OFFICIAL SECRECY AND BRITISH LIBERTARIANISM

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The United Kingdom has had laws providing for Official Secrecy for ninety years. The two main Acts now in force were both passed in the first quarter of this century, and their essential provisions have been reflected in legal statutes of similar names adopted into the penal codes of most present or former commonwealth countries —notoriously including South Africa and Rhodesia. In contrast to the United States libertarian tradition flowing from its plural democracy and federalist government, British official secrecy legislation has provided much of the Anglo-Saxon world with a legacy of fundamental state secrecy, supported by the potential criminalisation of persons inside or outside the civil service who indulge in disclosure.

The argument is not fundamentally about the provisions made by states for bona fide foreign espionage, if that is the correct term. (Although the definition of just what constitutes espionage is capable of considerable bending; I return to this point later.) It is about subsidiary provisions—specifically those made under Section 2 of the British Official Secrets Act—which criminalize any unauthorized transaction in official information.

It is now widely accepted that this provision is overdue for complete reform, although the motives and benevolence of some of the reform lobby is entirely suspect. Section 2 is in effect the antithesis of proposals for Freedom of Information. (A more apposite title would be the right of free access to official information, although the title of the US legislation has stuck.)

The purpose of this article is to recount the circumstances of, and report the lessons for the left from, a two year case under the Official Secrets Acts, which ended in November 1978. It became known as the ABC case; this derives from the surnames of the three accused: Crispin Aubrey, a journalist for the 'alternative' London weekly Time Out, John Berry, a former soldier in the Intelligence Corps, and the present author. From arrest to the end of a trial at the Old
Bailey, the case took almost twenty-one months. It ended in convictions under Section 2 for each of us, but with negligible penalty—in the case of myself and fellow journalist Aubrey, no penalty at all. During the course of the trial, those involved directly, legally, or in defence campaigning had the opportunity to learn a great deal about the intelligence organizations operating in Britain, internally and externally. Although the direct effects of the case were hard to measure, there has been a clearly perceptible undermining of the national security myths which are the civil servants' and politicians' handy blank walls behind which illiberal activities can be screened. In particular, an anonymous army intelligence witness in the case ('Colonel B') rapidly achieved the position of a national figure of ridicule.

It is also probable that the case, with the barrage of criticism which followed for the government, was responsible in large measure for the decision by the Liberal Party, on the fortuitous winning of the ballot for first place in presenting private member's Bills by Clement Freud MP, to select a Freedom of Information Bill. Although muddled and unsatisfactory in many ways, Freud's Bill—which lapsed with the collapse of the Callaghan administration—achieved a wholly unopposed second reading in the House of Commons, reflecting a considerable change in the general attitude of British parliamentarians.

The political context of the creation of the Official Secrets Acts is well reported and analysed from a committed socialist point of view in Tony Bunyan's *The Political Police in Britain*. He notes that the OSAs 'represent the last resort in suppressing public knowledge of the workings of the state'. They are one of 'a number of overtly political laws drawn up to protect and preserve the state in a capitalist society'. It should be noted in passing that provisions at least as harsh apply in Eastern European Socialist states, as in other capitalist states.

The last airing of Section 2, which ironically but not unsurprisingly was an attack on the Conservative pro-Biafra lobby launched by the Wilson administration in 1970, resulted in a wholesale acquittal and the appointment of a Committee of Inquiry (Franks) to investigate the workings of Section 2. (See Bunyan, *op. cit.*, p. 5, and Aitken for details.) Nothing save a stream of empty promises flowed from the Franks Report, however.

The origins of the ABC case have their roots entirely elsewhere, in a counter-attack by the British intelligence and security services against the importation from the United States of post-Watergate
investigative journalism, which had been adopted by radical and left journalists at a considerable speed during 1975. It was a logical outcome of the dramatically changed US popular perception of 'national security'—Nixon's ready phrase when a cover-up was needed—and of the US intelligence agencies themselves, whose part in the affair led eventually to the stream of investigations and reports in the US press and in the Senate and Congress. Although there have been past major initiatives against the British internal repressive agencies, particularly associated with the Committee of 100 (and in particular the 'Spies for Peace' who in 1963 disclosed the extensive network of secret emergency wartime headquarters), what had come from the United States was a new legitimacy for the idea that the secret agencies should become the subject of watchful press reporting and close democratic scrutiny.

