

The State of Secrecy

Spies and the Media in Britain

Richard Norton-Taylor

London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2020, £20 h/b

Scott Anthony

Logic would tell you that the relationship between journalists and secret agents should be antagonistic. Journalists are after all charged with exposing power, while intelligence work is supposedly done in the shadows. But in Norton-Taylor's highly believable account, the British media is nearly always accommodating if not weak before the influence of the intelligence agencies. According to the author, who has worked on defence and security issues at *The Guardian* for forty years, this failure to hold the intelligence services to account has had some disastrous consequences. 'Official secrecy has allowed the intelligence agencies to commit such serious mistakes and indulge in such wrongdoing', he argues, 'that far from protecting national security, it has had the perverse effect of undermining it.'

However, while the book returns again and again to the idea that secrecy (bad) must be opposed by openness (good), the actual 'heroes' and 'villains' of the book reveal that Norton-Taylor is telling a slightly different story. Chief among the villains is Tony Blair. Blair's refusal to openly admit his commitment to invading Iraq ensured British troops were sent to war unprepared. The lack of training, equipment and local intelligence created a scenario where overstretched and under trained soldiers would abuse local civilians. Standing, hooding, sleep deprivation, and worse seem to have become normalised as the Geneva Convention was tossed out the window. Throughout the book Blair, Jack Straw and David Miliband exhibit varying degrees of mendacity, indifference and/or wilful blindness to the use of torture. By 2016 the UK had paid out £20 million in compensation to Iraqis brutalised by the British military.

While the political villains are in a league of their own, the British class system is also held responsible for the love of hierarchies and unspoken rules that disfigure the intelligence services. Figures like Sir Mark Allen are crying out for their own Peter O'Toole. Allen is an intellectual and expert on Islamic calligraphy who has written a study of Arab Falconry. Yet the former MI6 officer also seems to have signed-off on the abduction and rendition of opponents of

Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi to help secure an oil deal between the UK and Libya. Norton-Taylor argues that the intelligence services are besotted with the emirates and sultanates of the Gulf. Romanticism has displaced any sense of unease about the crucifixions and other barbaric punishments that the rulers of the Gulf States mete out on dissenting citizens.

Lastly, Norton-Taylor highlights procedural and administrative problems with the intelligence services. Over the last two decades resources have flowed into cybersecurity, and, by working with the NSA, the British security services are able to harvest enormous amounts of data. Quite shockingly, the 2016 Investigatory Powers Act allows anyone's phone, emails or texts to be intercepted – regardless of whether they are suspected of being involved with any crime. But perhaps, because this information has been captured in such overwhelming volume, it's open to question how practically useful it has been. Since 9/11 the vast majority of successful terror attacks on Britain have been carried out by people already known to the security services. Either the enormous amounts of data being harvested get in the way of closely targeted labour-intensive intelligence work, or (as happened in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles') parts of the intelligence services are less interested in preventing the attacks than they are of building up an ever-larger network of informers. In Northern Ireland informers kidnapped, robbed and murdered with the knowledge of the security services. It's obviously startling how far British agents can exist above normal legal and moral norms, but the realisation that secrecy can also serve to protect a basic lack of competence is perhaps even more unnerving. As a result, no outsider can assess whether the security services are actually any good.

With the exception of Tony Blair then, the villains of the *State of Secrecy* are generalised anxieties about ethos, protocols and process. But there is much less ambiguity about the heroes of Norton-Taylor's book. Firstly, there is a general positivity about dealing with members of the armed services, although as Norton-Taylor admits, army officers can often be open and straightforward with journalists because they nearly always have the public's backing. Even when fighting obscure, unpopular and possibly illegal wars, the public will support the army's calls for more material and political resources.

It's certainly easy to sympathise with this public sentiment and the shared residual sense of 'lions led by donkeys'; but it is also worth noting that this same sentiment hasn't been especially effective in resolving the scandals around the privatisation of soldiers' housing, or the suicides at Deepcut barracks. The support and attention are limited to times of combat. Equally, while the author seems thrilled by Brigadier David Richards' 'bugger the orders' response to the military and humanitarian crisis in Sierra Leone, the success of

this 'defence diplomacy' was ultimately to encourage successive British governments to adopt a more gung-ho approach to military intervention. In Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya this has been disastrous. You realise Norton-Taylor's relative admiration for the military is partially intertwined with their value as journalistic sources. He doesn't necessarily think through the longer-term consequences. This is a pattern that reoccurs elsewhere in the book.

We're told that, during the Cold War, leaks from heroic defectors and double agents helped preserve peace. For instance, they helped convince Thatcher that Mikhail Gorbachev was serious about reforming the Soviet Union. Norton-Taylor also gives honourable mentions to politicians like Robin Cook, Tam Dalyell and Menzies Campbell for working with him to prise information from the government. He also likes a fair few of the spies he has met. He praises Eliza Manningham-Buller's admission that, in the past, MI5's 'anti-subversion' activities had got out of hand. He also praises Stella Rimington for warning government about the dangers of eroding civil liberties since she was elevated to the House of Lords. But without wanting to be overly cynical, these comments are shining examples of a type of bounded criticism. While reasonable in themselves, this 'lessons have been learned' defence ultimately functions to enhance the reputation of the security services.

