contract. Milne said nothing, so Gar-nett went on: "If this continues to happen then I won't be able to hire the people I want, which is my job as a producer." Milne didn't argue. He picked up the phone and rang Sutton. "Hire Joffe," he snapped. Joffe's con-tract was confirmed and The Spongers won that year's presligious Prix Italia award.

The "problem" with Joffe's appointment was that the BBC's personnel department had, according to Garnett and the then head of plays, James Cellan-Jones, branded the director a security risk because of his political views. This accu-sation was based on the fact that Joffe had attended Work ers' Revolutionary Party (WRP) meetings in the early 1970s.

Like many dramatists at the time he was briefly interested in the WRP, but he was never a party member, and by 1977 he had long severed his associa-



Roland Joffe: "socialist in the humanist sense'

politics at that time. But I was interested in what all the political parties were doing, not just the WRP, and I was never actively involved.'

Film producer and SDP sup-porter David Puttnam says of Joffe's politics: "Roland would have nothing to do with the ide-ologies of the hard left. He detests that kind of imposition on the human spirit. He's a mem-ber of the Labour Party, and a socialist in the humanist

The attempt to blacklist Joffe had nothing to do with the BBC's drama department. The recommendation had come Broadcasting House." | tion with it. Joffe describes | from the personnel office at people's he Garnett stormed out and himself as a leftwinger, and Broadcasting House on the adward that it was went straight to see Alasdair says: "I was very interested in vice of MI5. It was part of the influence."

secretive political vetting which the BBC had been practising since 1937, a situation reformed in 1986, after public and trade union pressure.

MI5 had always kept a close eye on the BBC's drama department. Actors, actresses, producers and directors were all vetted. According to Stuart Hood: "Actors and performers were blacklisted. I went to one meeting in the early 1960s where slips of paper were being handed out about an actress.

"They said: 'Not to be used on sensitive programmes.' I knew the woman. She was not political, but her husband was a prewar leftwing Austrian refugee. I strongly protested." But MI5 reserved their stron-

gest objections to BBC drama producers in the early and mid-1970s. It was a period of great political turmoil and activity. And television drama reflected the new radical mood with plays like Cathy Come Home, Leeds United, Law and Order and others. These were hard-hitting, naturalistic dramas which portrayed working-class people in a sympathetic light.
They also sparked off politi-

cal controversy. As Kenith Trodd, probably the BBC's most respected and successful drama producer, recalled: "There was general view at the time that drama has a powerful hold on people's hearts and minds and that it was a source of political

## Lifting the veil on British Telecom's vetting system

1986, British Telecom's most senior security officials — Laurie Heatherington, Ken England and Peter Jones — assembled in the Rosewood Room on the eighth floor of their head office in Newgate Street for a most unusual meeting. It was to discuss their political vetting procedures with five leading trade union representatives.

Chaired by the company secretary, Malcolm Argent, the meeting was rare because, apart from MI5, BT's vetting practices are by far the most secretive. This was reflected by Argent's opening remarks: am limited to what I can say".

The unions argue that BT's 250,000 employees are entitled to know whether or not they are being vetted by the company, if only in general terms. BT has always refused to tell

However, it is known that staff working on government services, which deals with plan-ning government and defence private circuits, are positively vetted. These employees in-clude those working on communications links between defence installations and government departments. Also vetted are staff working on the regional seats of government (under-ground nuclear bunkers).

An insight into BT's vetting procedures was given to the authors by one of the company's senior executives. He joined BT in the early 1970s after working for an electronics company which had government defence contracts. So he was used to security measures. But he found the atmosphere at BT far more paranoid. "Everything was treated as security sensitive," he said, "and everyone was expected to be silent about their

At first the executive (who has asked not to be identified) noticed little vetting. He wasn't security checked himself when he joined BT. But in 1977, while working on the classification of files and documents, he discovered that the practice was being extended. He was about to be promoted to a potentially sensi-

THE afternoon of | tive job when he was asked to | be positively vetted. But he regarded it as a bureaucratic waste of time and refused on principle. He also confirmed that staff working on maintaining private telephone exchanges, including high security government buildings, are positively vetted. One employee told him how his neighbours had been approached and asked if there was anything suspi-cious about him.

In 1986 the executive had direct experience of the positive denartment.