The British left had a figurehead ready to hand for this new current in the person of ex-CIA agent Philip Agee, then domiciled in England whilst writing a major account of his CIA work in South America, CIA \textit{Diary}.\footnote{He became the CIA's first serious, 'whistle-blower' of the seventies, who renounced and denounced his own repressive activities. A good number have since followed; at the time too, a serious intellectual and factual study of the US intelligence community was written by Marchetti and Marks\footnote{which provided a useful stimulus to disclosures and investigations about the role of the CIA in Britain.} which provided a useful stimulus to disclosures and investigations about the role of the CIA in Britain.}

Agee became and remained, despite suspicion on the left about his book which was an admitted reconstruction, the figurehead of the movement to 'name names' of CIA agents; a philosophy based on the unexceptional idea that those personally engaged abroad by the CIA on covert and subversive work should be called to account by the peoples whose liberties, as often as not, they were a party to destroying.

Agee was not of course involved in the ABC case, or with the Official Secrets Act. But it was he whom—with another American Mark Hosenball—the Security Service targeted for their counter-attack. And it was from the Agee-Hosenball deportation case that the ABC arrests arose. Deportation orders against both men were announced by Home Secretary Merlyn Rees in November 1976, citing powers to deport 'aliens in the interests of national security'. The reasons given were vague in the extreme; in both cases, the preparation of material for publication that was 'harmful to the security of the United Kingdom' and in Agee's case the allegation also included alleged contact with 'foreign intelligence officers'. No
evidence to support charges against either person was ever produced; it may be assumed that, in all probability, no evidence in the judicial sense ever existed. I do not think it would be too harsh to say that Agee was selected because, as an alien, he could be punished by executive action; the signature of Labour's Home Secretary sufficed.

Hosenball's case was separate and appeared rather more trivial. He had worked on a series of articles in *Time Out* which dealt with the activities of CIA front organizations in Britain, notably the Forum World Features syndication agency. Subsequently, an anonymous informant from the Institute for the Study of Conflict, to which some of the feature agency's personnel had transferred, provided extensive files revealing the Institute's programme for setting up a subversive right-wing network of contacts within the intelligence agencies, police, military and civil services. Hosenball had been involved in that exposure, and in 1976 jointly worked with the present author on a two-page study of British and US electronic espionage operations in *Time Out* (*The Eavesdroppers*).

'The Eavesdroppers' was to feature prominently in a hearing in which Hosenball appealed against his deportation order; the publicity given to the case drew the attention of John Berry, a social worker and former employee (indirectly) of the massive Anglo-American electronic espionage organization, run by the US National Security Agency and Britain's Government. Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham. Berry contacted the Defence Committee to offer his assistance, and to offer to go public with his own view of the intelligence work with which he had been involved. Until the Agee-Hosenball case arose, he had not tried to relate his own socialism to the work he had formerly carried out in military intelligence.

From events at the time and later, there is little doubt that Berry's contact with the Defence Committee came at a time when much of the Committee's work was under the direct surveillance of MI5, the Security Service, whose proposal the original deportation orders had probably been. They intercepted letters and telephone lines, and they seem the only likely culprits for a series of disturbances early in 1977 involving thefts of papers and documents from Agee-Hosenball and ABC Defence Committee members.

As a result of Berry's contact with the Defence Committee, *Time Out* reporter Crispin Aubrey and I visited Berry for a three-hour conversation on 18 February 1977. Immediately thereafter, we were arrested, and charged later with offences under Section 2 of the
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OSA. Although we were arrested by the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police, it is clear that they were acting only in their accustomed role as fetchers and carriers for the secret agencies who lack police powers; either MI5 or the security and intelligence overlords, the Cabinet Office's Joint Intelligence Staff.

Following the arrests, we went successively through a preliminary hearing (committal) and a long trial at the Old Bailey. Although the facts of the case were well reported, there were a number of important events of a political rather than judicial character.

