

Super Blog:

The Real Story of the SDS

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2 The Parapolitical History of the SDS

Attlee's government played a key role shaping political policing in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the UCPI has not admitted into evidence any of those earlier documents I have studied them at the national archives and used them as the basis for my account of Attlee's blacklists.

But later documents from those committees have been admitted into the UCPI published evidence. There are 54 documents from 1967 and onwards covering the remaining four years of Wilson's majority government. They are the minutes of the later incarnations of Attlee's McCarthyite Cabinet Committees containing reports of the risk of subversion compiled by F Branch of MI5. Altogether they extend to 315 pages. . There are precious few signs of any evolution in the intervening quarter of a century and plenty of similarities in the politicians paranoia, the Secret Service's exaggeration and the overall dominating impression of parapolitical group think and constitutional negligence.

The UCPI evidence database is not the easiest to navigate, so I have gathered these Cabinet counter subversion documents together in single document broadly arranged chronologically. These documents explain the context and set the scene for the creation and development of the SDS. They also bear testament the credulity of the most senior political leaders and civil servants.

The story of their reaction and response is to be found in other documents in the published evidence. This was the period immediately before the SDS creation and continues into the period the UCPI calls the "first Tranche". Unfortunately, the Inquiry has already published an interim report on this Tranche 1 period, but this newer material suggests that it was something of a rush to judgement. The interim report's very opening paragraph deals with the creation of the SDS:

"The Special Operations Squad (SOS) was the brainchild of HN325 Detective Chief Inspector Conrad Dixon. It was established on or immediately before 31 July 1968. Two surviving founder members of the SOS, HN218 ("Barry Morris") Barry

Moss and HN328 Joan Hillier, have described the circumstances in which they were recruited. Their recollection differs in immaterial details explained by the passage of time, but both agree that a group of Metropolitan Police Service Special Branch (Special Branch) officers were invited to attend a meeting addressed by Conrad Dixon, at which the purpose of the squad was explained”

Dixon’s explanation was that it was initially to be a discrete operation specifically to gather intelligence in advance of a particular demonstration being organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.

Without evidence of any assessment or description of how much further beyond plain clothes policing and into “Deep Cover” this specific exercise went, it is difficult at this distance in time to gauge whether it was more effective in gaining intelligence, than any methods that were already being employed and which didn’t involve deception and aggravated trespass.

But there were plenty of senior officers in the Yard who were ready to attest to its unique effectiveness, and so a one-off exercise became a one-year experimental unit within C squad of Scotland Yard. This squad es mostly responsible for, and engaged in, monitoring the CPGB also other political movements to the left of the Labour Party.

DCI Dixon became head of the unit. But the notion that it was his “brainchild” deliberately ignores the political and parapolitical decision-making process that preceded the first experimental operation. That decision-making had involved the state’s two domestic paramilitary forces, Scotland Yard and MI5, and the Home Office and Home Secretary to which the paramilitaries were accountable, But it had also involved the Cabinet Office and Cabinet Secretary reporting directly to the Prime Minister.

That decision-making had begun in 1967. By then Harold Wilson had been Prime Minister for three years although during the first two of those years he only had a Commons Majority of 4. But he had done enough with that to win a snap election in 1966. with a handsome majority of 96.

Wilson’s politics were always hard to pin down and hard to categorise. He had been a young cabinet minister in Attlee’s government but had resigned with Nye Bevan over the introduction of prescription charges. But then in 1955 he supported Gaitskell in the Party leadership vote then stood against him forcing a leadership vote in 1960. In 1963 Gaitskell died suddenly, and some suggested mysteriously, of Lupus following a visit to Moscow. Wilson competed successfully against George Brown to become Gaitskell’s successor. In the leadership contest he had become viewed as the unity candidate. The truth is he was a political opportunist not an ideologue.

He had been elected leader of an avowedly socialist party during the most febrile period of the Cold War and there was a conspiracy theory developing in the FBI that Gaitskell

had been killed by the Russians in order to put a Soviet sleeper in a position to become Prime Minister. This was taken up by some elements in MI5 and military circles in the UK, and in the right-wing media, The smear campaign against Wilson would later be characterised as “The Wilson Plot”.

