

MI5 speaks to the nation!

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'How MI5 is adapting to fight coronavirus'¹ was the headline on a BBC news online piece by Gordon Corera. In relation to that potential change in working practices, it quoted soon-to-depart MI5 chief, Sir Andrew Parker, thus:

'You'll understand if I don't go into exactly the ways in which we are working – what shape we are in. But MI5 is at work in a whole variety of ways flexibly operating to do our job.'

So absolutely no real information as to how they are changing in response to the current pandemic. The only tidbit of information was that, 'A number of qualified medical staff including doctors and nurses who usually work at MI5, have been released back to the NHS so they can serve on the front line.' In other words, they're doing exactly what you would expect of any UK employer.

The plodding plod

As mentioned, Sir Andrew Parker is due to step down as the Director General (DG) of MI5. As a valedictory gesture to him, let's examine his career – using the public details available on the MI5 website. Of all MI5 DGs that have ever held that position, he has been the slowest to progress through the ranks to the top. When he was promoted from Deputy DG to DG in 2013 he had already been an MI5 officer for thirty years. The second closest in terms of long service before attaining the post of DG was Eliza Manningham-Buller (with 28 years progress between recruitment in 1974 and appointment as DG in 2002).² Sir Andrew's successor, current Deputy DG Ken McCallum, 'has worked for MI5 for almost 25 years'.³

¹ <<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52349090>>

² The previous MI5 DGs took the following amounts of time to rise to the top: Jonathan Evans 27 years (1980/2007); Eliza Manningham-Buller 28 years (1974/2002); Stephen Lander 21 years (1975/1996); Stella Rimington 23 years (1969/1992); Patrick Walker 24 years (1963/1987); Antony Duff, direct entry as DG 1985; John Jones 26 years (1955/1981); Howard Smith, direct entry as DG 1978; Michael Hanley 24 years (1948/1972); Martin Furnival Jones 22 years (1941/1965); Roger Hollis 18 years (1938/1956); Dick White 17 years (1936/1953); Percy Silitoe, direct entry as DG 1946; David Petrie, direct entry as DG 1941; Oswald Harker 20 years (1920/1940); and Vernon Kell was the first ever DG. (All information sourced from <<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/former-dgs>>.)

³ <<https://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/news/ken-mccallum-named-new-head-mi5>>

Sir Andrew is certainly a survivor: a whole host of terrorist attacks have occurred during his time in MI5's senior management. The first of these was the 7 July 2005 bombings of the transport network in central London, which admittedly occurred only five months after he was appointed head of counter terrorism. During the official inquest into the 2005 attack it was revealed that, over a year before the bombings occurred, a surveillance photograph of 7/7 bombers Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer had been available. However, as the Guardian reported, they were 'cropped by intelligence officials in such a "speedy" manner as to render them unrecognisable'.⁴ In his position as head of counter terrorism, Sir Andrew would have been the person one would have expected to take action against the officer responsible for messing up what had, very likely, been an opportunity to prevent the attack. But we do not know what (if any) sanction was taken because the U.K. intelligence community is so secretive.

The cropped photo was sent to the U.S. so that it could be shown to 'Al-Qaida supergrass' Mohammed Junaid Babar.⁵ The unsurprising result was that he couldn't identify them. As one of the barristers at the 7 July inquest noted, when questioning the MI5 witness 'G' (chief of staff at the time to MI5 DG Jonathan Evans), a child 'could have done a better job'. Naturally, witness 'G' defended the work of MI5 to the hilt, claiming that the officer concerned, 'would have done their best at the time in the course of having quite a lot of other tasks available to them also at that time'.⁶ (Tasks that were, please note, 'available to them' and not, presumably, pressingly in need of attention.)

Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) also raised concerns about record keeping by MI5 in connection to the 7/7 bombings. In paragraphs 171 & 172 and paragraph 283 of the committee's *Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, MI5's process of record keeping is heavily criticised.