One of the first, and most significant, was the exercise by the Labour administration of the powers of oversight and veto which they possessed. Although the Home Secretary could (and, reported-ly, did) claim to have been caught unawares by the precipitate action of the security services in making arrests, the reverse was true of the Attorney General Samuel Silkin, whose written consent is statutorily necessary for any OSA trial to proceed. At this stage, therefore, the Labour government, through its law officer, had the opportunity to fulfil its promises to reform the OSA, by acting accordingly in the circumstances of the case. A veto on prosecution would also necessarily have served as a rebuke to the security services and as notice to rearrange their priorities.

No such veto was applied. Despite the instinctive distrust of the security services felt and indeed often expressed by many in the Labour Party, the political appointees have historically lacked any ability or will to manage them effectively. This had been clear in the same administration from a costly earlier débâcle when fourteen pacifists campaigning on behalf of the British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign had unsuccessfully been accused of conspiracy and incitement to disaffection under another notorious political statute. In our case, the Attorney General not only sanctioned the continuation of charges under Section 2, but permitted extensive and far more serious charges under the 'espionage' Section 1 of the Act. In all, nine charges were eventually brought; in the end, all the Section 1 charges were dismissed without going before a jury, and we were convicted on one Section 2 charge each, largely on a legalistic basis.

The Attorney General had later to defend his conduct in the forum of the Parliamentary Labour Party; he did so without allowing debate, spoke mostly bluster, but did tacitly acknowledge that he had been led up the garden path about the significance of the information involved in the case. He had allowed himself to be used as a patsy for the security services to try to rearrange the law of
official secrecy to their choosing. Several initiatives from that quarter had become apparent during the case.

The charges under Section 1 of the OSA had normally previously been confined to cases of espionage. However, the wording of the law, in alleging for example that Berry provided 'for a purpose prejudicial to the safety or interests of the state… information which might be useful to an enemy', is enormously flexible. Although the statute is clearly capable of extensive use for repressing political dissent, its implications have generally gone unnoticed by both libertarian and socialist groups. The requirement of a 'purpose prejudicial' to the state is almost invariably deemed to be the case in the circumstances of an arrest, and the accused has to prove his or her innocence; the 'information' concerned need not, unlike Section 2, be official or classified information obtained from a state employee; and the 'enemy' may be 'external or internal, potential or actual'. Like any similar repressive political legislation, it can only be successfully applied when the state can legitimate such activities, usually with reference to a popularly perceived threat, such as an 'internal …potential… enemy'. For this reason, the Section 1 charges in the ABC case wholly failed, as there was no involvement in the case of any subversive or terrorist group or foreign power. A related initiative under Section 1 had succeeded in 1963 against Committee of 100 activists who planned to sit down on a US Air Force nuclear bomber base. Their planned protest against nuclear weapons was held to be sabotage, and prison sentences were imposed after conviction of a Section 1 offence.

The ABC case did therefore reveal the intentions of the state security agencies towards the use of such political laws. In the end the initiatives failed, because there was no perceivable threat associated with ABC, whether a revolutionary organization or a foreign connection, and because the only consequences of a single conversation between two journalists and a soldier were hard to view as a dangerous event. (Compare for example the case of the Angry Brigade, where revolutionary anarchists were accused of a series of bomb explosions which had taken place.) ABC also benefited from the demystification resulting from the naming of 'Colonel B', and the consequent ridicule.

One of the new twists in official secrecy introduced in the ABC case was related, historically, to the Committee of 100 and the disarmament movement. The Spies for Peace exposure of the secret civil defence plans for nuclear war ('Regional Seats of Government') gave fire to the 1963 Aldermaston demonstration and has since
created a steady interest in the state's 'home defence' equipment and installations. A major product of this interest was a book published in 1970, Peter Laurie's *Beneath The City Streets*,\(^9\) which examined in some detail the nature of civil defence, and in particular deduced a great deal of useful information from open official sources, especially by observation. Major preparations by the state for internal or external warfare—and especially some of the arrangements made for emergency communications—proved amenable to analysis by detailed observation. Although *Beneath The City Streets* was a rather apolitical, journalistic tract, it attracted considerable attention on the libertarian left. It satisfactorily proved the thesis that 'civil defence is about the preservation of government' (the state) and not for offering succour to war survivors. Latterly, this point of view has been extended both in a revision of the same book, and elsewhere\(^{10}\) to a discussion of the counter-insurgency and counter-revolutionary preparations of the British state. After the Irish experience—interpreted as classic colonial counter-insurgency brought back home—more attention was paid to military and other defensive preparations being made within Britain for a 'strong state'—required to enforce a reduction of democracy in a time of capitalist crisis. In 1972, the partial resurrection of civil defence with a new brief for 'peacetime emergencies' and crises of various sorts, provided satisfactory evidence for this view. Since then, military 'anti-terrorist' and counter-insurgency exercises have considerably increased in number and scope.

