

Lobster 60

Sir John Sawer's speech and some aspects of SIS PR

Corinne Souza

An article in *Lobster* ten years ago claimed that SIS would not see its centenary (1909-2009). *Lobster* was right. SIS Chief Sir John Sawer's speech on 28 October 2010 – a public first – was a closing statement, even if the new chief cleverly made it look like an opening one.¹ In much the same way as the influence of 'big oil' is in decline because, with the exception of Washington, everybody else recognised the environment debate, so too has 'big' espionage collapsed. The last of the Cold War spook agencies with leading brand status to topple in ignominy like the rest of them was SIS: in its case because of the illegal and immoral invasion of Iraq, and allegations of complicity in torture, rendition and other issues.

The condemnation of spook behaviour, led by activists, some journalists and politicians, and some supporting 'silent lobbying' by honourable men and women at all levels of Britain's judiciary and public service, including the spooks, delivered a rebuke so deafening that it has led to a once-in-a-generation catastrophic collapse of SIS's reputation. Nothing gives a new chief more power or as much room for manoeuvre as this sort of circumstance. Sir John made clear his belief that he has the people and the relationships for SIS to recover. ('We work with over 200 partner services around the world

¹ Sir John defined his products. No intelligence chief does this because they change according to local markets and conditions.

with hugely constructive results.')

PR distraction

In the meantime, non-spook colleagues can use hideous allegations of complicity in torture, as a PR distraction. The real crisis was never SIS's reputation, as poor as this had become, the tragedy of the innocents, or indeed the guilty now confirmed in their hatreds, but the unasked question: 'Do the spooks represent the British people and their values, or the state and some particularly nasty individuals within it?' The fact that the majority of the public did not know the question existed when confined to the spooks, let alone that until Sir John's speech no answer had been given, is an example of this country's state censorship and finest top spin.

This is one of the reasons why we have historically succeeded in avoiding revolution – making a virtue of 'evolution' is perception management – but it is also a real time example of an ad hoc 'fall guy' PR state construct.² The fall guy in this case was SIS, which was in trouble anyway. It could just as easily have been some other organ of state. Its purpose was to distract attention from the real question to which the people do know the answer: does the British state represent the people and their values, or does it represent a whole bunch of crooked businessmen, politicians and the like and theirs?

The 'noise' honourably generated by activists about torture and the spooks has been used to divert attention away from that for which the spooks were not responsible – corruption of the state machine – even if at one time some spooks or their assets were obscenely well-rewarded

² Not all fall guys are underdogs. This is the value of the construct: it can be used against soft or strong targets. The Americans used the same trick against BP following the Gulf of Mexico spill.

facilitators – e.g. the BAE debacle.³

SIS Presentation

As a chastened, and in due course, aggregated national spook alliance sorts itself out,⁴ Sir John admirably pulled his organisation away from the past, staking Britain's future not in America's long war but in alternative thought leadership: he is the only global intelligence chief to be able to broadcast live on all media his abhorrence of torture.⁵ This ongoing fight is as significant a battle as the one against slavery, today's vested interests no different to the slave owners and slave traders of yesteryear.

As a result of the speech, SIS is now able to offer a gold standard choice distinguishing it from others. As a competitor pitch it was a clear, targeted invitation to the honourable and the best to join Britain in common cause. In this respect, it was one of the most memorable, moral and official British 'Fuck-You-Neanderthals' in years. Including to those in this country.

Control Principle

This is why it was a disappointment to watch Sir John sink into litigation lobbying in the hope that the judicial process will

³ The same thing happened to commercial lobbyists when the state was the cause of the problem having created the political information market in the first place, controlling the cartel. Similar parallels vis-a-vis the state can be made with the private security industry and military consultancies. Allow one issue to unravel, they collapse into and collide with each other.

⁴ Sir John said: 'The next five years will see us intensifying our collaboration.....' Convergence of services always results in greater consolidation – aggregation. A spook name change cannot be far off.