'MI5 believe that they keep a fully adequate record of their work and decisions. In the course of this Review, however, we have found that new information has come to light, sometimes as a result of current MI5 investigations, but often because of the questions we have asked and the

⁴ 'MI5 cropped 7/7 bomber out of picture shown to key informant'
<<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/21/mi5-cropped-7-7-bombings>>

⁵ A basic 'rap-sheet' of information on him can be seen via *The Intercept* at
<<https://trial-and-terror.theintercept.com/people/b8966ae6-41fc-48cc-9da9-8df9cbe727b3>>.

⁶ See column 52 of the testimony witness 'G' gave to the inquiry on 21 February 2011, archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/y8yujrte>> Witness 'G' gave extensive testimony and was the only witness before the inquiry on the 21st, 22nd and 23rd – and a substantial part of the 24th – of February 2011.)

specific issues we have pursued with them. For example, when MI5 gave evidence to the Committee during the original inquiry, they did not know that a pack of surveillance photographs had been shown to a detainee in 2004, despite the fact that the photographs had been returned to MI5 annotated by him, as was later discovered.⁷

When Fusilier Lee Rigby was brutally murdered by Jihadists Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale in Woolwich in 2013, MI5's record keeping was still not up to scratch. The ISC produced a further report on this attack (*Report on the intelligence relating to the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby*), published in November of 2014, which stated:

'We have examined, in very considerable detail, the decisions the Agencies made and the actions they took in the seven Agency operations in which either Adebolajo or Adebowale featured. We have discovered a number of errors, and this Report therefore contains criticisms where *processes have not been followed or decisions have not been recorded.*'⁸ [Emphasis added.]

The report went on to say that the committee '[did] not consider that any of the Agencies' errors, *when taken individually*, were significant enough to have affected the outcome.' [Emphasis added.] Obviously, therefore, the errors the committee uncovered did *as a whole* have an affect on the outcome.

These kinds of errors continued to have repercussions as other terrorists who had previously fallen off the radar committed atrocities. The attack at Westminster bridge and the Houses of Parliament (perpetrated by Khalid Masood on 22 march, 2017) being a prime example.

The inquest for that attack was held at the Old Bailey in the Autumn of 2018. A senior officer from MI5 gave oral testimony in court and was provided with the anonymous label 'Witness L'. During the cross-examination of 'L' it transpired that this was the same MI5 officer who had appeared as 'Witness G' at the inquests into the 7/7 bombings.⁹

⁷ Intelligence and Security Committee: *Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005* <<https://tinyurl.com/ybesrb6v>> or <https://b1cba9b3-a-5e6631fd-s-sites.googlegroups.com/a/independent.gov.uk/isc/files/20090519_ISC_7-7_Review.pdf>

⁸ See paragraph 10 (on p. 12) of <<https://tinyurl.com/ycj4hrtk>> or <https://b1cba9b3-a-5e6631fd-s-sites.googlegroups.com/a/independent.gov.uk/isc/files/20141125_ISC_Woolwich_Report%28website%29.pdf>.

⁹ The testimony of 'Witness L', as transcribed from the hearings, begins at column 10 on page 4 of the PDF at <<https://tinyurl.com/y7legnsj>> or <<https://westminsterbridgeinquests.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WI-Day-12-26-September-2018.pdf>>.

As the *Guardian* noted following the hearing into the Westminster attack:

'Witness L told the Old Bailey: "He [the perpetrator of the attack, Khalid Masood] was downgraded to a target who was not considered to be a risk to national security.'"

No record was made at the time of the reasons why the decision was taken.¹⁰

Not only no record kept regarding the decision but also, by extension, no action taken if that decision to downgrade had been a flawed one.

'L' reassured the inquiry, however, that the information MI5 had retained about investigations of Khalid Masood showed that by December 2010, when the decision to downgrade had been made, '. . . there would have been no reason to keep him open as a live subject of investigation.'¹¹ But obviously, because there had been a continued poor record keeping regimen, 'L' can have had no idea what had been known but was not recorded – information which may have justified an entirely different decision.