Following Laurie's book, I conducted considerable research into the secret provisions made for the 'strong state'; in particular the communications systems and the secret purposes of the Post Office network of radio towers. This material was seized together with all my papers during a Special Branch raid on my home immediately after our arrests. When the Attorney General allowed the OSA charges to proceed against us, this material was examined closely, and a charge of 'collecting information concerning defence communications… which might be of use to an enemy' was alleged against me.

I have explained at some length the background of the researches which formed this 'collection' charge. If I do not do so, the political significance of the charge and the evidence presented would be difficult to interpret coherently. For the evidence produced was a mishmash of files, photographs, cuttings and maps—it was clear that the security authorities had no clear idea what the research was leading to; they had however formed a very clear view that it was a threat to the state.
To this end they constructed their case very simply. A Major-General, in charge of defence communications, viewed a selection of the material and vouched his 'professional opinion' that it might be 'directly useful to an enemy'. Very simply then, the elements of a new political offence were created. It was sufficient to possess information, of itself neither illegal, improperly obtained, official or even secret, if it constituted a 'collection' or 'jigsaw' from which an incomplete picture of 'secret' activities could be assembled. Since agents of a hostile power can safely do this exercise at their leisure, the offence here resides in the political idea which motivates such research.

When the ABC case came to trial this charge in fact collapsed very quickly and embarrassingly. Since the prosecution, as mentioned above, lacked the legitimation which could be provided by the existence of a subversive or hostile threat, the presentation of their evidence rapidly became ridiculous. The information I had gathered, dealt with piecemeal, was of course readily available in public. As witness after witness conceded this point, the prosecution rapidly lost any sense of purpose. Well before the critical witnesses appeared, or the fundamental nature of the charge was argued out in court, the state withdrew its evidence.

The 'collection' or 'jigsaw puzzle' charge was a sideshow from the main course of the trial, although it was the most advanced (and disastrous) new twist in political law-making introduced during the case, and its political implications remain severe. But the remaining eight charges which we faced continued for some time into the trial; all were concerned solely with the interview we had held. In the course of the interview, which had been tape-recorded by Aubrey, Berry talked about his army life, joining army Intelligence, subsequent disillusionment, and later politicization. Between 1966 and 1970 he had worked at a Sigint (Signals Intelligence, i.e. electronic monitoring) establishment of some size and importance in Cyprus, monitoring Middle Eastern communications for Anglo-American intelligence\textsuperscript{11}. During the conversation he discussed what he could recall of the work he had done, revealing little in the way of secret information that was not already known to those interested in the subject. The only contentious point to emerge (and which was revealed during the trial) was the apparent exchange of intelligence reports with SAVAK, the notorious secret police of Iran, arranged through the American agencies.

The significance of his remarks was not in their factual content but in the fact of his speaking at all, renouncing vows of (literally)
'indoctrination' which he and his comrades had had to take, over and above the normal provisions of secrecy. The indoctrination procedure was a necessary preliminary before being granted 'the need to know: about the Sigint organization and its activities.

Berry was, and intended to be, a whistleblower, and to encourage others to do so when their own consciences told them to speak out in the public interest. He did so specifically in the context of the repressive activities of the US intelligence agencies revealed during and after Watergate, and in the hope of making a positive contribution to the defence of Agee and Hosenball. The whistleblowing tradition has not hitherto been culturally recognized or applauded in Britain. There always have been and always will be 'leaks' from within the state apparatus, both principled and self-seeking. There have also been British whistleblowers who have aired and exposed other matters in less sensitive areas, albeit braving the 'Official Secrets Acts to do so. The most noteworthy recent example was a former senior civil servant in the Environment department who quite boldly invited prosecution for the publications of a book revealing the disobedience of the department to government instructions.13

