

In June 1976 a meeting convened in the Home Office to consider the Security Service's latest threat assessment of subversion decided to reactivate the interdepartmental group to study subversion in public life (SPL). Founded by the Heath government, it had been virtually moribund since Labour returned to power in 1974.¹¹ Chaired by Robert Armstrong (then deputy secretary at the Home Office) with members from the FCO, Department of Energy, Scottish Office, Security Service, Scotland Yard and the Cabinet Office, the revived SPL was provided with an MI 5 assessments officer to prepare reports.¹² Its new terms of reference were 'to give guidance on the collection and to co-ordinate the assessment of intelligence about threats to the internal security of Great Britain arising from subversive activities, and to make periodic reports to the officials concerned'.¹³ The existence of the group was to be kept secret and its reports so closely held that they were not to be placed on normal departmental files. To advise on counter-subversion policy, the Subversion at Home Committee (SH) of permanent secretaries, which had also become moribund, was revived under the chairmanship of the cabinet secretary, Sir John Hunt, with the permanent secretaries of the Home Office, FCO and Department of Energy, the DG of the Security Service and the chairman of SPL as regular members, with other PUS being invited as necessary.¹⁴

In December 1976 SPL recommended a more positive and systematic approach to devising counter-subversion initiatives, probably with the covert release of damaging information on subversives to the media chiefly in mind. The DDG, John Jones, was extremely wary, arguing from the experience of the Heath administration that such initiatives were 'in the main ineffective':

The whole concept of trying to manage counter subversion in the media [is] of very doubtful value. It is natural for Ministers and senior officials to attempt to manipulate the news and the media. This is part of the stuff of politics. The results of such attempts have almost invariably been unforeseen and I think it unrewarding that officials should attempt to plan and launch in the media campaigns to counter subversion.

... In the field of counter subversion generally I see the Security Service as the provider of objective and factual information and comment to official departments and agencies about the security status of individuals and groups . . . We should be very chary of becoming involved in schemes to use our information publicly or through non official bodies. If we are consulted about such proposals our first concern must be to protect our sources and to preserve our non-partisan status in political matters.¹⁵

Fearing that the definition of subversion was in danger of being confused with opposition to the policies of the Callaghan government, Jones warned the DG, Sir Michael Hanley, before his first attendance at the SH in February 1977:

There is a natural tendency for senior officials (and in this they reflect the views of the Ministers they serve) to equate subversion with activity which threatens a Government's policies or may threaten its very existence ... In the heat of the day the objective impartiality in these matters which we must observe tends to become blurred, certainly in the minds of politicians and sometimes in those of their officials. It is in the long term interests of the Security Service that we adhere firmly to the objective non-partisan approach of our Charter and the current definition of subversion assists in this.¹⁶

The Communist-influenced left-wing minority on the TUC General Council had its greatest impact during the final two years of the Callaghan government. The Alternative Economic Policy adopted by the TUC in 1977 began as a Communist initiative, proposed by Ken Gill, the Communist leader of the draughtsmen's union, TASS. At its annual conference in September, the TUC voted for a return to 'unfettered collective bargaining'. Gill recalls an occasion when he was part of a TUC delegation to 10 Downing Street and had to ring his office during a break in the meeting. He felt a tap on his shoulder, turned round and saw the grinning face of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healey, who had presumably been reading MI5's Box 500 reports (so called after the Service's SWi Post Office box). 'Reporting back to King Street, Ken?' Healey asked him. In addition to the Communists Ken Gill and, briefly, Mick McGahey on the TUC General Council, there was a core of non-Communist union leaders with a high regard for Ramelson, who listened to his policy advice and took part in the left-wing caucus which he organized: among them the public employees' leader Rodney Bickerstaffe, the seamen's Jim Slater, print union leader Bill Keys, Alan Sapper of the television technicians, Ken Cameron of the Fire Brigades Union and the tobacco workers' Doug Grieve.¹⁷

Initially, however, some members of the Callaghan government were more concerned by political than industrial subversion. At his first meeting with Hanley on 11 November 1976, the new Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, raised the issue of Trotskyist penetration of the Labour Party.¹⁸ In 1971 the 'total hard membership' of Trotskyist and other 'Far Left' groups had been estimated as 'probably no greater than one-sixth that of the CPGB'.¹⁹ Though Trotskyists increased in number during the remainder