One day he received a phone call from a man calling himself Commander (our source de-clined to give his name). The man said he did not work for BT but was from government security, and wanted to meet him to discuss the employee in

The Commander told the executive that he could check his credentials with a senior security manager at BT's headquarters. The executive recognised government security as a euphemism for MI5. He spoke to the senior security manager at Newgate House who confirmed this and verified the Commander's credentials. A meeting was

then arranged. When the MI5 officer turned up the first thing the BT execuive noticed was that the name of the person being vetted was spelt incorrectly on his notepad. The officer began by asking whether the person in question had any political affiliations, and later asked: "Does he have any links with any other organisations?" The MI5 officer also revealed that he knew a lot of detailed information about various activities of the executive himself. It was rather disconcerting

As well as government services, many employees based in network management are also positively vetted. Network management deals with rerouting circuits if there is a breakdown in the system. When this happens the staff have to give

priority to certain circuits, so key official who co-ordinates tails of the circuit structure. Although BT have substan-

> staff requiring positive vetting since privatisation in 1983, their security procedures are still intact. Ultimate responsibility for security vetting lies with Mal-colm Argent, BT's company secretary, who is also on the board of directors. He answers for the company.

But the official who oversees and directly co-ordinates vetvetting procedures when he was asked to act as a referee for an employee who was being don Oehlers. He actually betransferred to a top secret came director of BT's Security nd Investigation Department in May 1987, although this was not publicly disclosed until Au gust. Ochlers joined BT from the Ministry of Defence, where he was assistant chief of the defence staff, responsible for com-mand and control communications and information systems Before that he managed the British worldwide Defence Communications Network. Major Oehlers also spent 30 years in the army and served on several defence and govern-

ment committees. Oehler's department — Secu rity and Investigation — is split into two separate divisions. One is the Investigation Division (BTID), headed by C. R. Ward, a Territorial Army offi-cer. This section deals with criminal offences by staff and the public — sabotage, theft of equipment, payphone offences, computer fraud — and general crime prevention. It liaises with the police and Special Branch as well as making its own en-quiries. The BTID is not responsible for vetting, although it is in a position to provide infor-mation on individuals through its police and Special Branch

contacts. It is the Security Division (Sec D), headed by Ken England, which deals with vetting and liaises with MI5 during the positive and secret vetting of employees. England and 14 other security advisers and offi-cers control the operation in Room A138, a large network of offices on the first floor of BT headquarters in the City. The

they need to know precise details of the circuit structure.

N. Jones, the personnel security adviser. Jones is a former tially reduced the number of RAF officer who was commissioned in 1967. He became a flight lieutenant in 1973 before retiring from the RAF's engi neering branch in April 1982. Another official deals with 'travel to Communist

Jones reports directly to England, head of Sec D. Both men accompanied Malcolm Argent to the meeting in June 1986 to discuss security vetting. Eng-land said little, and Jones spent most of the time taking notes.

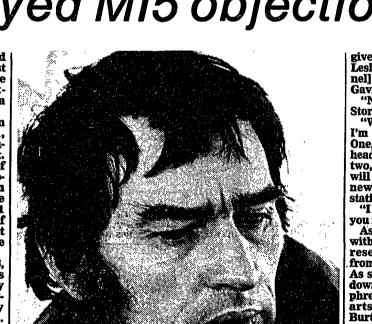
Argent said at a private meeting that information for vettin purposes was subject to careful protection and that only a small number of people have access to an employee's security file e Security Division (about 14 officials), Argent himself, the company chairman, Sir George Jefferson, and one or two

BT have maintained that this tight security procedure en-sures that the political views of individual employees are not taken into consideration when they apply for jobs. But a new recruitment vetting document shows this not to be the case. The form, marked staff-in-Confidence, is compiled at BT's head office and is used through-

out the company. It is a de-tailed, four-page application form containing 23 questions. Among them are the following: Q.16: Have you at any time visited or resided in a country having, at the time of the visit or residence, a Communist government? Answer Yes or No. Where the answer is Yes give

Q.20: Have you any relative by blood or marriage who is liv-ing or has lived in a country having, at the time of residence, a Communist government? Answer Yes or No. Where the answer is Yes give such particulars.

Q.22: Have you ever been a member of a Communist or fas-cist party or any organisation controlled by or connected with such parties? Answer Yes or No. Where the answer is Yes give particulars.