To find a real parallel to John Berry, however, it is once again necessary to go back twenty years to the nuclear disarmament movement. Two students who had worked during a period of national service in British naval Sigint revealed in a magazine how many of the frequent cross-border disputes and incidents during the Cold War were the result of Western provocation deliberately engineered. Prosecuted under Section 2, both received short prison sentences. We were left in no doubt at the end of the day that encouraging 'whistleblowing' by others whose consciences left them uneasy was the almost only subversive aspect left in the whole affair. Sentencing John Berry to a six-month suspended prison sentence, for giving information to us, the trial judge stated: 'the law will not tolerate whistleblowers from our intelligence services who seek the assistance of press or other media to publish secrets'. (For our part Aubrey and I were given conditional discharges—in effect no penalty and no conviction, subject to review were we to commit a criminal offence during a two-year period.)

Here was notice that, although most of the prosecution had failed dramatically, the state institutions were determined to ensure that whistleblowing was not to become part of the British political tradition.

The course of the case against us in respect of the Berry interview
was marked by many unusual measures—ostensibly required for and justified by 'security', in actuality simple and crude techniques to whip up prejudice. A transcript of our conversation was analysed by military intelligence experts, and at a preliminary hearing of the case, we heard the evidence of the anonymous 'Colonel B'. The anonymity of this witness proved to be a most inept move. It was ordered by the intelligence authorities who for long have regarded any request for information on their activities, even arising in the liberal democratic forum, as inherently naive and subversive. Colonel Johnstone ('B') had been the administrative head of British Army Sigint, and pronounced that the material revealed by John Berry contained secret and top secret information and that its disclosure could cause 'exceptionally grave... damage' to the national interest. Later, forensically and legally, we destroyed this evidence almost totally. But that narrative belongs to the lore of the Bar rather than here. Some important political points do arise, however.

Forceful arguments were advanced and readily accepted for Johnstone's anonymity. When journalists on two magazines which had been prominent in supporting the ABC Defence Campaign, Peace News and the Leveller, revealed his name they were prosecuted, in the end unsuccessfully, for contempt of court. Significantly however, the revealing of the name did no harm whatsoever to the national interest, although it clearly damaged the credibility of the prosecution. When the case finally reached the Old Bailey for trial in September 1978, the prosecution indicated that they would need another, new, expert witness to extend Colonel Johnstone's no longer anonymous evidence. The person concerned, one of the Directors of GCHQ, was inevitably an even more secret figure, whose evidence could only be heard entirely in camera and whose identity needed to be masked as 'Mr C'!

It was a simpleminded, if Kafkaesque, extension of the ruse of 'Colonel B'. This time, however, Mr C was never to be seen. As the prosecution drew to its finale, the court decided that the bringing of the Section 1 'spying' charges was 'oppressive in the circumstances' of the case; in a round rebuke to Labour's Attorney, the judge had the prosecution withdraw, leaving only the three Section 2 charges on which we were eventually convicted.

Colonel Johnstone and his evidence gave a novel insight into the security and intelligence high command. Their operations and arguments were justified within a closed set of concepts which explicitly embraced a design for Anglo-American world hegemony, and an authoritarian internal model of the requirements of national
security which allowed little challenge of dictat from above. Johnstone found the very idea of even liberal democratic scrutiny or of interest in intelligence activities hardly comprehensible. He was unfamiliar even with the ready model of ministerial accountability to parliamentary democracy which normally serves civil servants and policemen as legitimation for their tasks.

Since the activities on which John Berry was engaged do not directly bear on internal repression in Britain or in other countries, the arguments about their political significance are not brief. I have tried to deal with them elsewhere.13

Public reaction at the end of the trial was almost exclusively concerned with the embarrassment of the Labour government, and it was anticipated that the Attorney General would have to justify his actions at length. (He had previously been shielded by the application of sub judice rules.) He did so only unwillingly and unhelpfully. It was also anticipated that pressure would mount for urgent reform of the OSA, at the very least.

There was no censure from the press or even the trial judge for the activities of the two journalists, myself and Aubrey. Berry's position was more equivocal but hardly unsatisfactory. To that extent, and despite our convictions, we regard the verdicts of the case as a victory.