⁵ Sir John gave his speech while a former Mongolian torture chief is being held on an international arrest warrant in Wandsworth prison. Mongolia is seen as a strategic ally 'not least because of its geographical position sandwiched between Russia and China', *The Independent*, 5 November 2010.

continue to look favourably upon what is known as the 'Control Principle': that intelligence material provided by one country to another should remain confidential to the country providing it, and it should never be disclosed, directly or indirectly, by the receiving country without the provider's permission.

Sir John did not even acknowledge the legitimacy of the other side's arguments as they defend that which is central to British law. If nothing else, this was poor PR. In PR, omission is a mechanism to force polarisation. It is an instrument of authoritarian command – not something Sir John should have exposed, given he was talking to civilians.

He was so intent on being loyal to his friends that by using the phrase 'Control Principle' twice, he bumped up the number of times he mentioned the word 'control', in a short speech, to seven. This is plain silly in a statement to post-leadership civilian Britain even though abbreviating it to 'the Principle' would have been a spin too far.

Because the spooks have allowed appalling miscarriages of justice to go uncorrected, a pragmatic arrangement will eventually end. This is bad news: some very decent people work for lousy regimes. This way, they feed their families and serve their co-patriots as best they can. If, for their own honourable reasons, they are also working with the Brits, the Control Principle (CP) is of incalculable comfort and protection because they are situated within some pretty nasty efficient administrations. CP removal exposes them and their families to the possibility of appalling retribution.

CP also prevents an SIS competitor-ally from poaching or undermining them, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

Evolving terrorism language

Top down language is always a give-away and can be a pleasing indication of progress. So, for example, in Professor

Jeffery's reference work, *MI6, the history of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909 – 1949*, there is an example of the huge lobbying pressure that the educator – a crucial spook role – would have been under when writing it. On page 689 he consigns militant Zionists intent on violence fifty years ago to civilian 'groups' and military 'units' involved in 'sabotage operations' – which is how the Allies explained their similar work in the Second World War – even though British authorities of the day described militant Zionists intent on violence as terrorists, in the same way as militant Islamists intent on violence today are also described as terrorists.⁶

Now turn to Sir John's speech and see how, also as a result of lobbying, including women's groups whose opinions are given parity by an intelligence chief for the first time – he has moved the terrorist debate on.⁷ Instead of the simplistic demonisation of recent years, and while remaining neutral, he recognised some of the reasons behind it.:

'There is no one reason for the terrorist phenomenon. Some blame political issues like Palestine or Kashmir or Iraq. Others cite economic disadvantage. Distortions of the Islamic faith. Male supremacy

Given precedents – e.g. Irgun and more recently terrorist groups in Ireland – it can be only a matter of time before negotiations are opened with Al-Qaeda. By key-wording, Sir John provided spook PR teams a vehicle by which they could create a base reputation pulse score, allowing for subsequent

⁶ Terrorism/bombing of the King David Hotel, 1946: in July 2006, the British Ambassador in Tel Aviv, and the Consul-General in Jerusalem, condemned Israel's commemoration: 'We do not think that it is right for an act of terrorism, which led to the loss of many lives, to be commemorated.' *Sunday Times* 20 July 2006.

⁷ Language evolution: See how the term 'rogue state' has been dropped since some say it can be used against the UK, in favour of 'failing' state.

measurement of issues in order to monitor or influence them.⁸

Non-verbal PR

Sir John also got his non-verbal PR right on 28 October, enabling him to get his various messages across to the global publics he hoped would be viewing him. Everything would have been considered including the time of day that he spoke. Out went dated British tailoring. In came British style, of great consequence overseas where a fashion frump cuts no ice. The light blue colour of his civilian clothing was appropriate for the hot climates where some of his key audiences were based. Delivering his statement from Reuters' London office, he stood at a lectern like a cutting-edge trainer in stylish 'Strictly Come Spooking' mode. Behind him, instead of a Union flag – too militaristic – was the logo of the Society of Editors. His photo released to the press was a non-dominant half-body shot taken from a soft angle.⁹ In a cosy real time newsblog immediately after the speech, the *Guardian* correspondent summarised the main points, parcelling out each of Sir John's key issues to separate media or newspapers including a tweet from Channel 4.

