

What the spooks want

Tony Simpson

Britain now has a National Security Council, headed by Sir Peter Ricketts, a Foreign Office civil servant. He it was who advised Jack Straw, in March 2002, that ‘the truth is that what has changed is not the pace of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction programmes, but our tolerance of them post-11 September’. Straw duly repeated this sage judgment to the Prime Minister, but Mr Blair wasn’t minded to heed the caution implicit in Sir Peter’s words. The Prime Minister was off to Crawford, Texas, where President Bush would apprise him of the current state of US planning for the war on Iraq. Blair joined in the President’s warmongering against Iraq, with all the deceptions and distortions that entailed.

Such a baleful experience may have contributed to the motivation, which seems to have been felt latterly within the British Establishment, and has sometimes been on display at the Chilcot Inquiry, to regularise governmental discussions of peace and war as well as related matters usually lumped under the catch-all heading of ‘security’. ‘Sofa’ government, that hallmark of the Blair years, had attended British complicity in all the horrors of the clandestine ‘war on terror’ which was being waged by President Bush’s torturers, closely assisted by the lawyers of the Office of Legal Counsel (see *Spokesman 104*).

It was Sir Richard Dearlove, formerly head of the Secret Intelligence Service, whose spies range across the globe, who was one of the first to propose publicly a National Security Council for Britain. Speaking at Gresham College in the City of London in November 2009, he said:

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'I firmly recommend and support the idea of creating a National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, which meets regularly and can pull together the various ministers and officials relevant to the creation of policy, and, if necessary, can take direct control of a crisis.

I also think we should create the post of a National Security Adviser, with supporting staff, to give the Council a permanent expression and to do some of the longer term conceptual thinking and planning. This is following quite closely the American model, but I would advocate a much lighter bureaucracy here than exists in the States to support their National Security Council.'

Sir Richard seems, at least, to have made some progress on this first part of his agenda. Indeed, the new National Security Council met on day one of the new government, with both Cameron and Clegg attending. This was even before the new Cabinet had had a chance to meet. According to reports, the Council discussed Afghanistan, although 'Afpak' might have been a more accurate description, as we shall see later.

But, first of all, we might consider Sir Richard's wider ambitions for Britain's spooks. He went on to tell Gresham College:

'I think we should create a National Security Staff College which would train around a cohesive programme all the senior staff of the intelligence and security agencies and make them more interchangeable. It might also put an end to the anomaly of unqualified senior officials being parachuted into senior national security appointments. It would also embrace selected law enforcement officers, armed forces officers, and other civil servants, as appropriate, to create a cohesive, cross-Government, national security culture.'

There's no mention of this in the coalition agreement published by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. However, having got their Council, who's to say that, notwithstanding our cash-strapped times, the Establishment won't get its Security Staff College for advanced studies in spookery? Sir Richard sets an exacting standard for the new College:

'... it should also aim to be the centre of European excellence in national security. I think it is far more effective for the UK to train Europe's national security experts in a field in which the UK is clearly pre-eminent, rather than try to create another European institution at 27 in Brussels to deal with this. In my practice, they do not really deliver what you want, particularly in such sensitive areas.'

That should go down well elsewhere in Europe. Now that the City has lost some of its allure, Britain can trade on top-of-the-range spooks. Sir Richard, however, downplays his ambitions:

'These may sound like modest changes, but I think that, over time, their impact

could be far-reaching in creating greater consensus about what really constitutes our national security concerns in strengthening the Government's structures to deliver policy and strengthen the cadre of professionals, both in the UK and Europe, who would lead the delivery.'

This is quite a far-reaching project. We are witnessing the early stages of its public appearance. What might have been said when its inaugural meeting considered Afghanistan. Once again, Sir Richard can probably help us. He told Gresham College:

'the irony of this evening's talk is that, in talking about the UK's national security, I have spoken much more about Pakistan. Of course I have done this deliberately to try to bring home to you just how much we are now part of an interdependent security regime, how we cannot really stand apart from problems which we might prefer to regard as distant and alien. As I said, the line between what is domestic and what is foreign has disappeared, and in conclusion, I would say effective national security has no frontiers any longer.'