Kenith Trodd, the BBC drama producer whose freelance con-

to accept it."

Battersby went on to direct Leeds United, a controversial play about a clothing strike in Leeds. He then left television to work full-time for the WRP. It wasn't until the spring of 1985 that he next came up against the BBC blacklist. He had been asked by Kenith Trodd to direct a play based on Stuart Hood's book Pebbles From My Skull, an account of Italian resis-tance fighters during the second world war. Battersby was invited to Bologna to start work on the project, but before he could leave, Trodd spoke to Peter Goodchild head of plays, and told him he wanted to employ Bat-tersby. "Come on, Ken," sighed Goodchild, "you know there are always some people we can't employ on sensitive subjects." Bat-

tersby was refused a contract.
Within six weeks MI5 again targeted Battersby. In June 1985 he was asked to direct four episodes of the BBC2 series King of the Ghetto. He accepted the offer and went to see the producer, Stephen Gilbert, at his office in Union House, Shepherds Bush Green, to discuss the project. Just as he was about to tell Gilbert to expect problems about his contract be cause of his political activi-ties, the phone rang, and Gilbert was summoned up-stairs to see Ken Riddington, acting head of drama while Jonathan Powell was on holi-

day in Italy.
"There is a problem," an embarrassed Riddington told him. "You can't offer him [Battersby] the job." Gilbert was amazed, and returned to his office to break the news to Battersby."

The blacklisting of the director meant that the production, already well behind

tract was terminated then renewed after a storm of protest he was the best director for Graeme Macdonald, control-the job and I wasn't prepared ler of BBC2, who overruled the personnel department and insisted that Battersby be employed.

For much of the time drama and arts producers and directors like Battersby were able to survive MI5's at-tempts to blacklist them. This had little to do with the security services' or person-nel office's magnanimity or flexibility. It was for two

Firstly, some of the victims were sufficiently talented to overcome the blacklist. Secondly, the individualistic, even iconoclastic nature of many arts and drama executives meant that they often refused to accept the recommendations from MI5.

Arts documentaries like Omnibus were also affected by the MI5 blacklist. From 1975 to 1982 the programme's editor was Barrie Gavin, in February 1976, he received a detailed and well-presented proposal for a documentary from the young director Jeff

Perks.
Gavin, who remembered his work as a graduate director at the British Film Institute, found Perks's proposal

— about the poster maker
Ken Sprague — interesting
and exciting. He agreed to make the programme, and a three-month contract was assed to the personnel office

for approval. A week later, in his office at Kensington House, Gavin received a telephone call from Christopher Storey, senior personnel officer for BBC TV, who was based at Threshold House, Shepherds Bush Green.

"There may be a problem about employing Jeff Perks,"

sald Storey.
"Why?" asked Gavin.
"He may not be acceptable."
"What do you mean by not

acceptable?" 'Not acceptable." Gavin then asked for a

give him one. "I presume Leslie Page [head of person-nel] will tell me why," said Gavin impatiently. 'Not necessarily," replied

Storey.
"Well, if you don't tell me, two things. I'm going to do two things. One, I'm going straight to the head of my department and two, I'm going public and will make sure that every newspaper and television station knows about this." "I would strongly advise

you not to do that." As editor of a programme with a large budget, Gavin resented being prevented from choosing his own staff. s soon as he put As soon as he put the phone down, he went to see Humphrey Burton, head of the arts department. At first Burton's attitude was flippant; "Perhaps it's because he's a Communist or maybe he has a foreign background or name."

Gavin told Burton he wanted to take the matter further. Two weeks later he saw Trethowan. The conver-sation sounded like two civil servants discussing a sensitive issue, but without specifically referring to the heart of the matter. Trethowan was clearly uncomfortable.
"Yes, well these kind of cases
are very difficult," he said.
"I don't see what's so diffi-

cult about this," replied Ga-vin. "I am asking him [Perks] to make a film about a poster maker in the middle of Exmoor. I'm not sending him out on a Poseidon nu-clear submarine".

Trethowan agreed to look into the matter. Three weeks later Perks was given a contract, and his film went on to secure the highest ratings of any Omnibus programme

that year.

Humphrey Burton also liked it. "That was a very good film," he remarked to Gavin."I think you should pursue this combination further." So in December 1976 ther." So, in December 1976, Gavin asked Perks and Spra-gue to make a series of pilot programmes for Omnibus.