No information about the Society of Editors was given – a PR ploy ensuring that interested parties' googled it. If they did so, they discovered that prestigious speakers lined up for

⁸ It may make the reader wince but a retailer's reputation-monitoring and taking action on consumer issues and biggest complaints is no different to what the spooks are doing re: say, torture. For example, a reputational pulse score – if one is being taken by SIS – for, say, the *Daily Telegraph's* full page coverage of Sir John's speech, would be lower than hoped because of non-related headlines on the facing page beside Sir John's photograph.

⁹ International relations students find photo PR useful: e.g. state photographs of captured terrorists which are no longer demonic. National leaders use it to talk to their people, offering in the process a snapshot of their society's different levels of development: Prime Minister Putin showing off his biceps; intelligence chief Sawers photographed by his wife in his speedos.

its annual conference included Alexander Lebedev, the Russian proprietor of important British newspapers, and Ellis Watson, CEO of Simon Cowell's Syco Entertainment. Subtext: British spooks have access to international media and entertainment elites, a crucially influential global sector which have overtaken, say, Hollywood movie moguls.

Ostensibly part of a chieftain rolling programme – Sir John's speech followed those given by the director of GCHQ and directors general of MI5 – the statement was the finale to an impressive three pronged SIS PR campaign. In addition to Sir John's talk, this comprised the September launches of John le Carré's latest novel *Our Kind of Traitor* and Professor Jeffery's book mentioned above.

The subliminal messaging – Sir John wrote forewords to both – was SIS's association with high status civilians whose occupations and attributes have world-wide followings or significant niche networks. The two men complemented each other – patrician Englishman, scruffy Irishman. It included the cover design colours of their books (black and gold; red and gold) which 'talk' to key listeners abroad. The jacket to Professor Jeffery's in particular looked as if it had been designed to knock out others.

Publication was perfectly timed for Christmas buyers, the markets maturing six months down the track sustaining separate dialogue streams around – when they fall due – the verdict of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, and Sir Peter Gibson's into allegations that SIS was complicit in the torture of detainees.¹⁰ Every gizmo under the sun was used to launch the books – the bill picked up by the private sector, not the taxpayer – in a marketing campaign that was traditional, experiential, digital and impressively expensive.

¹⁰ 'Resolution' either way of torture allegations will concentrate minds on the present, letting SIS off the hook re: any other misconduct long into the past, the lives trashed, including those of patriotic British businessmen.

The books by Professor Jeffery and John le Carré Professor Jeffery's book was linked directly to the MI6 James Bond website offering free copies in answer to the question: 'What is the name of the London tube station closest to the SIS/MI6 HQ'. In addition, the site played a YouTube video of Sir John's speech, a pretty Asian girl in the frame, interspersed with action shots from the latest James Bond movie.¹¹

The book itself, errors and omissions excepted, sets out as faithfully as possible old loyalties and prejudices, creating a base document which invites comparisons with British foreign policy today. This provides Sir John with the hooks he requires to flag-up modernisation – e.g. changing attitudes towards terrorism as evidenced by evolving language (see above).

Simultaneous to the non-fiction, the movie of John le Carré's fiction was announced which, if it is faithful to the novel, will showcase the 'good' British spook, unable to defeat the wicked – classic underdog appeal which works across all continents and cultures. Le Carré himself used his global celebrity to give a punishing round of 'last' interviews including one to Channel 4. In this he skilfully placed the 'good' British spook wholly at the public's – not the state's – side, which is where Sir John is repositioning his staff.

In a bravura performance, the eighty-year old le Carré forcefully set off a round of complementary viral sound-bites, some recycled – 'we spoke truth to power' – and some new, creating sound-bite and PR collateral for the future. Speaking as a former interrogator, he was contemptuous of anything other than 'sweet interrogation'; and expressed the belief that to do a distasteful job, a 'pastoral connection' was the ideal: i.e. he condemned torture and had the credibility to do

¹¹ Question: how do you give a YouTube video legs? Answer: you remove it. Keep in mind that *The Sunday Times* reported 'Sawers wants to phase out the image of the MI6 officer as a globetrotting James Bond figure who undertakes glamorous missions abroad.' 17 October 2010.

so.¹² He also condemned Russian oligarch corruption and complicity at the highest levels of British politics, as well as setting out the task ahead: 'our next job is to deal with the excesses of capitalism'; i.e. the PR message was that the spooks are the people's friend not their enemy.

Britain's brand

Sir John gave his speech when Britain's overall reputation in some parts of the world is low.¹³ Two companies with which SIS prestige is also linked have sunk: BP has lost its status as the world's biggest non-state oil producer. De La Rue, a one-time British world leader with a licence to print bank notes for countries across the globe, is collapsing under falsified test certificates.

It's a new world order

The new world order also causes anxieties. In the latest version of the scramble for Africa, middle class Africans have to be airbrushed. If water is the new oil in some parts of the world, people in pre-consumer societies are the new oil in others. African countries are always presented as basket cases because Britain needs Africa to need Britain and therefore has to portray it as needy. An existing and growing middle class Africa has to be airbrushed out of the picture in

¹² Parts of Mr le Carre's performance were the best piece of ham acting in years.

¹³ Canada's former Prime Minister Paul Martin who eradicated his country's debt by harsh reductions in public spending, said that he believes Britain's decision to increase foreign aid funding has been recognised 'throughout the world' and will pay 'huge dividends' for the UK, not least in attracting business and influencing public policy in Africa. *The Independent*, 31 October 2010.

consequence. ¹⁴ In fact, in consumer PR terms, Britain is running a loyalty programme (Aid budget), paid for by the taxpayer, as part of its soft power initiative to guarantee new markets and influence. History, usually crucial to soft power cannot be used. Instead, Africa's nu-history will lower the status of the independence movements and begin instead with, say, genocide, followed by reconstruction courtesy of the West. Unlike in Britain, where personal history (genealogy) is the new sportism,¹⁵ Africa will not 'do' history.

The scramble for the continent is about more than stealing its mineral wealth. While at the moment some African countries suffer from Al Qaeda training up new recruits, over time this will subside. What will not go away is Islam: while some parts of Africa will remain Christian, the predominant faith will remain Muslim not least because the implosion of the Church of England in Africa pretty much leaves only the Vatican as Islam's faith challenger which, incidentally is the case world-wide. This is why 'the West' has thrown itself into promoting the antiracism/religious tolerance messages, in much the same way, as *Lobster's* Tom Easton has pointed out, that the Israeli lobby allied itself a generation ago in common

¹⁴ This nu-history is most evident when seeing how Rwanda is presented today. Fifteen years ago, Rwanda suffered one of the deadliest genocides in world history, when an estimated 800,000 people were killed in 100 days. This year it was named the world's top reformer in the World Bank's Doing Business report. It has the highest proportion of female politicians in the world (52%) and a growing number of female entrepreneurs. *PRWeek*, awards issue, 2010.

¹⁵ Perhaps 'sport-ism'? Maybe this is clearer. The point I am making is that sport has been promoted world-wide not only because of the money it brings in which is a result not a tactic, but because it became necessary for 'ordinary' people to see reflections of themselves and that which they could attain if they trained hard enough and had the talent – no different to the 'It could be you' strap-line that once promoted the National Lottery. This was the foil to the 'ordinary' person seeing, say, a parade of top politicians who did not necessarily have the talent but were top-dogs because of a patronage or class system to which the 'ordinary' person has no access. Sport now provides an alternative patronage system.

cause with antiracist movements promoting black rights, drawing attention away from racism against Palestinians/Arabs. In very clever perception management today, 'the West' pretends its devotion to the religious tolerance cause, is because it is the solution for Christian/Muslim violence in the Sudan. In fact it is the solution all over Africa for 'the West', which is predominantly white, secular or Christian, so that in due course huge potential African consumers do not boycott it. These markets will be so vast that during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, African faces predominated in the Chinese promotional video in Beijing when China is one of the most racist countries in the world.

