

4. Propaganda and the 'Terror Threat' in the UK

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Since 11 September 2001 both the US and UK governments have comprehensively overhauled their internal and external propaganda apparatus. These have been globally coordinated as never before to justify the 'War on Terror' including the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq and the assault on civil liberties at home.

There is very little public debate on the propaganda apparatus and very few people know of the extensive machinery that has been built up in the past two years. The machinery has a number of parallel elements in the US and UK and the efforts are also coordinated globally between the US and UK. In the US the White House has the Office of Global Communications that sits at the top of the global pyramid. The Office was set up by the Bush White House based on the experience of the Coalition Information Centers (CIC) that operated during the Kosovo and Afghanistan conflicts. These drew on the propaganda expertise of the British government and are reported to have been the idea of Alastair Campbell the No. 10 Press Secretary (Foreign Affairs Select Committee 2003). The CIC was set up in October 2001 for the Afghanistan campaign with offices in Washington, London and Islamabad to coordinate across time zones. According to reports it was this initiative that sparked information sharing to ensure that the US and UK (and other governments) 'sang from the same hymn sheet' (Day 2002). The CIC was made permanent under the auspices of the White House with the creation of the Office of Global Communications (OGC) in July 2002. It was the OGC that fed out the lies about the threat posed by the Hussein regime including the faked and spun intelligence information supplied by the UK and by the secret Pentagon intelligence operation, the Office of Special Plans. This was set up by Rumsfeld to bypass the CIA, which was reluctant to go along with some of the lies.

From the White House the message is cascaded down to the rest of the propaganda apparatus. In the US, the State Department Office of Public Diplomacy is responsible for overseas propaganda; in the UK there is a parallel apparatus. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign Office

have the biggest propaganda operations of any UK government departments and their efforts are coordinated with Downing Street. The co-ordination is accomplished by means of a cross-departmental committee known as the Communication and Information Centre, later changed back to the Coalition Information Centre as it had been in the Afghanistan campaign. It is based administratively in the Foreign Office Information Directorate, yet directed by Alastair Campbell and run from Downing Street.¹ Campbell also chaired a further cross-departmental committee at No. 10 – the Iraq Communication Group. It was from here that the campaign to mislead the media about the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was directed. In particular it oversaw the September dossier on WMD and the second ‘dodgy’ dossier of February 2003, which was quickly exposed as plagiarised and spun.

The propaganda apparatus below this has four main elements. First is the external system of propaganda run by the Foreign Office. Second is internal propaganda focused on the alleged ‘terrorist threat’, coordinated out of the Cabinet Office by the newly established Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS). Third was the operation ‘in theatre’ in Iraq. Lastly, the US and UK military psychological operations teams undertaking overt and covert operations inside Iraq. All of these operations have their own contribution to make in the ‘War on Terror’ although most public debate (in the US and the UK) has focused on the system of embedding journalists and latterly (in the UK) on the Downing Street operation overseen by Campbell. This article focuses on the internal propaganda apparatus that has overseen the dissemination of information about the alleged ‘terror threat’ in the UK.

UK Resilience and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Without attracting front-page attention the Blair government has quietly presided over a revolution in internal propaganda systems for dealing with national emergencies. The overhaul was set in motion in July 2001 as a result of the foot-and-mouth crisis and drawing on the experience of the floods of winter 2000 and the cost of fuel protests. Based in the Cabinet Office and overseen initially by the most senior propaganda official in the civil service, the Head of the Government Information and Communication Service Mike Granatt, is the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. It works closely with another new body, the Health Protection Agency which encompasses parts of the Department of Health disease surveillance operation and the MoD’s chemical and biological labs at Porton Down. Under the rather chilling website title ‘UK Resilience’, this network of organisations also works closely with the Special Branch and MI5. They tap

straight into the CIC, chaired – until his departure from government – by Alastair Campbell. The aim of the CCS is said to be to improve the UK's 'resilience' to 'disruptive challenge'.² It has already seen action in the fire-fighters dispute – an indication of the orientation of the CCS towards state rather than public service agendas. Post September 11 it has been centrally involved in circulating information on the alleged 'threat' from Islamic 'terrorism'.

The CCS houses a 24-hour monitoring spin operation called the News Co-ordination Centre (NCC), which stands ready for use in the event of the next emergency. It has also (in the wake of September 11) established a wide ranging review of information handling in an emergency situation, undertaken by a working party involving government press officers and senior media executives together with police and local authority crisis planners. The Media Emergency Forum has produced a long report that the CCS claims 'reflects a more productive relationship' with the media.³ The approach taken by the CCS is more sophisticated than previous emergency planning responses that allow the government simply to take over the broadcast media. However, that system is still in place – according to Mike Granatt, forced out as Director General of the GICS in early 2004, 'we've got a system that was put in place for nuclear war. We could press the button and pre-empt every transmitter in this country'. But this would be counter-productive. 'Voluntary' agreements with the media are seen as more effective. Granatt (2003) says: 'We need a credible active, sceptical – rather than cynical – system of news reporting... Anything we do to subvert the process of giving trust in that is wrong... If the BBC or ITN... said we think you should do this because the government says so, we would be lost.' So productive has this been that it has occasioned little attention in the media.

