

Intelligence, Security and the Attlee Governments, 1945-51: An Uneasy Relationship?

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In December 1945, George Orwell wrote in *Tribune* wondering what happened to Special Branch, MI5 and MI6 when a Labour government was in office. This was when he still thought the Attlee government might attack the bastions of ruling class power in Britain by closing down the secret state, taking over the public schools, abolishing the House of Lords and confiscating the wealth of the rich and super rich. The short answer in 1945 was that Special Branch, MI5 and MI6 actually began working for the Labour government. This is the story that Daniel Lomas chronicles, breaking considerable welcome new ground in the process. He makes the point that accounts of the Attlee government have usually focussed on welfare reforms, the NHS, and on decolonisation. These celebrations of Attlee and of the so-called 'Spirit of 45' have 'overlooked his support for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent, Cold War foreign policy and. . . the development of Britain's Cold War "secret state", and his intimate relationship with British intelligence'. Overlooked is arguably too weak a term because the fact is that many of today's Labour enthusiasts, both old and young, seem determined not to know, or at least acknowledge, anything to Attlee's detriment. And this is the man who not only initiated Britain's nuclear weapons programme but also kept it secret from both Parliament and his own Cabinet, something that even Blair would have thought twice about!

What of the 'secret state'? By the time Attlee took office, the bad old days of the 'Zinoviev Letter' had been forgotten and a new relationship had been forged during the War. Attlee himself, Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton and Ernest Bevin all had dealings with the intelligence agencies during the War. The politicians regarded them as valuable instruments of government and, contrary to some accounts, the intelligence agencies, whatever disagreements might have arisen, trusted the new Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. It is not true that Attlee was suspicious of MI5 and bought in a policeman, Percy Sillitoe, to take over as Director General in order to make sure there was no repeat of the 'Zinoviev Letter': Attlee was not involved with Sillitoe's appointment. Attlee developed a particularly close relationship with the new head of MI5, saw him at least once a fortnight and was the first Prime Minister to ever visit MI5's headquarters. When Sillitoe retired and wrote his memoirs, it was Attlee who provided the Foreword.

As far as Attlee was concerned there were a number of Labour MPs who needed keeping a eye on (some were much too close to the Communist Party, much too left-wing). There was communist influence in the trade unions that needed to be monitored and there was the problem of Communist Party members and sympathisers in sensitive positions in the civil service, scientific establishments and elsewhere. As relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated

and Britain became increasingly dependent on the United States, these concerns moved up the agenda.

Attlee was very worried about communist activity in the trade union movement in late 1947, for example, concerned that they intended to call strikes 'to sabotage the Royal Wedding'. He was reassured when Sillitoe told him of the extent to which MI5 had penetrated the CP. This was a recurring concern, exacerbated by the government's imposition of domestic austerity combined with massive rearmament, something that Attlee's current admirers generally forget. The government took steps to root out communists and communist sympathisers within the civil service, introducing 'extensive vetting . . . first "positive" and then "negative"'.

One case, not discussed by Lomas, which shows the way the wind was blowing is that of Monica Felton, a Labour Party member, feminist and pacifist, and town planning expert, who was chair of the Stevenage Development Corporation. She was sacked from her post by Hugh Dalton on trumped-up charges in June 1951. The real reason for her dismissal was her taking part in a visit to North Korea with a peace delegation that then reported back on how the United States was conducting the war, singling out for particular condemnation the US bombing of civilian targets. There is no doubt that the communists made use of people like Felton (she was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize!), but the fact remains that indiscriminate US bombing of North Korea levelled much of the country and killed perhaps as many as a million plus people. This was not something the Attlee government wanted publicised. Felton was not only sacked, but was threatened with prosecution, with some Tory MPs demanding she be hanged. Every effort was made to intimidate and discredit her. This brief account of the Felton affair is not intended as a criticism of Lomas, but future scholars building on his work should certainly investigate the fate of Felton and others at the hands of MI5 and similar agencies.

