

UK intelligence defends mass surveillance as Britain is accused of spying on Germany

Chris Marsden
8 November 2013

A committee of Britain's parliament, the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), yesterday questioned the head of the internal security service MI5, Andrew Parker; the director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) Sir Iain Lobban; and Sir John Sawers, head of the foreign intelligence department MI6.

The hearing was meant to demonstrate an unprecedented openness and accountability to parliament of the secret state apparatus in the wake of the revelations, by US National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden, that the UK agencies worked with the US to monitor the Internet and phone activity of the majority of the world's citizens.

It was little more than political pantomime, meant to provide Britain's spooks with a platform from which to justify their actions by constantly citing the threat posed by terrorism.

Questions were fielded by loyal representatives of the state such as Committee chairman and top Conservative Sir Malcolm Rifkind. Also on the committee are Labour MPs Hazel Blears and George Howarth, Lord Butler of Brockwell, the top civil servant who previously distinguished himself by leading an inquiry that whitewashed the lies used by the Blair Labour government and the intelligence services to justify the 2003 Iraq War; former Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell; Tory MPs Mark Field and Julian Lewis; and Michael Ancram, now Lord Lothian, the former Conservative Party chairman. The committee has already cleared MI5 of any wrongdoing in the 197 specific intelligence reports it has looked at.

It was, in short, the equivalent of intelligence superstars being quizzed by a group of adoring fans.

For one and a half hours, the top spies were given

their chance to issue numerous sound-bites portraying *themselves and their agents* as the victims of an historic abuse by Snowden.

"The work we do is addressing directly threats to this country, to our way of life and to the people who live here," declared Parker. There had been 330 prosecutions for international terrorism since 9/11, he said and 34 plots had been disrupted since the 7/7 terrorist bombings in London in 2005. This good work was being endangered by Snowden and the *Guardian* newspaper publishing his revelations regarding GCHQ's Tempora programme, he implied.

In reply to a question by Blears on whether GCHQ had used its contacts with the United States to circumvent British law, Lobban said his agency acted wholly within the law. "We do not spend our time listening to the telephone calls or reading the emails of the majority. That would not be proportionate, that would not be legal, and we would not do it," he baldly declared.

When asked why the public had not been entitled to know about the mass surveillance programmes and had only found out about them via the *Guardian*, Lobban said some things were "necessarily secret" and "should remain secret". Secret did not mean sinister. The laws were drafted to be technology-neutral and the draftsmen "did a pretty good job," he said.

Rifkind, regarding the *Guardian's* decision to publish Snowden's revelations, offered that they had been made in general terms and have not named names. Sawers would have none of it. Journalists are not particularly well-placed to make judgements on what was safe, he said. "The leaks from Snowden have been very damaging. They have put our operations at risk.... Al-Qaida are lapping it up."

Rifkind asked Parker about his having called

revelations such as the *Guardian*'s a "gift" to terrorists and questioned whether either he or Lobban could give specific examples. Parker replied that he could not do so publicly but would do in private.

Terrorist groups in the Middle East and Afghanistan had been discussing the Snowden revelations and had discussed moving to other "communications packages" as a "direct consequence of what has been referred to in the press," Lobban asserted. "Uncovering terrorist cells, revealing people shipping materials or expertise around the world, battling online sexual exploitation of children, all that is in a much weaker place than it was before the revelations."

He, too, did not provide any example of how Snowden and the *Guardian* had apparently aided not only terrorists but sexual predators and paedophiles.

The one and a half hours having been exhausted, all patted themselves on the back for a job well done. Except few outside of parliament's rarefied environs and some slavishly supportive newspaper editorial offices would have believed a world of what was said.

Millions of working people, especially the younger generation, view Snowden as a hero for having exposed a vast criminal conspiracy against democratic rights that they know has nothing to do with combating terrorism.

Moreover, even as the ISC met, the illegal activities of the UK intelligence services overseas were leading to an unprecedented breakdown in relations between Britain and Germany.

The day before, the head of the German parliament's own intelligence committee, Thomas Oppermann, had called for inquiries into alleged spying by the British embassy in Berlin. His committee had asked both Germany's law enforcement services and its intelligence services to investigate the issue.

"Spying carried out from the British embassy would be a scandal and a crime," said Oppermann, a Social Democrat who chairs the Bundestag's intelligence committee.

"We have asked the law enforcement agencies to investigate. We have also asked the German secret services to look into espionage by allies. From now on we work on the principle 'Trust is good, monitoring is better'."

On Tuesday, British ambassador Simon McDonald had been summoned to meet Foreign Minister Guido

Westerwelle and other leading government figures.

The moves followed a story in the *Independent* newspaper reporting that a structure on top of the embassy is an electronic listening post or "spy nest". The report was based on documents leaked by Snowden. Opened in 2000, the new building on Wilhelmstrasse is close to Germany's parliament and Chancellor Angela Merkel's office.

Germany is presently seeking to speak to Snowden, who has been forced into asylum in Russia, over allegations that the US Embassy in Berlin's entire top floor is a monitoring station and had targeted Chancellor Merkel's phone since 2002. *Der Spiegel* reported that the US embassy's roof was used by a special unit of the NSA.

Britain is now in the frame alongside the US for this crime, also. The German Foreign Ministry's European Department pointed out to McDonald that the "interception of communications from the premises of a diplomatic mission would be behaviour contrary to international law".

Prime Minister David Cameron did not comment on the allegations of spying on the Bundestag. But he told parliament last month that leaders of the European Union should stop complaining about surveillance conducted by GCHQ and the NSA, which had saved their citizens from terrorist attacks. In the same speech, he accused Snowden and "newspapers helping him" of aiding terrorists and threatened to use injunctions and Defence Advisory Notices if the media did not "demonstrate some social responsibility."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact