

Following Edward Snowden's revelations of massive spying:

## UK parliament's intelligence and security committee cancels questioning of UK spy agencies

Robert Stevens

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Today's scheduled televised questioning of the intelligence agencies by the UK parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) has been cancelled and postponed, with no plausible explanation, until the autumn.

The ISC, established by the Intelligence Services Act 1994, is tasked with overseeing the work of the intelligence services. It is composed of former ministers, appointed by the prime minister, in consultations with the Leader of the Opposition--the Labour Party. Its workings are kept secret and the prime minister filters its reports to Parliament.

The session was to have been the first ever public and televised questioning of representatives of the various spy agencies--MI5, MI6 and possibly the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

According to Monday's *Guardian*, the ISC delayed the event "because it says it is too busy focusing on the murder of Lee Rigby and revelations about GCHQ's activities." Rigby was hacked to death in May near London's Woolwich army barracks, and two men have been charged with his murder. The role of the intelligence services, who knew both suspects intimately and whom they even sought to recruit, is yet to be explained.

The decision of the ISC to postpone the questioning is extraordinary in light of the mass of revelations, exposed by former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden, regarding the gigantic scale of the spying operations on the UK's population organised through GCHQ. Since Snowden's exposures first came to light, nearly a month ago,

nothing has been said by any senior government figure or opposition Member of Parliament, about the grave implications of the activities of GCHQ and the other intelligence agencies.

On June 7 the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP, issued a perfunctory statement, "The Intelligence and Security Committee is aware of the allegations surrounding data obtained by GCHQ via the US Prism programme. The ISC will be receiving a full report from GCHQ very shortly and will decide what further action needs to be taken as soon as it receives that information."

Since that statement the committee has not uttered a word, even as more and more devastating revelations have emerged about the nefarious operations of the intelligence agencies.

The government has claimed it is ignorant of Snowden's claims that the NSA's mass spying programme, Prism, is being used to spy on Britons.

On June 16 the *Guardian* reported, again via documents made available by Snowden, that GCHQ intercepted and hacked foreign politicians' communications at the 2009 G20 summit.

On June 22, Snowden revealed that GCHQ and the NSA record the content of phone calls, email messages, Facebook posts and browser histories of tens of millions of people. Via a programme called Tempora, GCHQ accesses fiber-optic cables through which all UK Internet traffic passes in order to monitor all outgoing and incoming communications.

The scale of such spying is almost unimaginable. Some 600 million "telephone events" are monitored by

GCHQ each day by tapping over 200 fiber-optic cables, including those that connect the UK to the US. According to the *Guardian* this is “equivalent to sending all the information in all the books in the British Library 192 times every 24 hours”.

The refusal of the ISC to adhere to basic democratic norms is exemplified in its cancellation of today’s scrutiny meeting, without even deputy prime minister Nick Clegg being informed.

On Monday, at his monthly press conference, Clegg, blithely unaware of the ISC’s decision to cancel the meeting, declared, “I cannot stress enough how important I think it that the ISC has got the new powers. Don’t underestimate what a break with convention it is that you have got the heads of the intelligence agencies going to the ISC this Thursday to give televised evidence.”

The “new powers” Clegg referred to are the ISC’s rights to call for evidence, including secret documents from the intelligence agencies and, purportedly, to initiate investigations without the permission of the government or the agencies themselves.

That the ISC refuses to exercise its new powers, or even comment about the allegations of a spying programme without precedent in history, reveals that the ruling elite is engaged in a monumental cover-up.

Whilst refusing to confirm what he knew about the spying programme, Clegg turned reality on its head, stating, “I don’t think we should be surprised at all that our intelligence agencies use technology to keep us safe.” Prime Minister David Cameron expressed similar sentiments.

No other newspaper has reported the ISC’s cancellation of today’s scheduled hearing, even though they are well aware of its significance.

On June 9, the *Independent* reported that ISC members were to meet in Washington the following week with NSA director General Keith Alexander. It stated the NSA “stands accused of secretly mining data from nine of the world’s top internet companies through its top-secret Prism programme.”

In the same article former MI5 officer and whistleblower Annie Machon explained how intelligence agencies intercepted and shared data precisely to “circumvent” domestic laws. She said, “In the UK, if GCHQ wanted to intercept a UK citizen’s phone number they need to get a warrant from the

Foreign Secretary. However, if the NSA wants to intercept something abroad, they can do it perfectly legally without a warrant and share it with GCHQ and vice versa.”

However, the nominally liberal *Independent* has not followed up this line of investigation since then.

Last month the WSWS reported that immediately following the first Snowden revelations, UK Defence officials moved rapidly to censor the entire media. The response of virtually all the media since has been to carry out the government’s instructions to the letter.

And even the *Guardian*’s more defiant stance is guided by concerns that confidence in the capitalist state are being dangerously undermined by the ISC’s actions. It said that making “bits of their work” visible was “absolutely indispensable to cultivating confidence in the stuff that has to stay secret.”

It added that the scheduled questioning of the intelligence chiefs “would have been a startling demonstration of this new age of accountability, an opportunity for open discussion of serious questions of spying and surveillance.”

The *Guardian* warned, “all the recent effort to show the ISC really does have the strength of purpose to hold the intelligence agencies to account has been undermined just when the need for a muscular investigatory and accountability regime is overwhelming.”

This episode demonstrates that the claim that ISC oversight of the intelligence services means it is in any way democratically accountable is patently untrue, as are the *Guardian*’s claims that all that is needed is more so-called “transparency”.



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