

The idea that the UK's intelligence agencies have an anti-Labour bias runs deep – but it is false



The myth that the UK's intelligence agencies have an anti-Labour bias certainly runs deep, writes [Dan Lomas](#). But while the history of the Labour Party's relationship with intelligence is beset by periods of intimacy and paranoia, the view that the country's agencies are 'the enemy' of the Labour Party are false.

Labour Party splits over the [Covert Human Intelligence Sources \(Criminal Conduct\) Bill](#) are a timely reminder of the Party's fractured attitude to intelligence and security issues. Popularly known as the 'spy cops' or CHIS bill, the legislation would see the UK's intelligence agencies, police, National Crime Agency, armed forces and ten other public bodies authorise covert sources (agents or informers) to get involved in activities 'which would otherwise constitute a criminal offence' in a limited number of cases.

but critics point out the legislation is unacceptable. A [report](#) by Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights said the proposals raised the 'abhorrent possibility of serious crimes such as rape, murder or torture being carried out under an authorisation'. The committee is arguing for 'additional safeguards to ensure there can be no authorisation of serious criminality'.

The Labour Party has already split over the legislation. Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer wanted his party to abstain during the second reading, leading to a [rebellion](#) by 20 MPs. Dan Carden and Margaret Greenwood [resigned](#) from the Labour frontbench during the third reading, part of a rebellion by 34 MPs amidst growing concern at the leadership's stance. Shadow Minister of State for Security, Conor McGinn, told *LabourList* that [opposition](#) would only 'weaken national security'.

Recently the House of Lords [approved](#) a cross-party amendment by a majority of 299 votes to 284, curbing the crimes that could be committed under the legislation. Labour's Baroness Chakrabarti tabled an amendment questioning the need for total immunity for sources. Sources close to the Labour leadership were suggesting that Chakrabarti, a former Shadow Attorney General, was inflaming 'internal divisions'. Chakrabarti told those briefing against her to [grow up](#)'.

The episode nicely illustrates Labour's split personality on intelligence and security matters, a subject, Dick Crossman wrote in June 1963, where the Conservatives are 'far better than us'.

The history of the Labour Party's relationship with intelligence is beset by periods of intimacy and paranoia. Famously, Britain's first Labour government under James Ramsey Macdonald collapsed in October 1924 amidst a frenzied general election campaign, made famous by the publication of the Zinoviev Letter. The letter, published just days before the election by the *Daily Mail*, and reportedly from Comintern head Grigory Zinoviev, called on Britain's workers to rise up. Exhaustive research now reveals the letter was a forgery, unofficially leaked by conservative-leaning members of the intelligence community, hoping to damage Labour's chances. Zinoviev loomed large in Labour folklore. It remains for former Foreign & Commonwealth Office Chief Historian Gill Bennett the 'conspiracy that never dies' – and she's correct.

Just as damaging were claims made by Labour's Harold Wilson that Britain's Security Service (MI5) plotted against his government. In 1976, Wilson told BBC journalists, Barrie Penrose and Roger Courtiour, that a 'disaffected faction' in MI5 were out to get him, published as the *Pencourt File* two years later. Allegations of a plot were given new life by Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*, a book containing the alarming claim thirty MI5 officers were part of a plot, a claim Wright later denied to *BBC Panorama*.

In part, the plot can be explained by Wilson's own Jekyll and Hyde-like relationship with the 'secret state', combining his paranoia of bugging with a fascination for the world of spies, and his declining health. MI5's authorised history, published in 2009, found little to substantiate the claims, yet the plot lives on. Wilson's claims were televised in the 2006 BBC [docudrama](#) *The Plot Against Harold Wilson*.