We also had, we learned, the support of many of the jury that had convicted us. Four of them later apologized and explained the course of their decisions. The jury's views are important because they are the ultimate safeguard against a repressive regime and a vital product of libertarian radical tradition. The jury which convicted us had its sympathies firmly against the provisions of the Official Secrets Act. But they were unable on this occasion to escape from the immense authority which was impressed on them by the circumstances of Court 1 at the Old Bailey. In an almost satirical irony, the fundamental working-class sympathies of most of the members (to acquit) were overruled by the liberal instincts of a foreman whose young middle-class university-educated background most closely resembled that of two of the defendants (myself and Aubrey).

This was the jury of the second trial. We had already had an abortive first trial, which had been stopped after the publication of details of our unsuccessful attempts to remove the foreman of that jury. The defence had discovered at the start of the first trial that potential jurors had been vetted through police and Special Branch files, 'for loyalty'. All the names on the jury list had been secretly
made available six weeks early to the prosecution. It then strained coincidence, although coincidence it may be, when it was discovered that the foreman of that jury was a former member of the Special Air Service regiment, and had participated in counter-insurgency campaigns in Ireland and elsewhere. He made little secret of his strong views on the case, and intention to convict.\textsuperscript{14}

The ABC case was directly responsible for exposing this practice of jury vetting, and eliciting official disclosures on the nature and previous extent of the practice—generally in the case of political or terrorist trials, or cases of organized crime. Increasing attention by libertarians to the nature of the present jury system, and its preservation and strengthening, is one of the positive gains from the ABC case.\textsuperscript{15}

Throughout the case, the ABC Defence Campaign provided vital support, and organized fringe activity and protest to an extent which caused the Attorney General to comment that he had never previously experienced such a 'level of contempt of court'. The Campaign drew its strength mainly from those associated with radical or left journalism, and it did not attract the consistent support, as an issue, of the socialist left. Individual members of the SWP, Labour left and other groups gave strong support, but events such as local campaign meetings tended to be organized by libertarians. The National Union of Journalists gave unfailing and vital support from beginning to end, and twice took the case before the TUC obtaining (on the first occasion) its unanimous condemnation of the charges. Successful initiatives were taken within other unions, particularly those in the public sector, who already keenly appreciated the importance of the issues. The National Council for Civil Liberties organized a number of events around the issue, and has subsequently released studies of Official Secrecy and the jury system.\textsuperscript{16} A particularly important question within the NUJ was whether the union should support John Berry, a non-member. Arguments about the complementary importance of sources to journalism won the point, which was vital to the solidarity of both the individual defendants and political campaigning on the issue as a whole.

An inviting trap, when recounting the history of the case, is to fall into the Watergate idiom. The \textit{macho} loner journalist and his deep throats take on the Establishment and overthrow it. But Watergate, although it achieved important reforms and changes, some fundamental, did not alter the basic power relationships within US society—still less those operating internationally. The same is
obviously true of the ABC case. But it did further the awareness of the need to control the secret apparatus of the state.

The most immediate example of this has been Tony Benn's formation of a Labour NEC sub-committee to study the workings of the intelligence services. The committee, however, because of the exigencies of Labour's recent history has not met or reported at the time of writing.

The ABC case served to bolster, and eventually hearten, the libertarian cause. It has drawn attention and concern, as recounted above to matters of the reform of the OSA, 'Freedom of Information', the role of the government's Attorney, the vital importance of independent juries and open justice, without anonymous witnesses and secret hearings. The relationship to traditional socialist concerns is more tenuous. The labour movement continues to rely on basic industrial strength as its ultimate weapon, and is generally insensitive except at times of crisis to the subversive effects of the activities of secret police. Trade union leaders and Labour luminaries still subscribe to the notion of national security, with little, if any appreciation of its inherent requirement that individual civil rights and competing class interests be sacrificed to those of the dominant class. That, almost invariably, is what the 'national interest' is about. If an understanding of that can spread within the Labour movement, it will be a worthwhile ending to our encounter with the secret police.

NOTES

12. For an extended discussion of the British and US Sigint agencies and their political significance, see *The Eavesdroppers*, *op.cit*, and also

13. See *New Statesman*, *op. cit.*

