

British secret agents named on Internet: Former MI6 officer Richard Tomlinson accused of leak

Mike Ingram
18 May 1999

British security services were thrown into crisis last week when a list containing the names of 116 purported MI6 intelligence officers was posted on the Internet.

The exact source of the list is still disputed. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook declared it to be the work of former MI6 agent Richard Tomlinson, who Cook said had an "irrational, deep-seated sense of grievance" against his former employer. However, Tomlinson has consistently denied being the source of the list and offered to return to Britain to stand trial if he is guaranteed bail. In an e-mail to the *Times* newspaper, he raised the possibility that MI6 itself may have published the details to discredit him and "stop in its tracks my legal action against them".

Tomlinson, 36, has British and New Zealand citizenship. He was educated at Cambridge University, England, where he was awarded a first class honours degree in aeronautical engineering. He then took a Masters degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he was a Kennedy Memorial Scholar. His academic background, together with his training in a Territorial (part-time) division of the Special Air Services (SAS) and a penchant for adventure (Tomlinson once crossed the Sahara on a motorbike), made him a star recruit for MI6. In a biographical piece on his web site Tomlinson writes:

"In 1991, I was recruited as a fast-stream intelligence officer into the British Secret Intelligence Service, more commonly known as MI6. After completing the six-month initial training course with the highest marks ever achieved, I was posted to the Eastern European department of MI6 to operate undercover against Russia and Serbia. In 1993, I was posted for six months to Bosnia as the sole MI6 officer on the ground during the Bosnian civil war. On my return to the UK, I worked undercover against the Iranian intelligence service".

By 1995, at the end of his three-year probationary period, Tomlinson found himself dismissed, without warning and with no explanation. His attempts to take his dismissal to an Industrial Tribunal were predictably refused, on grounds of national security.

Since that time, Tomlinson has become a prominent

campaigner for the greater accountability of the security services, and for the scrapping of the Official Secrets Act. In 1996, he showed a five-page synopsis of a book he had written about his experiences inside the security services to the commissioning editor of an Australian publisher. This led to his arrest in 1997, and conviction for breaking the Official Secrets Act. He was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment in a maximum-security jail.

After his release, Tomlinson fled Britain, believing that MI6 were seeking to re-arrest him at the earliest opportunity. Tomlinson claims that since leaving Britain he has been on the receiving end of a "vindictive campaign of harassment", with MI6 "using their influence with the intelligence services of other countries. They used false pretences to persuade the French intelligence service (the DST) to arrest and beat me in Paris in August 1998. I was detained for 38 hours, and my computer equipment was illegally taken from me. This equipment was not returned until six months later."

After being released, Tomlinson decided to leave France for his native New Zealand, but "a few days after my arrival, MI6 persuaded the New Zealand Intelligence Service to again detain and search me in Auckland. More computer equipment was confiscated from me, and again was not returned until six months later."

Tomlinson then decided to move to Australia, but was denied a visa by the authorities. He claims this is again due to intervention by MI6. As a New Zealand citizen, he would normally not require a visa for Australia. Tomlinson then moved to Switzerland.

How, within just six years, could someone once so trusted they were the only MI6 officer in Bosnia during the civil war become so antagonistic towards the British security services? The only explanation offered for Tomlinson's dismissal is that his superiors regarded him to be a "loose cannon". At the time, his girlfriend had just died from cancer and he had told MI6 that he had become suicidally depressed.

Anger at being dismissed under such circumstances might be a significant factor in his subsequent actions. More interesting than such supposed motives is the substance of his criticisms.

Like other so-called “whistle blowers” before him, Tomlinson is not an opponent of the British state or its intelligence agencies. His concern is how these should function in the changed circumstances of the post-Cold War world. In an article in the *Guardian* in November 1998 Tomlinson wrote:

"A foreign intelligence service needs an untarnished image at home if it is to be trusted by its agents overseas. If public confidence is lost, the lifeblood of intelligence work is lost". To restore this confidence, Tomlinson argues, the intelligence services must be made more accountable.

"The Intelligence and Security Committee needs to be elevated to select committee status, so that members [of parliament] can cross-examine the heads of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ when things go wrong. That way, Messrs Lander, Spedding and Richards [the respective heads of the three agencies], will take good care that things do not go wrong in the first place. With an adequate and fair internal complaints procedure, plaintiffs would not be forced to go to the media. Where there are security concerns, the services should ensure that they stay in touch with former staff members and ensure they are helped in their new careers.

"The Official Secrets Act needs reforming to reflect the changing world order. It should be replaced with a Freedom of Information Act, and a distinction made between harmless revelations, those genuinely dangerous, and those in the public interest."

Prior to the election of the Blair government, these proposals would have found support within the Labour Party. While in opposition, the abolition of the Official Secrets Act was even one of Labour's demands. This law imposes a lifetime ban on intelligence operatives speaking publicly about any aspect of their work inside the security services. It has been widely criticised and was found to be incompatible with European law.

An interesting contrast can be seen between Robin Cook's present insistence on upholding the state's secret operations and comments he made 13 years ago. In a December 1986 issue of *New Statesman* he wrote, “Today's security services are not pitted against the KGB [Soviet intelligence], they parallel it in the surveillance of their domestic population”. On the question of reform of the service he asked “whether it would not be simpler merely to legislate for the abolition of the security services”, drawing attention to Peter Wright's revelation “that MI5 provides no discernible service to the public, even in the intervals between swapping personnel with the Russians and destabilising democratically elected governments”.

Today, however, not only are Labour in government but they are also presiding over a brutal war against the people of Yugoslavia.

There is much speculation as to what damage the publication of the MI6 list—which includes the names of operatives in the Balkans—has done to British covert operations. One thing is certain: the speed with which Labour has moved gives good reason to examine Tomlinson's allegations.

To back up his demand for change, he has detailed some of the worst excesses of the security forces. In September 1998, he wrote a letter* to John Wadham, head of the civil rights organisation *Liberty* and also Tomlinson's solicitor. The letter said, "I would like to bring to your attention a proposal by MI6 to assassinate President Milosevic of Serbia. My motive in doing this is to draw to your attention the casual and cavalier attitude that many MI6 officers have to British and international law. The officer who wrote this proposal clearly could (and in my view, should) be charged with conspiracy to murder. He will no doubt escape unpunished, like many other MI6 officers who routinely break the law."

Tomlinson goes on to speak about a two-page minute entitled "The need to assassinate President Milosevic of Serbia", which seeks to justify his killing on the grounds that Milosevic was providing arms and support to President Radovan Karadzic in the breakaway Bosnian *Republika Serbska*. Three possible scenarios are outlined:

1. To train and equip a Serbian paramilitary opposition group to assassinate Milosevic.
2. To use the "Increment", a small cell of the SAS and SBS [Special Boat Service], selected and trained to carry out operations exclusively for MI5/MI6.
3. To kill Milosevic in a staged car crash.

The letter concludes:

"I ask you to investigate this matter fully. I believe that legal action should be taken against Fishwick [the author of the memo] to show other MI6 officers that they should not assume that they can murder and carry out other illegal acts with impunity."

Far from the proposal to murder Slobodan Milosevic being the product of a cavalier attitude on the part of an individual officer, it is completely in line with imperialist policy in the Balkans. Within eight months of Tomlinson's letter, the assassination of the Serb president has been revealed as the unstated aim of the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia by the targeting of his residences for bombing.

*The full text of Tomlinson's letter to Wadham can be found at:
<http://www.inside-news.ch/shayler!/milosev.htm>



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](http://www.wsws.org/contact)