Why is Pakistan so important? Sir Richard can help us once again:

'The Obama Administration, in my view, is right to speak of AfPak. Our own [Brown] Government could talk more of Pakistan when it talks of Afghanistan, and the dangers to international security were Pakistan to be threatened with disintegration, particularly – and this is an important point – if the integrity of its nuclear arsenal were also in question. For me, the stability of Pakistan is just as important as taking on Al Qaeda, and actually, taking a medium to long term view, I think Pakistan's stability is really the stronger reason for not leaving Afghanistan prematurely.'

Perhaps that is what is now being chewed over at the National Security Council. Shouldn't we be told?

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Afghanistan – 'We're losing'

General Stanley McChrystal's sudden removal, in late June 2010, as US and Nato commander in Afghanistan caused consternation in military circles. One senior British soldier said at the time, 'You just couldn't make this up. Our assumption was that Obama wouldn't move McChrystal because of the disruption it would cause at the top of Nato. But we were proved wrong.' Now the growing disarray in Afghanistan has burst into public view.

President Obama had appointed McChrystal to take charge in Afghanistan in March 2009, shortly after entering office. The General's task was to 'to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan'. To assist him in this, an additional 21,000 US troops were to

be sent to Kabul, the largest increase since the war began in 2001. But the General and his Commander in Chief didn't hit it off. One of McChrystal's staff told the journalist Michael Hastings, whose article for *Rolling Stone* magazine triggered the General's departure,

'their first one-on-one meeting took place in the Oval Office ... Obama clearly didn't know anything about him, who he was. Here's the guy who's going to run his fucking war, but he didn't seem very engaged. The Boss was pretty disappointed.'

Notwithstanding the poor personal chemistry with the President, Hastings tells us, McChrystal was determined to use Afghanistan 'as a laboratory for a controversial military strategy known as counter-insurgency or COIN'. So why did he have to go?

Certainly, some of McChrystal's staff, which includes a former head of UK special forces, are highly critical of members of Obama's Administration. Vice President Joe Biden was the butt of numerous jokes. Obama's National Security Advisor, General Jim Jones, was called a 'clown ... stuck in 1985'. General McChrystal himself reportedly has strong reservations about Richard Holbrooke, the President's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Apparently, McChrystal thinks Holbrooke is like 'a wounded animal' who 'keeps hearing rumours that he's going to get fired'! But Hillary Clinton is rated because she supported McChrystal during the strategic review of policy in Afghanistan.

And why is McChrystal's departure felt so acutely in Afghanistan? One key reason is that McChrystal, not Holbrooke nor Karl Eikenberry, US Ambassador to Afghanistan, was closest to President Karzai. He tried hard to help Karzai fashion some vestige of credibility with his own people so that his counter-insurgency strategy might have a national leader to give it support. But now the US Administration must start again. Obama has turned to General Petraeus, instigator of the 'surge' in Iraq, for assistance. Whether relations with him can survive longer than those with McChrystal remains to be seen.

But the real damage done by General McChrystal, rather surprisingly, has been to US Army morale. He had been held in high esteem by ordinary soldiers. A British officer in Kabul said the lads

'love Stan McChrystal. You'd be out in Somewhere, Iraq, and someone would take a knee beside you, and a corporal would be like "Who the fuck is that?" And it's fucking Stan McChrystal.'

All that was changing, even before the General was dumped. *Rolling Stone* visited troops on the frontline in Afghanistan. Their correspondent sent

back reports of deep misgivings about how the US was losing its war in Afghanistan. The President may have been sold on counter-insurgency but, as Hastings observes, many of McChrystal's 'own men aren't buying it'.

In an attempt to kill fewer civilians, soldiers had been issued with new regulations which say 'Patrol only in areas that you are reasonably certain that you will not have to defend yourselves with lethal force'.

'Does that make any fucking sense?' asks Private First Class Jared Pautsch. 'We should just drop a fucking bomb on this place. You sit and ask yourself: What are we doing here?'

Another veteran of three combat tours says of McChrystal's leadership

'by the time his directives get passed down to us through Big Army, they're all fucked up – either because somebody is trying to cover their ass, or because they just don't understand it themselves. But we're fucking losing this thing.'

General McChrystal and his team may have given offence in the Oval Office and beyond, but surely their gravest mistake was to create a situation which let a little light shine on what the ordinary Joe on the frontline in Afghanistan really thinks. It was ten years before the Soviet Union eventually withdrew, in 1989, from that country. Will the United States, the UK and Nato take even longer?