Once again MI5 objected. A personnel officer told Gavin t was not possible to use him. Now he was outraged. Not only was this unjust, it was also unnecessary and a complete waste of time. Angry memos flew between departments. The matter was referred to Alasdair Milne, then director of programmes, who supported the ban. So Burton went higher — to Trethowan. Eventually, just before Christmas, Gavin got a call at home from Burton, who told him: "It's OK now, you can use Jeff Perks.'

MI5 objected to Perks for a simple reason. He had been a member of the Communist Party since 1971. But to Gadrick this did vin this did not make him a legitimate target: "The Com-munist Party is not a pro-scribed or illegal organisa-tion. And anyway, the notion that the modern Communist

that the modern Communist Party is revolutionary is laughable."

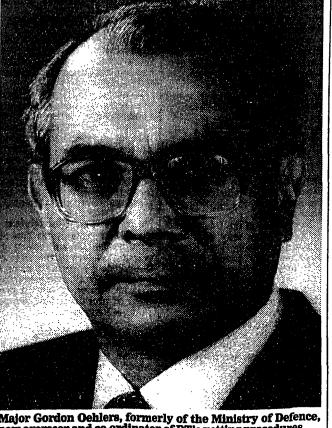
It was lucky for Perks that he had an editor of such in-tegrity as Gavin. Perks left the Communist Party in 1977. Since then he has had no employment problems in

the BBC.
Tomorrow: Vetting and the Police National Computer

Blacklist: the inside story of po-litical vetting; The Hogarth reason. But Storey refused to | Press; £7.95



Malcolm Argent, BT's company secretary: information used for vetting is subject to the most careful protection



Major Gordon Ochlers, formerly of the Ministry of Defence, now overseer and co-ordinator of BT's vetting procedures

Joffe, one of the most notable people the personnel department objected to was drama producer Kenith Trodd. His credits included Colin

Welland's Leeds United, Days of Hope (about the General Strike) and Coming Out. He also produced much of Dennis Potter's work, notably Pennies from Heaven and Brimstone and Treacle (banned by the BBC for 11 years). Shaun Sutton said of him: "He is absolutely first class. he has done some

damn good work. Yet, in September 1976, producer on Play for Today was terminated, despite having been renewed annually for the previous four years. There was an immediate storm of protest from Trodd's colleagues, who sus-pected that this act was politically motivated. Director Bryan Gibson drafted a letter with the actor Simon Gray registering "surprise and dismay that his (Trodd's) contract is not being renewed." It was signed by Dennis Potter, Colin Welland and Michael Lindsay-Hogg, among others, and dis-patched to Alasdair Milne.

Milne and Sir Ian Trethowan, the director gen-eral, both strongly denied that there was a plot against Trodd. They claimed that the system of freelance contracts was being reorganised in order to phase out one-year renewable deals. Trodd's contract was simply being renegotiated and he would eventually be invited back as

guest producer. In fact the personnel office and MI5 had branded Trodd a security risk since the early 1970s, when he had attended WRP meetings (although he

was never a party member).
In 1976 the management
made their move. The key executive involved was James Cellan-Jones, a talented di-rector who had become head of plays that autumn. One of his first tasks was to deal with Trodd's contract. Cel-lan-Jones didn't always agree with Trodd, but he had no intention of sacking him. But one day Trethowan came into the office. Cellan-Jones recalls: "Ian Trethowan said he wanted to remove Trodd and I was not to renew him because there were security problems ... He said Trodd was a troublemaker and sus-pected by the security

people".
Cellan-Jones didn't like it.
After a few days he went to
see Trethowan. He argued
against sacking Trodd, and Trethowan backed down. But it was a few weeks before Trodd's contract was renewed. He then went on to make Pennies from Heaven, winner of the 1979 British Academy award for most original programme.

Trodd survived one black-listing attempt, but director Roy Battersby was a marked Roy Battersby was a marked man for 13 years. In 1972 he had been invited by Christopher Morahan, head of plays, to direct The Operation, a satire about a property speculator. MI5 objected: he was an active member of the WRP. "Yes, there was an objection to him," recalls Morahan. "It was indicated to me that they (the personnel dethat they (the personnel department) would be happier if he was not engaged. I said matter was dealt with by