At the far end of Europe a trio of countries – the 21st century versions of the one-time Hindu and Islamic empires of India, Persia and the Ottomans – demand recognition equal to their huge populations and status. How does the Foreign Office grab a share of the consumer markets without offending both Israel and the royal princes of Arabia? Besides which, their re-emergence was never one it envisaged – Turkey with its years of understanding of Russia, the Balkans and the Levant as well as of its southern neighbours; Persia, now in control of Iraq, and with substantial knowledge of Russia and the 'Stans'.¹⁶

As for shining India, it has long history with Russia and Central Asia; recognises that Pakistan is essential for

¹⁶ With all the avarice, it is interesting to note the number of times 'Mesopotamia' now creeps into discussion of Iraq. 'The Allies' will do all it takes to get their hands on the oil which could lead to an independent Kurdistan after all. Turkey's water theft of the Tigris and Euphrates, which once irrigated many countries of the region, means that it is impossible to get at the oil in southern Iraq now because vast amounts of water are needed to get it out of the ground. Oil companies plans to build conduit to transport sea water from the Persian Gulf deep into the Iraqi desert in 'probably the largest industrial project of its kind ever undertaken'. See 'Iraq's "third river", the largest industrial project of its kind' in *The Times*, 8 November 2010.

Afghanistan and will not countenance a 21st century version of the Baghdad Pact; has exceptional global Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Parsee and Sikh diasporas, including in South America; is equal to the might of 'harmonious' (!) China; and is happy to engage on its own terms with America – tumbling balance-of-power tacticians in Britain and Bismarck's Old Europe into meltdown in the process. Meaning, as Sir John knows all too well, it is boom time for spooks again and SIS in particular.

Sir John Sawyer's speech

This is why Sir John's speech promoting SIS was a good example of bid-related communications: ostensibly open and certainly well-timed, revealing head and heart decision-making along with aggression and strong messages. In so doing Sir John subliminally showcased British society – 'we want to enjoy public confidence' – which was an essential component of his pitch. Unable to turn some of SIS's biggest liabilities into positive attributes – not least because 'liability' and 'attribute' mean different things to different audiences – Sir John mixed his messages. For example, he rightly praised heroic agents who, for their own honourable motives, work with SIS – an attribute to most British audiences; but a liability if a philosophical discussion of the morality of espionage is being held, or you are the current President of Iran.¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, there was some ludicrous top spin: Sir John tried to give the public the impression they were his sole priority when he has many, including the preservation of the corrupt banking system. He said the 'debate on SIS's role is not well-informed', when the cumulative picture of SIS is truly well-informed. His comments about 'our support for forces of moderation around the world', followed by almost in the same

¹⁷ Iran has accused Britain of not only carrying out 'secret espionage activities in the country but also funding and supporting certain terrorist groups. . .' *The Times*, 5 November 2010.

breath condemnation of Al-Qaeda for wanting to control the Arab world's oil reserves, was laughable given that Britain and America have had the same goals for over a century. And, incidentally, while 'weakening the power of the West' is certainly an Al-Qaeda ambition, Western corruption has done a far better job.

Personalisation PR

Nor did Sir John personalise some of his arguments which is essential if you are in the persuasion business.¹⁸

Personalisation could have been helpful when Sir John said 'if we demand an abrupt move to the pluralism that we in the West enjoy, we may undermine the controls that are now in place.' Suggesting that people favour stability, which allows their children to go to school in safety, over instability, which may result in their children being shot if their societies are modernised too swiftly, would have furthered empathy, a PR staple.

Sir John was rightly proud of what is known in PR as an 'influencer programme', which works for organisations that deliver change across a complex network of partners: 'We offer training and support to partner services around the world. It wins their co-operation, it improves the quality of their work, and it builds respect for human rights.'

Does he mean that this is a one-way street and SIS has nothing to learn from others? For example, while Saudi Arabia is revoltingly lacking in some areas, it has also established a humane de-radicalisation programme for its young Al-Qaeda supporters, a coincidental echo of John le Carre's 'pastoral care' message. Surely our country has need of this sort of expertise?

¹⁸ In PR, personalisation is so important, it is the reason the Americans said 'only' three men were water-boarded; and that the information obtained as a result, protected Londoners – a 'perception positive' – which claim was disputed.

