

COVERING SECRET

PRIME MINISTER

c. Sir Percy Cradock

THE PETER WRIGHT CASE

You should see Percy Cradock's minute below.

I know that you are reluctant to make a statement after the Wright case has been concluded. Certainly we should give no commitment to one in advance. But Percy's minute puts very well the one strong positive argument for a statement - only Ministers can explain to the public the vital job the agencies do for all of us. Of course you should not say anything which would depart from the usual convention about not discussing details of security matters on the floor of the House. Nor should anything be said which hinders the effectiveness of the Security Services. But I think that the approach in Percy's minute could help increase public confidence in the Services and thus their effectiveness.

N.L.W.

NIGEL WICKS

9 December 1986

MR WICKS8 December 1986THE PETER WRIGHT CASE

1. I am concerned at the damage to the image of British intelligence and in consequence to the image of the Government flowing from the Wright case and its totally irresponsible treatment by the media and opposition. This bears on what the Prime Minister should say when she is finally able to make a statement.

2. We have an intelligence machine of a high order, which makes a vital contribution to our defence and security, and to the promotion of British interests abroad. It is recognised and respected as such by foreign governments, hostile and friendly, and confers disproportionate influence, particularly with the Americans. The general public cannot be expected to know this; but in their more sober moods they accept that intelligence is useful and necessary, if only to prevent the Russians, or Syrians getting away with murder. The problem is that for most of the time the public tends to see intelligence only as a source for scandal or amusement. They are encouraged in this by the better informed, some of whom, sincerely but foolishly, think intelligence should be more exposed to scrutiny, and some of whom are simply malevolent.

3. In the last weeks sobriety has been at a discount. Our intelligence services, particularly the Security Service, have been popularly presented as undemocratic, unaccountable, arrogant, potentially fascist, criminal and treasonous. At the same time they have also been presented as accident-prone, incompetent, irrelevant, and farcical. The inconsistency of many of these adjectives does not worry the press. The Government is presented as obstinate, undemocratic, over-secretive and devious for directing and defending intelligence activities and as ill-advised or incompetent for launching the Australian case without due thought for the consequences.

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4. I do not over-estimate the effect of this criticism. Much of it is froth and will evaporate. And public misrepresentation is an occupational hazard of intelligence work. But there could be some lasting impact, and we shall have to consider carefully what is to be said when we are free of the case and the Prime Minister can speak.

5. As suggested at her meeting on 19 November, she will wish to underline the distinction between books by employees of the intelligence service and books by outsiders, however well-informed, (a distinction the press have resolutely evaded). She will want to put the 'revelations' firmly in their distant historical context and to speak of new rules governing the operations of today's intelligence services. But I suggest she should also be prepared to say something more than in the past about the work of the intelligence machine, and its direct relevance to national security. This could be done in very general terms. The public should be reminded quietly about the dangers that face this country daily, not simply from Soviet espionage and subversion, although this is relentless and on a vast scale, but also from terrorists, whether Irish or Middle Eastern, whose activities proliferate and whose threats are of the most urgent and direct kind. Also of the threat from those who illegally import drugs. Also of the need to defend and promote British interests abroad in a hostile environment by acquiring the best and most timely information. This is unremitting, round-the-clock work. Its setbacks are headline news - the Grand Hotel Brighton and the shooting of Policewoman Yvonne Fletcher. In the nature of things, the successes usually go unsung; for the media they are the non-events; the aircraft not blown up; the Royal visit unhindered; the international agreement obtained on better terms; people going about their daily business in safety. But this can only be done by patient, dedicated and above all secret work. The public expects and enjoys the benefits; it must ensure the conditions.

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6. This would be a slightly more forward defence than usual. It would not preclude the customary 'no comment' on any point of detail. But it would do something to correct the media travesties. It would appeal to the instinctive support of the broad public for the defence of the country in all its aspects.* And it would lead naturally to an appeal for more responsible press and opposition treatment of a vital matter where there have been in the past certain standards of behaviour. What we have to get away from is the picture of intelligence as an esoteric and pointless game, which the Government obstinately insist on playing and are just now playing particularly badly.

7. The above would not, of course, dispose of arguments along the lines: we fully support responsible work by the intelligence agencies, but they must in a democratic society be subject to outside oversight, eg a committee of Privy Councillors. I think we must continue to resist this, on the grounds that the oversight is best provided, and with less risk of leakage or political interference, by Ministers answerable to Parliament. Palliatives are possible; but there is no means of satisfying the critics without destructive exposure of intelligence work. The line therefore has to be held. But this refusal would come better if preceded by some effort to put intelligence work in a positive, understandable and more public context, rather than remaining entirely tight-lipped.



PERCY CRADOCK

* It might also be helpful to relate the Security Service more closely to the police. There is a popular misconception that the police protect us while the Security Service breaks into the foreign embassies. And police publicity eg over IRA arrests encourages this. When there is another success that can be publicly acknowledged, Special Branch should not be given the sole credit.