

Super Blog:

The Real Story of the SDS

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1 The prehistory of the SDS

1968 was chosen as the start date for the UCPI inquiry because it was only in about July 1968 that Scotland Yard created the unit that placed officers in “deep cover” in political campaigns and organisations. Unlike “Plain Clothes Policing”, which Scotland Yard had been doing (albeit very controversially) since it was set up, “deep cover” is a CIA/FBI term for long-term, highly concealed undercover operation in which an officer assumes a fraudulent identity which was maintained for two or three years.

The unit was at first called the “Special Operations Squad” recalling the name of “The Special Operations Executive” [SOE] set up in WWII to work undercover behind enemy lines to “set Europe Ablaze”. Within months this was quickly changed to the less honest name Special Demonstration Squad (SDS). The UCPI refers to the SOS/SDS as the SDS from July 1968 until it was wound up in 2008; and all of its “black operations” were transferred to even more deceptively names National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU).

In 1945, Labour Party politicians in Parliament and in the trade unions, initiated within the British secret state, an unprincipled and abusive determination to frustrate the political aspirations of anyone to the left of the Labour Party’s right wing Christian democratic centre ground.

Subsequently, in and out of office, they nurtured and encouraged that obsessive abuse, until they once again secured a workable majority in Parliament in 1966 when they secretively took political policing in the 1940s to a new, deeper and darker level of abuse.

By the time the leaders of the Labour Party had achieved their first Parliamentary majority in 1945, they been involved in a relentless twenty-five-year struggle for the hearts and minds of the Labour, vote not with Conservatives or the Liberals but with the Communist Party of Great Britain (**CPGB**). Of Course, radical economic and social welfare reforms were high on their public political agenda. But they also had an unpublished agenda in both in Great Britain, its colonies and on the wider world stage. They would mobilise the

not inconsiderable power of the British State and its Secret State to crush communism and thwart Stalin's expansionist foreign policies.

There was an informal cabinet group responsible for taking forward this undeclared policy forward, which consisted of Attlee himself, Ernest Bevin (Foreign Secretary), A V Alexander (First Lord of the Admiralty, Later Minister of Defence), James Chuter Ede (Home Secretary) and George Isaacs (Minister of Labour and National Service).

An **"Official Cabinet Committee on Anti-Communism"** was convened. [the National Archive reference is known as **GEN 163**]. It was chaired by Attlee and met on January 17 1947 to hear a paper by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) that assessed the threat posed in the UK and the world by the CPGB. It was to be an object lesson in how "group-think" could develop in public policy making before the convention of systematic risk assessment, due diligence and SWOT analyses became routine.

There is little evidence that that committee ever met again, but it was the spark that initiated an unconstrained and unquestioned chain reaction that has, so far, lasted 80 years. The first reaction was to establish a committee to concentrate exclusively on disrupting the CPGB. This was **"Official Cabinet Committee on Anti-Communism (Home)"** [the National Archive reference is known as **GEN 183**] which met first in June 1947 with A V Alexander the newly appointed Minister of Defence in the chair.

Gen 183 regularly throughout the two Attlee Ministries which ended with a lost election in 1951 in which they had the largest share of the vote. GEN 183 actually changed its name quite quickly during the first ministry to the **"Official Cabinet Committee on Communism (Home)"**. Although no explanation is given in the official records it is clear that someone in the decision-making process was sensitive to what would now be called the "optics" of turning into an enemy of the state a political party that returned two MPs. But GEN 183 didn't end with the Attlee government's demise. It continued to meet regularly for another thirty years through to the Thatcher Government although it had undergone another name change to the **"Official Cabinet Committee on Subversion (Home)"**. It was joined early on in its history by the **"Official Cabinet Committee on Communism (Overseas)"** run by the Foreign Office which also had an internal counter-subversion organisation **Information Research Department** which from 1951 had a **"Home Desk"**.

In terms of blacklisting and spycopperty, the "Home" committees were most important and later on one set up to look at **"Subversion in Public Life"**. During the Attlee government's ministries it established three separate subcommittees to design three anti communist **"purges"** using data from **MI5's registry, which had** and collected by **MI5** itself or **Scotland Yard's Special Branch** and **Regional Police Special Branches**.

Of these purges only one had any public scrutiny, which was the first **civil service purge**. This one was announced in Parliament, although not voted on, negotiated with trades

unions and had a limited appeal mechanism. It was not admitted that MI5 registry files were being used as the blacklist, and it was not possible for blacklisted to see or challenge the information. In the end a small number of people were sacked, redeployed or left the service as a result of the purge.

There was no acknowledgement that following the Civil Service purge MI5 files would continue be used to vet everyone applying to join the professional civil service and this continues today.

The second and largest “purge” was of workers working on secret government contracts or in the supply chain for them. After an negative joint consultation with the TUC General Council and Confederation of Employers the government were persuaded to abandon to drop an elaborate scheme based on the civil service purge. Neither side tried to persuade the government to abandon blacklisting, just to achieve it quietly on a contract-by-contract basis, rigorously applying the standard contract terms that the name of those engaged in confidential work had to be submitted in advance to the commissioners of the contract. Today the Civil Service Blacklisting and Industrial Blacklisting using MI5 registry files in the UKSV system,

These were up and running by 1948, when MI5 approved the appointment of a former Yard Detective to the Economic League who could act as a liaison to Special Branch. By around 1975 there were around 7500 names of CPGB members on the Economic League’s central and regional registries,

The third and final Purge-and-Blacklist is more often described by its methodology – **positive vetting** – than its target groups - **research and development scientist and workers**. In an attempt to get the US government to lift its ban on sharing weapons secrets, Attlee needed to persuade J Edgar Hoover that the UK was actively investigating the background of these workers before employing them, and was then continuing to vet them while in employment. It was introduced by Attlee’s government in 1951 but only made public when Churchill was visiting America a year later.

It is hard to see how the Labour Party can atone for the blighting of so many lives through the three nationalised blacklist processes they introduced after the purges. An apology hardly seems to cut the mustard. Of course we do not have data on the numbers of people vetted and negatively vetted. But it is perfectly believable th MI5 do have it. The UKSV checks over two hundred thousand Jobs being undertaken a year.

There was something personal and visceral in Attlee’s and his closest political allies’ dislike and distain for the CPGB. But it was also driven by the prospect of immediate party political advantage in the event of the CPGB’s destruction, and that made it constitutionally insidious.

As a person, Attlee was not the sort of politician to be visceral about anything, Beatrice Webb an important political ally told her diary in 1940:

“His hour’s lecture was pitiable. He looked and spoke like an insignificant elderly clerk, without distinction in the voice, manner or substance of his discourse ... To realise that this little nonentity is the Parliamentary Leader of the Labour Party ... and presumably the future P.M., is humiliating.”

But after his time in Downing Street when he was again leader of the opposition there was one occasion when he showed a little fire. It happened in 1953, after he was critical of Joe McCarthy’s attempts to unilaterally organise an economic blockade of Russia in pursuance of the Korean War, The America went on the warpath against Attlee as a crypto communist, and Churchill as weak for not standing up to him. Attlee did not take it lying down but took the unprecedented step of issuing a press release reported widely in America:

“The British Labour Party and I myself have been vigorously opposing the Communist Party in this country ever since its formation – long before Senator McCarthy was ever heard of.”