Labour's 1979 defeat and the rise of Thatcher led to a new wave of suspicion. Influenced by claims US intelligence had 'gone rogue' and fearing plots closer to home, Labour became the first ever political UK political party to make intelligence agency oversight a political issue, eroding the traditional bipartisan consensus not to talk about intelligence in political debate. Labour's *Freedom and the Security Services* – a call for parliamentary oversight and access to information, was enshrined in Labour's 1983 manifesto. The party remained committed to liberal democratic oversight mechanisms, effectively giving impetus to debates for the 1989 Security Service Act and Intelligence Services Act (1994) that finally brought the UK's spy agencies (to use the *cliché*) in from the cold. Speaking in the Commons in 1994, Labour's Jack Cunningham could rightly suggest that the legislation was a 'victory for the arguments that we have advanced over the years'.

The myth that the UK's intelligence agencies have an anti-Labour bias certainly runs deep. Writing in the *New Left Review* in 1991, Tony Benn – whose published diaries are littered with suspicions about surveillance and bugging – talked of the 'secret state' having the prerogative to 'destroy democratically elected governments or individuals ... if it believes that to be necessary to protect its own interests'. Shortly afterwards, MI5's first female Director General Stella Rimington personally invited Labour grandees to Thames House aiming to convince them that such plots were an illusion. 'I knew at the end of the exercise that further efforts would be fruitless', she recalled. Former Labour MP Chris Mullin could also [claim](#) in the *Spectator* in June 2017 that 'Even moderate Labour governments have traditionally faced attempts to destabilise them by elements in the political and security establishment'.

Yet it's good storytelling, but bad history. Claims of plots and intrigue by intelligence insiders say more about internal party politics than reality. The Zinoviev Plot gave Labour 'a magnificent excuse for failure and defeat', wrote historian Robert Rhodes James in 1977, while *Guardian* columnist Martin Kettle [wrote](#) in August 2018 that history reminds us that 'Radical movements love to think that the only reason their inherently virtuous projects can fail is because conspiracies, faintheartedness or betrayals have brought them down'.

Going against the easy narrative of the agencies being anti-Labour, it's clear that party attitudes to intelligence change across different party factions, experiences in government and access to information. Though the left have erred towards suspicion, the leadership have traditionally taken the opposite view. History also tells us that Labour governments have enjoyed close relations with their intelligence officials.

Other than help build the 'New Jerusalem' of the post-war welfare state, Attlee's government oversaw the formation of the Cold War [secret state](#). Domestically, Attlee's government formalised the 'purge' of Communists in the civil service, MI5 also keeping Attlee and Ministers updated on the crypto-Communists (or 'Lost Sheep') in his own party. Overseas, Labour Ministers approved SIS (MI6) operations and covert propaganda to combat the spread of Communism.

In 1961, the Labour leadership under Hugh Gaitskell even approached MI5 with a list of sixteen backbenchers suspected to be Communist Party members. Another nine were listed as possible crypto-Communists. The approach came to nothing; MI5 saw it as politically risky. Even Wilson, despite his claims of a plot, had a close relationship with MI5. Though banning MI5 from actively monitoring MPs (the so-called 'Wilson Doctrine') in 1965, both Wilson and his successor, Jim Callaghan, relied on MI5's reporting on subversion to keep up to date on trade union leaders and industrial action. Famously, Wilson even used MI5's reports as the basis of his attack on the 1966 strike by the National Union of Seamen. Parts of Wilson's statement had been drafted by MI5.

And, of course, intelligence remained central to Tony Blair's Downing Street tenure. In 2001, Blair even wrote to MI5's Director General: 'The Government and British people are fortunate to be served by security and intelligence organisations whose professionalism is admired ... throughout the world'. If anything, the Iraq fiasco showed that intelligence was perhaps too central with claims of intelligence politicisation at the top.

A review of over 100 years of intelligence-Labour relations tells us that simplistic narratives of state-based plots are wide of the mark. Although it must be pointed out that some fears may appear genuine, the view that the UK's agencies are, in the words of one critic, 'the enemy' of the Labour Party or that – to quote Ken Livingstone in 1996 – MI5 was guilty of 'treason' against Labour throughout its history, are false. Perceptions of intelligence change because of a number of variables mentioned earlier. In short, it's time to rethink Labour's relationship with the UK intelligence community.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Intelligence and National Security*.

About the Author



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