It was the new propaganda apparatus that oversaw the release of the information on the alleged discovery of ricin in January 2003 and that ordered the tanks to Heathrow in late 2002, following an intelligence tip-off, reported as a suspected surface to air missile attack on the airport. In the case of Heathrow, Granatt (2003) has noted:

I will now confess to you. I sat at all the meetings that decided to do that, and I have seen agony cross their face before... Ministers actually considering putting tanks at our biggest economic asset... After what I sat and heard, doing it was absolutely necessary and I can't tell you more – I'm very sorry about it but that's the fact. But I can tell you first hand there was no lack of sincerity and nobody does that because it's going to make some

propaganda point for a war that at that point, wasn't entirely certain anyway.

What Granatt and others sat and heard was the intelligence assessment of the threat. Whether or not the threat was genuine or just more dodgy 'intelligence', no one was arrested and no surface to air missiles were found. Militarily, the effectiveness of light armoured vehicles, with a top speed of thirty-eight miles an hour, against a SAM attack launched at some distance from the airport remains opaque. But according to senior sources involved in the decision: 'You don't catch rockets in an armoured vehicle. That is not the point. Part of the point of these things may be deterrence. So visibility is another part of the game.' Visibility – otherwise known as propaganda.

In the case of ricin, the information was released, after deliberation in the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, under the name of the then Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Pat Troop.⁴ She conducted a joint media briefing at Scotland Yard with the police. Troop (2003) has maintained that the information that ricin had been found was released because 'what we didn't know when we started was whether or not we were then going to find lots more Ricin somewhere else and therefore it was felt the public had the legitimate right to know'. According to a senior source involved 'the broadcasters' response was very positive. They told us afterwards it enabled them to go straight to air...because they were talking to people they believed were trustworthy and experts in their fields'.⁵ The CCS released the information in the knowledge that it would potentially prejudice the trial of the people arrested in connection with the find. As Mike Granatt (2003) noted, prejudicing a trial comes way down the list of priorities after 'public safety'.

The claim that the information was released for public health reasons ushers in a new era of threat warning and assessment where the threat of terrorist attack is whipped up on shaky evidence for our own good – a very New Labour propaganda solution. The 'threat' from ricin in the 'environment' was clearly very small. The poison has to be ingested, inhaled or injected. Even if we suppose that the warning genuinely was given by civil servants operating in good faith, the information on which the warnings are based depended on the 'intelligence' services. Their collective lack of understanding of Islamic activists together with their own overhauled spin apparatus makes it difficult to discern whether the information in such cases is based on genuine, if misinterpreted, intelligence or deliberate fabrication, as was the case of the MI5 leak that a planned gas attack on the London Tube had been foiled (Miller 2003).

The case of the London Underground is instructive in that the arrests occurred on 9 November 2002 with little fanfare. Two days later Tony Blair made his Lord Mayor's speech in which he stated that there was a 'real' threat. The following weekend *The Sunday Times*, following briefings from MI5 linked the arrests to a 'suspected Al Qaeda terrorists' gas attack plot (17 November 2002).

Fleet Street scrambled to follow up the sensational tale...the Independent on Sunday said the Algerians may have been planning to place a dirty nuclear bomb 'on a ferry using a British port'. [The Observer] said they had been charged with plotting to 'release cyanide on the London Underground', as did pretty much everyone else. Broadcasters repeated the story. (Cohen 2003)

The story was boosted by the 'green light' from No. 10 to follow it up, leading *The Sunday Times* to defend its story as being based on 'reputable security sources' (Cohen 2003). Reputable maybe, but how accurate are they? This link surprised the lawyer for one of the suspects since as he put it, 'none of the allegations which had entered the public domain over the past few days had been put to his client' (*Guardian* 19 November 2002). The Algerians eventually were charged with having false passports, and no evidence whatsoever of gas or dirty bombs was produced. Some commentators, such as Simon Jenkins, the former editor of *The Times* complained:

I was outraged by the smallpox scare story [of 3 December 2002]. It was a clear repeat of the previous weekend's lobby story of 'gas horror on London Tube', itself an echo of the Home Office 'dirty bomb' story two weeks earlier. These Whitehall officials are panic happy; careless of the cost and worry they cause others... This is the third weekend in a month that a terrorism threat has emanated from Whitehall. Terror stories are always the easiest for government to sell. Headlines write themselves and the pictures always 'burn or bleed'. (*The Times* 4 December 2002)

For some commentators the combination of repression and media frenzy stirs uncomfortable memories of Ireland. Faisal Bodi argued: 'For all the hysterical headlines warning of a Bin Laden in our backyard, the reality is a picture of political repression of Muslims that is starting to resemble the experience of Northern Ireland's Catholics throughout the Troubles' (*Guardian* 21 January 2003). Like Ireland, the arrests are high profile and the outcomes usually much less dramatic. Also like Ireland, the media

coverage ensures the possibility of a fair trial will be prejudiced, potentially leading to a series of unsafe convictions. According to Home Office figures, covering 11 September 2001 to June 2004, 609 people have been arrested and 99 of them have been charged with offences under the Terrorism Act 2000. As of 30 June 2004, there had been fifteen convictions. Of the fifteen convictions at least eight were of white people, six of whom were convicted for displaying Ulster loyalist symbols. It is important to stress that the number of convictions for planning or carrying out specific acts of terrorism is zero (Athwal 2004).

