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NEW STATESMAN
23 JULY 1982

Secrecy for its own sake

In the light of the latest spy case, DUNCAN CAMPBELL looks back at GCHQ's lack of any accountability

LAST WEEK'S ARREST of a former Russian language intelligence specialist is potentially the most serious breach of security to have been discovered at Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the Cheltenham-based eaves-dropping agency. It is however at least GCHQ's seventh such case since the war. The facade of secrecy and the mystique surrounding GCHQ are now truly cracked. If the allegations against Geoffrey Prime and some of the suggestions made off-the-record by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary last week are true, then there have been only seven years in the last 37 when there has *not* been a Russian spy working inside GCHQ.

The gravity of the charges against Mr Geoffrey Prime under the Official Secrets Act (and it has to be stressed that they are not yet proven) reflects the fact that he had access to and daily knowledge of the critical core of GCHQ's efforts to break Russian codes, and to read and interpret their military and diplomatic signals. Mr Prime joined Britain's 'Sigint' - or signals intelligence - organisation about 1959, in the Royal Air Force. Later, he worked at Cheadle, a Sigint base in Staffordshire, where Soviet Air Force communications are monitored.

Latterly, he worked in the Joint Technical Language Service at Cheltenham, a shadowy organisation within GCHQ, which employs most of the intelligence agency's translations staff, and which also assists other intelligence organisations, including the Secret Service and the Ministry of Defence intelligence staff. A special section of GCHQ - 'J Division' - organises the interception of Russian signals at GCHQ. Linguists in JTLs not only provide translations for J Division (or transcriptions of intercepted telephone signals), but also advise on special ways of codebreaking.

Last week, the police accused Mr Prime of spying and passing on information for a period of 13 years from 1968 to 1981. If their allegation is true, three consequences follow:

- GCHQ's own work in some or all areas of Soviet code-breaking would have been nullified.
- United States intelligence information also involved in Soviet codebreaking could be jeopardised to the same extent, damag-

ing the US intelligence connection which the British agencies so highly value.

- GCHQ might have effectively been 'turned round' to undermine western security, if the Russians could use the activities of a well-placed agent to plant false or deceptive information.

The fact that previous cases of espionage seriously affected GCHQ has not reached public attention, because it has, at all costs, been determined to preserve its mystique with the British press, public, parliament and - not least - the Treasury. It has seemed to many on the inside that it cared less about the possibility of providing fertile pastures for KGB recruiters than about public knowledge of the nature or scale of their activities.

There has been a remarkable record of offensive action by GCHQ to prevent public discussion of its affairs. Since 1958, there have been two major prosecutions under the Official Secrets Act (one the so-called ABC trial in which the author was a defendant), three rows over the D Notice system, one American journalist has been deported, two others have been banned from Britain, and a number of 'troublemakers' eased out of Cheltenham to protect GCHQ from public scrutiny.

After the wartime successes against German codes which emanated from its celebrated Bletchley Park base, GCHQ became a post-war institution of the greatest inscrutability. With intense solemnity, new recruits to the business of 'Sigint' are 'indoctrinated' into the rules of the game. Sigint is surrounded by many special and elaborate, but often quite useless security procedures.

The reality of GCHQ, however, is expressed by Mr Alex Lawrie, a Labour County Councillor in Gloucestershire, who was for 22 years a language specialist working for GCHQ until he spoke out of turn in public.

The ritual of security is far more important than making sure it works . . . It's like believing in the dogma of a church.

You cannot question the belief or challenge or question the procedures.

Mr Lawrie's case is instructive. Although a senior specialist in two languages (and a long term employee), he was warned shortly before he was due to retire that the establishment and its security force - 'R' Division - would not tolerate any further remarks of the kind he had made at a Fabian society meeting concerned with police accountability. He had then posed the rhetorical question: 'How many MPs, or even cabinet ministers, know how much

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