Earlier in the testimony, 'L' had described what it meant if a person was a 'subject of interest' to MI5:

'. . . the opening of them as a subject of interest: one, allows us to ensure we are legal, necessary and proportionate in all we do against that individual, and, two, *we are able to record* the things that we are doing against that individual, and three, that *we then have a record which we can refer back to later* should that be required.'¹² [Emphasis added]

So a clearly acknowledged benefit to keeping accurate records.

All this came with a side order of whitewash from 'Witness L', who claimed that nothing had actually gone wrong. Time and again, 'L' was asked about associations between Masood and members of the British extremist group Al-Muhajiroun (ALM¹³); time and again, 'L' denied that anything other than what MI5 had managed not to do could have been done.

Two typical exchanges are this (from column 146, on page 38 of the transcription):

¹⁰ 'MI5 officer tells inquest of Westminster attacker's terror links' <<https://tinyurl.com/ycfwmzjl>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/26/mi5-officer-tells-inquest-of-westminster-attackers-terror-links>>.

¹¹ Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9 above) column 59 on p. 16.

¹² Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9 above) columns 21-22 on p. 7.

¹³ A meticulously put together index at the end of the transcription document shows that 'ALM' is mentioned 28 times, whereas 'surveillance' is only mentioned three times and 'informant' not once. Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9) beginning on p. 53.

'Q. That brings me back to my cumulative point. At this stage did nobody think: hang on, again and again there is material suggesting this guy is crying out to be investigated?

A. No, they did not.

Q. Isn't that surprising?

A. No, it is not.'¹⁴

Which is quickly followed by this (from column 152, on page 39):

'Q. Right. Well, I suggest that, given the cumulative weight of all of this material by this stage of the chronology, something has gone wrong; do you agree?

A. No, I do not.

Q. And that there has been a missed opportunity and [his case] should have been reopened?

A. I do not agree with that.'¹⁵

Witness 'L' was also keen to claim that MI5 was suffering under-resourcing and/or budgetary restraints. They claimed there was a 'limited resourcing picture within which we work' and that MI5 had to 'prioritise investigations' to make sure they 'allocate resources accordingly'.¹⁶ But it can't be argued that MI5 had any kind of staffing problems because, for the year 2016-17 (the period leading up to the terrorist attacks in question), government documents show that MI5 had 4,058 staff as at 31 March 2017, compared to 3,789 staff as at 31 March 2016 and that (for 2016-17) 'MI5 recruited 505 staff, against a target of 500', which 'compares with 427 staff recruited in 2015/16'. So, not only were their staff numbers going up, they were going up at an increasing rate.¹⁷

And any claim of financial constraints is completely unprovable in the public domain because, although the combined total MI5/MI6/GCHQ budget is

¹⁴ See note 9 above column 146 on p. 38.

¹⁵ See note 9 above column 152 on p. 39.

¹⁶ Ibid columns 18-19 on p. 6.

¹⁷ See page 18 of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, Annual Report 2017-2018 at <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4vmhtd>> or <<http://isc.independent.gov.uk/committee-reports/annual-reports>>.

public,¹⁸ the amounts for the individual agencies remain classified. Working on a reasonable assumption that the disclosed unitary budget is divided according to the ratio of staff numbers between the three agencies, the figure for MI5 comes to the huge sum of £888.7 million.¹⁹

Identifying the witness

This staunch defence of MI5 in the face of frankly overwhelming evidence shows that 'Witness L' was a very steady hand on the tiller. Not only did 'L' identify themselves as both the previously referred to Witness 'G' from the 7/7 inquest but they further revealed they had been in charge of the Operational Improvement Review (conducted jointly by MI5 and the Metropolitan Police) following the Westminster Bridge, Manchester Arena, London Bridge and Finsbury Park attacks.²⁰

I can thus confidently state that 'Witness L' has been chosen to replace Sir Andrew Parker as Director General. As the 'news item' from the MI5 website that revealed how Ken McCallum had been chosen as the new Director General, states:

'Ken led MI5's strategic response to the 2017 terrorist attacks, setting up the joint MI5 and Police "Operational Improvement Review"'.²¹

Other elements of the testimony of 'Witness L' also fit with the career path of Mr McCallum.

