

Ref. A04131

PRIME MINISTER

Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services

When you last discussed this with your colleagues on 1 October 1980, I was asked to continue to keep the matter under close review and bring further developments to the attention of Ministers.

2. Sir Ian Trethowan at first thought that, when the production team had put their material together and made a film, he should see the film, together with one or two members of the editorial and production teams and with Mr Sheldon (legal adviser to the Security Service). Later on he decided that that would be too difficult, since the role of Mr Sheldon would be liable to leak. Sir Ian decided that he and Mr Sheldon should watch the film privately together, and that thereafter, having heard Mr Sheldon's comments, he should take his own responsibility for deciding whether certain portions of the programme should be omitted. I was consulted as to whether Mr Sheldon should go along with this, and after consulting the appropriate colleagues I agreed that he should, on the understanding that it was clearly understood that he would be in no way giving clearance for the programme but would be providing Sir Ian Trethowan with specialist advice on which to make editorial judgements. It must be clearly understood, I said, that the fact that Mr Sheldon had seen and commented on the material would not be taken as restraining Ministers from saying publicly, if they had the mind to do so, that the programme was irresponsible and should not have been produced.

3. The material which Mr Sheldon eventually saw on 13 January ran for 100 minutes. It opened with a statement by Mr Jonathan Aitken supporting the need for greater accountability. Dr David Owen was shown stating in an interview that the convention that MI6 did not exist was a farce, though it had the marginal advantage that one did not need to consider what could be said about that organisation. The programme then dealt with the four agencies (MI5, MI6, Special Branch and GCHQ) in that order. There were photographs of premises and names and photographs of people (including the Director General of the Security Service, the Director General of the SIS, the Intelligence Co-ordinator



and the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office). There was a discussion of the chain of responsibility from the Director General of the Security Service to the Home Secretary. There were some comments on the Blunt case. Mr Merlyn Rees was quoted a number of times, but nothing of what he said contained anything particularly damaging and most of it would be regarded as reassuring. There was a section about the Security Service's use of Special Branch in making arrests, etc. for them. There was an interview with the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall emphasising that there was no national Special Branch and that all Special Branches were directly answerable to their own Chief Constables. There was a statement by Mr Robin Cook MP about the need for greater accountability and the inadequacy of the present practice under which the Home Secretary regularly refused to answer his questions. Mr Merlyn Rees took the line that people would have to trust Ministers.

4. When it came to MI6 and GCHQ, there were interviews with people said to work for MI6. The Service was said to be accountable to the Foreign Secretary with access to the Prime Minister. There were references to the Wynne case and to the Philby and Burgess cases. There was a brief reference to the Christine Keeler affair and to the Littlejohn affair.

5. There was a statement by Jonathan Aitken referring to a plan to assassinate Nasser. Dr David Owen was recorded as saying that during his time as Foreign Secretary it was not the policy of MI6 to engage in assassination.

6. A former member of the CIA was reported as saying that the CIA used MI6 to plant stories in areas which they could not reach and referred to the use of journalists through Reuters for intelligence purposes. Mr Gerald Long, General Manager of Reuters, stated that all intelligence officers were professional liars and no reliance should be placed on any allegations made by them. Another former CIA officer, who was a member of President-elect Reagan's entourage, supported the manipulation of news and said that it would only be done by Americans in this country with the knowledge of British Intelligence. This officer was asked about the consequences for the UK/USA relationship of the election of a Labour Government under left-wing domination. He stated that military co-operation and intelligence exchanges would be a casualty of this.



7. A number of interviews in America were shown, including Senator Huddleston, Mr William Colby and Mr Richard Helms. All spoke in a complimentary way about British Intelligence and Mr Richard Helms was emphatic that no changes were needed on the ground that "you do not fix something that is not broken".

8. Finally, there was a further interview with Dr David Owen in which he expressed some anxiety about the responsibilities carried by the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary and suggested that there might be merit in establishing a small group of Privy Counsellors who could question those Ministers in order to satisfy themselves that there was full democratic accountability.

9. The film lasted 100 minutes and was presumably intended to cover two Panorama programmes. Mr Sheldon made a number of comments immediately after seeing the film and some further comments after consulting the departments and agencies concerned.