It seems that the wave of arrests signals – at best – the confusion and panic in the police and intelligence services. Under the cloak of the Terrorism Act the police are simply sweeping the Muslim community in the hope that they strike it lucky against an unknown threat. According to press reports, ‘From the beginning, senior officers privately recognised there would be “collateral damage” – petty criminals or even innocent individuals temporarily detained in the police trawls. But they decided it was a price worth paying’ (Burke and Bright 2003).

Where there is ‘intelligence’ the quality of it reportedly has been suspect. The strongest connection between the people arrested in the past year has been that many have been from Algeria. It is well known that two key Algerian opposition groups have been active in the UK since the 1992 election was cancelled for fear that it would be won by Islamists. The ‘intelligence’ on some of the Algerian suspects arrested in the UK reportedly has emanated from Paris, and some experts say the information comes from ‘tainted official sources in Algiers’. In addition, neither opposition group ‘has ever been directly connected to bin Laden’ (Burke and Bright 2003).

Spook Spin?

In a 2001 deportation case against nine men detained without trial for over 7 months, the defence asked Martin Bright, Home Affairs editor of the *Observer*, to analyse the prosecution evidence linking the defendants to terrorism. In a piece submitted to the court and available only on the *Observer* website he notes that ‘by far the largest proportion’ of evidence was simply press cuttings reporting such links. In ‘almost absurdly circular’ fashion these were based largely on unattributable briefings from intelligence sources.

Information from intelligence briefings from foreign or the domestic services becomes common currency and is then repeated by

journalists who are starved of any real information. Reputable journalists report the denials of the Islamists themselves, but the fact that someone denies being a terrorist is never considered to be much of a story. As increasing numbers of dissidents have been rounded up in Britain and elsewhere it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to check their stories properly... We have therefore been thrown back on an increasingly narrow set of sources: essentially the police and the intelligence services. (Bright 2001)

In recent years MI5 and MI6 have overhauled their information operations and now have named press officers who deal with designated reporters in each media outlet. Bright notes that, 'In the case of the *Observer*, I deal with MI5.' As he notes: 'Most journalists feel that, on balance, it is better to report what the intelligence services are saying, but whenever the readers see the words "Whitehall sources" they should have no illusions about where the information comes from' (Bright 2001).

Of course it would be wrong to see this as a wide-ranging conspiracy in which the government, the police the secret state are all engaged. Key elements of the state clearly genuinely believe the briefings they get, and in fact much of the state apparatus has to act as if the briefings are true regardless of what they actually believe. A useful way of looking at it is proposed by Martin Bright of the *Observer*:

I believe that the police and intelligence services are genuinely concerned and that the threats are largely real (in their minds at least they really believe an attack is imminent and inevitable)... But I do not know for sure and I don't believe the police have any understanding of Islamist politics and so what they perceive as a threat may be nothing of the sort.⁶ (Bright 2001)

As Bright notes in his court submission, the same goes for MI5's press officer. He has 'no expertise in Islamic or Arab affairs and simply acts as a conduit' (Bright 2001). Furthermore, it may well be that Tony Blair genuinely is convinced that there is a threat. As he put it in an interview with *Newsnight*: 'I mean, this is what our intelligence services are telling us and it's difficult because, you know, either they're simply making the whole thing up or this is what they are telling me' (6 February 2003). And it doesn't seem likely that they are making *all* of it up. Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt the 'genuine mistake' line of argument at least some of the time. One good reason for scepticism is the past record of the intelligence and defence establishment. As Bright himself notes, in the past information

was slipped out informally and, 'Sometimes the stories that resulted were true and sometimes not' (Bright 2001). Others have revealed the deceptive information operations of intelligence agencies (Leigh 2000; Dorril 2000). But the best reason to doubt the Prime Minister is that there is abundant evidence that Downing Street and MI5 have engaged in both spin and deliberate mendacity. If the Hutton inquiry shows anything it is that almost the entire apparatus of government is mired in deception. Moreover, as the case of the London underground showed, MI5 have themselves been engaged in deception on the terror 'threat'.

The propaganda apparatus, run under the auspices of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, appears credible to most mainstream journalists and ensures effective wall-to-wall coverage for stories based on dubious sources, which played very nicely into the propaganda campaign to legitimise the attack on Iraq. Its key function – apart from indulging the paranoid fantasies of the intelligence services – is to provide cover for the ever-expanding power of the state to subvert civil liberties and to undermine dissent. While the propaganda campaign to launch the attack on Iraq has to some extent unravelled, propaganda on the terror threat seems much more successful.