Since Christmas 1965 the Home Secretary had been Roy Jenkins. He was the most liberal-minded Labour appointment to the role, ever, bar none. In November 1967 he was replaced by James Callaghan. Nevertheless, Labour’s journey to the creation of the SDS was sparked off by a remark made by Jenkins to the Civil Service head of the Home Office, the Permanent Under Secretary (PUS), Sir Phillip Allen.

Allen wrote on March 1 1967 to Peter E. Brodie. Assistant Chief Constable “C” at Scotland Yard, the head of Special Branch, explaining the task and setting in motion an informal review:

I mentioned to the commissioner that the home secretary noticed in the report on the work of the Special Branch in 1966 a good deal of material about communists, Trotskyists and similar organisations. He has from time to time being kept informed on these matters by the Security Services and asked me whether there had been any recent review to ensure that the area of responsibility of Special Branch and the Security Service was clearly defined and that there was no risk of duplication in the work of the organisations. I said that I had no ground for supposing that there was any duplication, but I had to say that this was not a matter which had been looked at very recently; and the Home Secretary said that although he did not want any formal inquiry he would be grateful if the Home Office would discuss with the organisations whether there were any problems arising in this matter. He was quite prepared to find that at the end of the day he would be told that everything was in order but he never nevertheless thought that the position could with advantage be looked at.

*As I explained to the commissioner I have accordingly asked Waddell, to arrange this discussion it would probably take only two or three meetings I hope that you would come bringing Ferguson with you and anyone else you would like to have with you I am writing in similar terms to **Sys officer***

Letter from Sir Philip Allen to Brodie concerning a review of possible overlap between Special Branch and the Security Service. UCPI0000035123

James Waddell, was Phillip Allen’s number two in charge of the Home Office’s B Branch which was responsible for the Metropolitan Police and the Security Service, Brodie is to represent the Yard but the name of the Security Service officer is redacted. Given the seniority of the other two participants there really can only be one name under that

redaction and that is Richard Thistlethwaite the Director of MI5's F Branch, responsible for domestic subversion and the person who would be made immediately responsible for tasking the SDS on behalf the Home Office and Cabinet Committees.

If by any chance it was a more Junior officer, possibly James Elliot or Charles Ellwell, Dick Thistlethwaite would have appointed them to the role and be keeping them on a tight leash. The redaction is mysterious because in the Subversion (home) documents up to his retirement in 1972 his name has not redacted.

The discussion occurred over the summer of 1967 culminating in a final meeting at the Home Office on November 13th, The minutes of that meeting are in the published UCPI evidence showing the meeting was attended by Waddell and two other more junior Home Office officers, Brodie and Ferguson-Smith from the Yard and two unnamed MI5 representatives one of whom would have Thistlethwaite and the other may have been either the DDG or the more junior Charles Ellwell or James Elliot. Those minutes are at UCPI0000034284, But the conclusions had been simply summarised in a note from MI5 to the Home office immediately after the meeting:

"(a) S.B. "tops up" Security Service information but in the Communist field almost all of it originates from the Security Service®

(e) S.B. makes ad hoc enquiries on behalf of the Security Service

(f) S.B. acts as the executive arm of the Security Service in cases involving the Official Secrets Act in the Metropolitan area

(g) S.B. and the Security Service do not share information about their agents in the subversive field proper but have now initiated discussions to rationalise agent coverage where law-and-order might be involved

2. Our conclusion is that there is necessary duplication between the Security Service and Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police because of their different functions but since our recent discussions there is no unnecessary duplication."

UCPI0000035121

Another Key piece of evidence tying the foundation of the SDS in to Waddell's Home Office-led review is UCPI0000030044 which is an internal note for file from MI5 reporting that Ferguson-Smith had secured agreement and funding for the Dixon's "limited" pilot that would become the SDS.

NOTE FOR FILE

On 19th September Chief Superintendent Cunningham telephoned. He was happy to be able to tell me that he had had another word with Deputy Commander Ferguson Smith who had now agreed to our scheme being put into practice on the limited front we had discussed together.

2. Chief Superintendent Cunningham asked for a supply of our forms and so I suggested that Inspector Dixon and [REDACTED] might profitably tie-up the details of this arrangement together as soon as possible. Chief Superintendent Cunningham agreed with this idea and said that he would get Inspector Dixon to telephone [REDACTED] in the near future.

F.4.

20th September, 1967.