As Lomas points out, the number of British people who were victims of this was very small compared to the United States and Eastern Europe. Stalin's anti-Titoite purges swept up hundreds of thousands, many of them imprisoned, tortured and often executed. Nevertheless, when compared with the discussion of the subject in Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones recent book, *We Know All About You*,¹ a case can be made that Lomas plays down the British purge. Jeffreys-Jones writes of Britain having a 'silent McCarthyism', what he calls the 'Great British Silence'. Whereas the US purge was accompanied by considerable histrionics, the much smaller British version was carried out more covertly and consequently was able to continue for much longer.

Why was the purge here so restrained, compared to the situation in the United States, where even 'Comrade Attlee' was to be condemned by Senator McCarthy? Partly it was the relative strength of the Left in Britain that would

¹ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *We Know All About You: The Story of Surveillance in Britain and America* (Oxford: OUP, 2017) <<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/we-know-all-about-you-9780198749660>>.

have resisted a more full-blooded purge. Many Labour MPs would have opposed it. And a British McCarthyism would have inevitably engulfed many people in the Labour Party who might have once flirted with the Popular Front – or even with communism – but had since moved to the right. Denis Healey is an obvious example. The government actually rejected Conservative attempts to establish an Un-British Activities Committee in the House of Commons, almost certainly because they were aware that it would be used to smear the Labour Party itself with the enthusiastic support of the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*.

We have to also bear in mind that if Labour had been re-elected in 1951, then we would have certainly seen a serious stepping-up of the British purge, extending it into the field of education and elsewhere. By 1951, the government was concerned by the presence of some 2,000 'subversives' in education and there would certainly have been a move to deal with this problem. The Korean War, contingency plans for war with the Soviet Union and subordination to the United States would have all required more offensive action against the domestic Left.

Ironically, the Conservative election victory in 1951 actually returned to office a government that did not yet recognise the extent of British dependence upon and subordination to the United States. It was to take the Suez Crisis of 1956 to bring this reality home to the Conservatives. And while the 'silent McCarthyism' continued uninterrupted, there was no dramatic increase in attacks on the Left. If Attlee had been re-elected, his government would have had to decisively crush opposition from the Left to its pro-American stance. The Conservatives faced no such problem.

The government was very much concerned to counter anti-British propaganda, much of it communist-inspired; and to this end established the Information Research Department. This was intended to covertly advocate a 'Third Force' approach, portraying Britain as a reforming alternative to Soviet communism and American capitalism. The man responsible for this initiative was Christopher Mayhew MP; and what would have particularly delighted Attlee was that he was, like the Prime Minister himself, an Old Haileyburian. Attlee took great pleasure in promoting chaps from his old school through the ranks of the labour movement! Whatever the ideological colouring of the propaganda, the IRD was defending foreign, colonial policy and defence policies that were indistinguishable from those a Conservative government would have followed. All that was different was the rhetoric.

One other area where Lomas challenges the accepted wisdom is with regard to the notion that Attlee was unsympathetic to covert operations. He insists that the closing down of the Special Operations Executive was all about saving money and that when ministers felt it necessary, covert operations were given their full support. The covert operation aimed at Albania is a case in point. Even more remarkable is the fact that when the Labour government decided not to intervene militarily in Iran after the nationalisation of the British-

owned oil industry by the nationalist government (because of shortage of troops and US pressure), they instead authorised a covert operation to bring down the government and hopefully replace it with a puppet regime. Once again, this is something that Attlee's admirers prefer to forget.

Lomas's book is to be heartily welcomed, making an important contribution to a subject of vital importance, not least because of the cult of 'Attleeism' that seems to be in fashion within parts of the Left today. It is a great shame the cost of the book is prohibitive, pretty much limiting its readership to people with access to a good university library.

John Newsinger

John Newsinger has a new book,
'Hope Lies in the Proles': Orwell and the Left,
coming out early next year.