Sir John rightly praised his staff whom he wants us to like and trust, but whom he disadvantaged by dehumanising. They 'receive recognition for their work only within the confines of the Service' – in PR, an internal recognition/applause programme. Less reductive language would have explained that, in addition to the utmost need for their identities to be protected, these 'exceptional' and 'remarkable' men and women are profoundly modest people anyway and do not seek or want public recognition. We have some idea of exactly how awesome they are given the formidable qualifications made available to us, following the tragic death in August 2010 of a young star on secondment to SIS.

Agents

Where Sir John did personalise, as a measure of his fervour, was when he expressed his sincere gratitude to SIS's foreign agents, whom he described as 'the true heroes of our work' which they are. As he rightly said: 'They have their own motivations and hopes. Many of them show extraordinary courage and idealism....'

Although it is some years since I researched the subject, so far as I am aware Sir John has done more than any other country's intelligence chief to lift the agent profile and give credit where it is due. In particular, he broke new ground by smashing a long held pejorative consensus proselytised by some who should have known better. 'Our agents are working today in some of the most dangerous and exposed places, bravely and to hugely valuable effect, and we owe a debt to countless more whose service is over.' The last part of that phrase, speaking intimately to this generation of the recently retired or their families, was profoundly touching.

Sir John's gracious correction of other people's bad manners was an end in itself but had a further legitimate

motive. At a time when intense competition for good agents is likely to be at an all time high, he wanted the public to understand why SIS make them 'a solemn pledge: that we shall keep their role secret'. Given the courage of these agents, the risks they take, the unbearable haunting sorrows, the debt public owes them, it is the very least that they deserve.¹⁹

Parts of Sir John's speech seemed unnecessarily obtuse. I did not understand his definition of SIS as 'a sovereign national asset'. It may be that he was confirming SIS's status. However, it could also be a spook way of explaining that SIS staff are Crown Servants. In my dated experience and if this is what Sir John meant, it invited legal query which today may well have been resolved. Questions once included: is the Crown immune from prosecution? Given that for their own protection some may have no written proof of their contract, what protection is there for agents and the sources they are running?

The person who plays a pivotal role in all this is an agent's case officer. The vivid experience of espionage offers a passport into other people's lives which is a privilege. For this and many other reasons, the qualities of SIS staff could not be more important. Sir John described them in the warmest possible terms as patriotic, loyal, dedicated and innovative people who act with the utmost integrity.²⁰ While I have no knowledge of the present generation, and my family's

¹⁹ Agents and staff are not the only brave civilians and they certainly would not claim to be. For example, a Human Rights Watch report was based on months of working undercover in remote and dangerous areas. *Daily Telegraph*, 29 October 21010

²⁰ See also a suspicious story in *Sunday Times* 17 October 2010 about the impact of Sir John's internal SIS changes and alleged poor SIS morale; glowing advertorial for Australian Secret Intelligence Service; SIS alumni programme; SIS middle managers being offloaded which simultaneously twin spook experience (e.g. job losses) and concerns (e.g. torture allegations) with the public for the first time since the ending of the Cold War.

relationship with SIS went badly wrong, I have no reason to disbelieve him.²¹

I wish him, his staff and agents well.

Corinne Souza's father, Lawrence de Souza (1921–1986), was a senior decorated SIS agent for nearly twenty years.

²¹ Unlike their predecessors whose international views were likely to have been formed by the influence of the Second World War and the Cold War, thus chiming with much public opinion then, British spooks in their twenties and thirties today are of the generation who learned about, say, the tragedy of Palestine through the protest movements when they were at university, or about the destruction of the Aral Sea through environment protesters. This is to say, we have a generation whose knowledge of international relations may have been formed by civilian protest: they know that Kazakhstan, with all the endemic hideous corruption and repression (torture), is eyed greedily by China, India, Russia and the US, but their views may be conditioned not by pragmatism but by their primary influences. In much the same way as the Second World War created a moral generation of public servants and politicians of all political parties who did not wish to visit on their children the same carnage, protest movements various are likely to have grown today's equally moral generation who are more representative of issues-based opinion and a British public starved of virtuous example than the top echelons of elected and administrative government may wish to admit.