'Q. What previous posts have you held which may be relevant for our purposes?

A. I have spent most of my career in international counter terrorism. I think some of the more relevant posts I have spent is I was an investigative senior manager between 2000 and 2004, working in the international counter terrorism section. I was chief of staff to the director

¹⁸ For 2016-17 see <<https://tinyurl.com/y8dpnytt>> or <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630221/60394_HC30_Accessible.pdf>; for 2017-18 see <<https://tinyurl.com/y99885m3>> or <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/738479/SIA_Accounts_HC1509_Web_Version.pdf>. These docs show that, despite managing to underspend by more than £39M in 2016-17, the budgets went up by £97.5M for 2017-18.

¹⁹ MI5 staff numbers for 2017 were 4,058 of a total workforce in all three agencies of 13,335 (so 30.4% of the total) and 30.4% of £2,923,515,000 = £888,748,560

²⁰ See note 9 above columns 29-30 on p. 9.

²¹ 'New Director General of MI5 appointed' <<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/new-director-general-of-mi5-appointed>>

general between 2005 and 2011, and I've done a variety of other operational and policy posts.'²²

Note, there, the lack of detail post 2011. This tallies with Mr McCallum who, post 2012, temporarily moved away from MI5 and, '. . . embarked on a secondment to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills'²³

Note, also, how the question was carefully phrased to ask only for those work details that 'may be relevant for our purposes'. This is important because, when he testified as 'Witness L', Ken McCallum was already Deputy Director General.²⁴

I have detected what I think is a hint of obfuscation with regard to this, as 'Witness L' also testified that their 'current position' was as 'Deputy Director for International Counter Terrorism'²⁵ As I have mentioned above, at the time of the hearing in 2018, Ken McCallum was already Deputy Director General (DDG) of MI5. Is this an anomaly? Well . . . not necessarily, because – as the organisational chart that MI5 presents on its own website shows – the position of DDG appears above the column of International Counter Terrorism,²⁶ so it is quite conceivable that 'Witness L' was being '*economical with the actualité*' and the two positions (Deputy Director for International Counter Terrorism & DDG) were one and the same thing.

As I have said, there are many indications that Ken McCallum was 'Witness G'/'Witness L'. The indications to the contrary are very few and far between – and likely explainable. In the Testimony as 'Witness L', the MI5 officer said that they had been 'first employed by MI5' in '1991'.²⁷ This is contrary to the official information released about Ken McCallum's career, which as I mentioned earlier in this article, states that he is 'an MI5 officer with almost 25 years of experience' – the added difficulty here being that Ken

²² Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9 above) columns 12-13 pp. 4-5.

²³ See note 21.

²⁴ The MI5 'news story' referred to in note 21 says, 'Ken was appointed Deputy Director General of MI5 in April 2017'. That would account for him only being available to give evidence in September 2018 for just part of one day. The testimony of 'Witness L' is logged within the transcript as beginning at 10:19 am and ending at 4:13 pm, with a one hour lunch break and a couple of 15-20 minute 'comfort' breaks included. (This in stark contrast to the more than three days he was available as 'Witness G' in February 2011.)

²⁵ Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9 above) column 12, p. 4.

²⁶ See <<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/people-and-organisation>>.

²⁷ Testimony of 'Witness L' (see note 9 above) column 12, p. 4.

McCallum graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1996.²⁸ The resolution to this, as I can see it, is that this was either incorrect testimony (deliberate or accidental), or that the court transcriber got the information wrong (although this is unlikely, as the transcript is excellent).

So it is quite possible that 'Witness G'/'Witness L' – the senior MI5 officer who testified before two public inquiries and protected the reputation of MI5 to the hilt, despite the very strong evidence of bad or negligent practices – will be the new Director General. If this is the case, then I predict MI5's future is safe in Ken's hands.

²⁸ See <https://www.gla.ac.uk/alumni/noticeboard/headline_717486_en.html>.