10. Sir Ian Trethowan has now put the programme in the hands of Mr Richard Francis, Director of News and Current Affairs (and a member of the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Committee), who has been asked to reduce it to a 50 minute programme, taking account of the various comments made and deletions suggested by Sir Ian Trethowan (following Mr Sheldon's comments). If those comments are all faithfully followed, the result should be a reasonably balanced programme from which most of the material to which we would have strong objection had been deleted.

11. Mr Sheldon has in my judgement done a very good job with Sir Ian Trethowan, and will certainly have significantly limited the damage caused by the programme. We cannot be sure that all the comments will be followed: there is some reason to think that Sir Ian Trethowan and Mr Francis may have quite a battle on their hands inside the BBC, and we can expect to hear echoes of this in the press. But I do not think there is any more we can do, short of an outright veto; and it remains my view (as I said in my minute of 24 September 1980) that that cure would be worse than the disease.

12.

SECRET AND PERSONAL

12. I attach a copy of a piece in today's Guardian about this programme. This was to be expected, and is as little damaging as we could hope: the spotlight is very much on Sir Ian Trethowan. It suggests (I do not know whether correctly) that the programme has been dropped. If so, I fear that attempts may be made to get it, or parts of it, out by other means (e.g. on the ITV network, or on some other BBC programme such as Newsnight). I am suggesting to the Home Office that they should warn the Independent Broadcasting Authority to keep their eyes open for this possibility.

13. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

RA

Robert Armstrong

30th January 1981

Film dropped after Trethowan intervenes

By David Leigh

Large portions of a special edition of Panorama about the security services have been suppressed on the intervention of the BBC director-general, Sir Ian Trethowan. The film, although approved by senior BBC executives, will not now be shown.

Sir Ian took an unusual step two weeks ago which has puzzled BBC staff. He ordered a video cassette to be made of the 100-minute film, along with the transcript, which he took away for 15 days.

He then ordered portions to be struck out which BBC executives describe as covering 50-75 per cent of the material.

This included a sequence describing how the Special Branch passed false information

to a women's employer; and another sequence in which a former agent claimed to have arranged hundreds of illegal telephone taps for MI6—an activity which the Government denies takes place.

Another excised passage consisted of an interview with a named former MI5 agent, Anthony Motion.

The programme, called M15/MI6—the need to know, also covers claims of MI5 involvement in the downfall of Lord Lambton, whose activities with prostitutes were made known to the News of the World.

It deals with the Profumo affair, another ministerial sex scandal; MI6 recruitment of criminals in the Littlejohn affair; and MI6 plots to liquidate

date Prime Minister Mosaadeq of Iran and Colonel Nasser in Egypt.

There were interviews with Mr Merlyn Rees, the former Home Secretary, who was in charge of domestic MI5 phone-tapping, David Owen, former Foreign Secretary, and other MPs.

The Special Branch episode described how inaccurate political information was collected about a young woman, and subsequently made available to her employer. It said that Scotland Yard subsequently apologised.

The interviewee who discussed phone-taps said he had conducted "500 black bag jobs"—illegal phone taps subcontracted by MI6 while ministers assured Parliament no such thing occurred,

The Panorama programme has been made openly. Many Fleet Street writers and specialists were consulted during its research, and Sir Arthur Franks and Sir Howard Smith, Callaghan appointees to head MI6 and MI5 were notified.

BBC staff believe that Mrs Thatcher expressed disquiet about the programme as long ago as last summer, and at one point the programme-makers received a directive from Sir Ian Trethowan which made it difficult to continue the programme: he banned them from contacting any agent or former agent of the security services.

The final programme was approved, before Sir Ian's intervention, by the then head of BBC-1, Mr Bill Cotton, and the head of current affairs, Mr.

Dick Francis, who is also a member of the Whitehall-Fleet Street D-Notice Committee which exists to protect national security.

The BBC last night denied that Sir Ian had shown the cassette to anyone in the Government. It said the status of the programme was still uncertain and the alterations presented by Sir Ian were "suggestions" because he was editor-in-chief concerned with such a sensitive matter.

The Prime Minister's office declined to comment last night on whether consultations had taken place either between the BBC and Mrs Thatcher, or officials of the BBC and officials of the security services. The security services themselves do not admit that they have any official existence.