

On Her Majesty's Private Secret Service

Stephen Berry

The image of the British secret service agent which the British government would like to propagate is well exemplified by Ian Fleming's James Bond. Bond is portrayed as an accomplished womaniser, able to discourse knowledgeably on the finest wines whilst nonchalantly dealing hammer blows to the machinations of World Communism. Gradually, this picture is being replaced with one more in accord with reality. The typical British agent is in fact, a rampant homosexual, does not talk too much about drink, preferring instead to consume vast quantities of it and, when he finally gets around to doing some work, deals hammer blows on behalf of the Soviet State.

This judgement should surprise no one. John Bright, the leading Victorian classical liberal, described the British Empire as 'a vast system of outdoor relief' for the upper classes and the same judgement could have been made about the British Secret Service. Recruited from the elite schools and universities, its members were supposed to possess the unique style and character which typified the mythical English gentleman. But if it was believed that the sense of kinship provided by the old school tie would prove stronger than an ideological commitment to Communism, if it was assumed that the spirit of Beau Geste would run rings around the KGB, then disappointment was in store. Beginning in the 1930s, a whole series of colourful double agents (Burgess, MacLean, Philby, Vassal, Blake and Blunt are only some of those that we know about) have in their eccentric fashion revealed British Intelligence to be dilettantish and incompetent to an unbelievable degree. Under pressure, British Intelligence has widened recruitment and attempted to tighten security cheeks, but this leopard simply refuses to change its spots.

Anatomy of a Spy

One of the most recent examples of bungling concerned the case of Michael Bettany, convicted as a spy in 1984. He was the stuff of which Messiahs, not spies, are made. After enjoying a sudden conversion to Roman Catholicism at the age of sixteen, he went to university where he was defiantly traditionalist, refusing to make any concessions in clothes or manners to the 1960s generation. Because of his old fashioned ways he did not enjoy much success with the girls, but consoled himself by listening to Hitler's Nuremberg speeches on record. A friend recalled, "He was easily goaded and if ever rebuked he would storm off, goose-stepping and cursing in fluent German.

MI5 snapped him up as being just the man for them. During the summer of 1982 perhaps tiring of Roman Catholicism and Nazism, Bethany became a Communist. In October of that year he was arrested and fined on a drunk and disorderly charge in central London. The policeman reported that when he came up to Bettany. Our hero babbled, "I am a spy. I am a spy". Within days Bettany was in court again for failing to pay a railway ticket fine. If a police officer in Britain were to be found guilty of a criminal offence, he would automatically be suspended from duty and quite probably dismissed. Bettany's superiors at MI5 decided not to follow the example of the British Bobbies. Within two months, he was promoted to the ultra-sensitive 'Russian desk'. Four months later, Bettany was caught attempting to pass information to the Russians who, suspecting a ham-fisted attempt by MI5 to implicate embassy staff in London had ignored him.

Incredible incompetence perhaps? Peter Wright, an ex-spycatcher in MI5 thinks not. He believes that for the last 40 years MI5 has been penetrated from top to bottom by the KGB and he wants to publish a book which, he believes, will result in an investigation to purge MI5 of pro- Soviet elements.

Secret Societies can be Libertarian

Libertarians do not like secrecy. It is even rumoured that some libertarians believe that a libertarian society would have no secrets. It is true that there would be fewer secrets, but secrets there would be. A libertarian society would, by virtue of its stupendous wealth and enviable life-style, be an immensely attractive target for the statist villains of this world. The fact that this society would also by its nature be subversive to statist ideas would make it a likely candidate for pressure from outside. It would clearly be in the interests of this libertarian society to learn of the plans of states who were opposed to it. It is also clear that the methods by which this information is obtained should remain secret.

By analogy, it is clear that it is valuable for NATO to know the battle plans of the Warsaw Pact (and vice-versa), whilst the means of obtaining the plans should remain secret. These very necessities however, result in obvious failings. At the best of times a state monopoly means inefficiency. When that state monopoly is shrouded in secrecy, the problem of inefficiency is made much worse and the dangers to individual liberties increased. Much of the talk concerning efforts to rectify this situation is completely misguided. Some people demand that parliamentary supervision should replace ministerial supervision, but what evidence is there that what has been hidden from ministers will not also be hidden from a parliamentary committee?

One solution which might appeal to the present Tory government would be privatisation. The British government would then pay competing agencies according to the value of the information each agency produces. If it is argued that these agencies would not be secret enough, it can be pointed out that it is in the interests of any business to be efficient and, in this context that means being secret. If it is argued that the Soviet Union could buy information from an agency used by the West, it could be pointed out that the West is much wealthier than the Soviet Bloc and can afford to pay higher prices. Also, given the recent record of British Intelligence, any criticism of the ability of agencies to resist Soviet blandishment should be taken with a pinch of salt. It is in any case

probable that most worthwhile information is paid for by MI6 to freelancers who have no obvious loyalty to the British State. On the plus side is the fact that this arrangement would be much cheaper than running the present set-up.

Even conceding that on occasions, special agents such as Richard Sorge (who told Stalin that the Japanese would not invade Russia in 1941) have been spectacularly successful, their activities are undoubtedly overrated. Wars are typically won by those states which are most powerful militarily and economically. A few James Bonds running around never made much difference either way. Sir Compton Mackenzie, the novelist, was in British Intelligence in Greece during the First World War. Highly critical of his employers, he wrote a novel *Water on the Brain* lampooning every aspect of espionage. He commented, "The amount of money wasted in subsidising worthless information all over the world should keep every taxpayer resentfully awake at night". It still should.

Free Life