Despite its subtitle of *The State of Secrecy: Spies and the Media in Britain*, the strongest criticisms are aimed at politicians and the bureaucratic mismanagement at the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Journalistic responsibility gets off lightly. Strikingly, neither MI5, MI6 nor GCHQ are portrayed as bad in toto. Sometimes the leaders of the intelligence services get too close to politicians, sometimes politicians are simply not interested in advice that contradicts what they have already decided to do. Norton-Taylor almost always focuses on procedural wrongdoings or specific case studies. Perhaps that is simply good journalism, but you sometimes wish that he would tackle the bigger questions. There's no systematic critique. Essentially, as with the good defectors and double-agents of the Cold War, Norton-Taylor seems to understand himself as 'a responsible leaker'. Perhaps one of the most troubling things you realise after reading the book is that Norton-Taylor's measured and often modest questioning of the security services still placed him on the maverick fringes of journalistic acceptability. The British state simply finds his doggedness and persistence irritating.

Having blasted the class system, one also can't help but notice that Norton-Taylor is himself very much part of a particular elite. He's won Liberty's Human Rights Campaign of the Year Award and written acclaimed pieces of verbatim theatre (including works based on the Hutton and MacPherson inquiries). He is now a Member of Council for the Royal United Services

Institute. Michael Frayn once characterised political life in Britain as a fight between a 'herbivore' and 'carnivore' elite, a distinction that has now degenerated into an even coarser distinction between 'Remainer' and 'Brexititeer'. Norton-Taylor's preferences slot predictably onto both axes. Apropos of not much, the book is shot through with barbs about the foolishness of the Brexit vote. Norton-Taylor's principle arguments for the EU – support for the European Arrest Warrant and greater sharing of data – look to be at variance with his stated desire for more proportionality and democratic oversight.

The State of Secrecy is a strange book. Though based on personal insights rather than archival research, it's not really a memoir or even very self-reflective. Equally, although it often returns to a moral ('secrecy works against good governance'), it doesn't have a sustained focus or present any kind of structured argument. There's also a sense that it's a rushed book. Some of the phrases and anecdotes appear to be recycled from past newspaper articles, and even the relatively in-depth analysis of the Chilcot Report fragments into bullet points and extended quotes.

The book is at its strongest when it is at its most sober. Norton-Taylor is especially eloquent about the number of times he has been misled by British officials. 'Euphemism is a barrier to honesty,' he argues. When it comes to describing military offensives, the government give us 'remotely piloted air systems', 'precision weapons' and 'collateral damage' rather than bomb-dropping drones that murder civilians. Conversely, alongside these euphemisms for hiding state violence, there are also euphemisms for stripping away the rights of individuals. Since 9/11 a world has been created where the definition of 'terrorism' has expanded to encompass the realms of what used to be 'crime', while 'extremism' is a label that can now be tagged to legitimate political protest. When the Green MP Caroline Lucas protested at a fracking site she was accused of 'non-violent extremism'.

Often the rhetorical power of Norton-Taylor's book depends on the reader accepting contrasts between the past and the present. The intelligence services of yore are often portrayed as a bit of a joke. Norton-Taylor recalls being fed a file which turned out to be a history of Secret Operations from the French Revolution to 1909. The anecdote is consistent with his presentation of secret agents as old duffers and oddballs, although less friendly readings are available. The file sounds like the sort of nonsense Nesta Webster used to write in the early twentieth century – conspiratorial literature that saw the Russian Revolution as part of a longer history of Jewish conspiracy. Winston Churchill was reportedly a fan of this stuff. Indeed, while often presented in an off-hand or even slightly amused way, some of the historical asides are horrifying in

their implications. One such example is the extensive surveillance MI5 imposed on the undeniably brilliant polymath Jacob Bronowski. It is alleged that Bronowski had to eventually emigrate to the U.S. to find any decent work. It is because of MI5 suspicions of which he was completely unaware.

Doubtless, there are some good reasons to downplay the past. There's been a large generational shift in the make-up of the intelligence agencies. MI5 has doubled in size since 9/11, while MI6 has grown by a third since 2016. Accompanying this growth in size has been a broadening of remit and a massive expansion of legal powers. When the security and intelligence services were finally established on a statutory basis in the 1990s, they were encouraged to engage more in the public sphere. Commercial and industrial espionage were legitimised, and the days of secretive but deeply reactionary figures such as Peter Wright and Charles Elwell are long gone.

We now live in a world of GCHQ puzzle books, Alan Turing celebrations, and frequent editorials and media interventions by former secret intelligence figures like Lord Evans of Weardale, Sir John Sawers and Sir John Scarlett. In addition to the existing penetration of the British media, 'greater openness' has entailed the emergence of an intelligence lobby that consistently argues for the extension of legal powers and limits on the right to privacy, while strongly criticising unauthorised leaks and staving off any suggestion that the intelligence services should be more democratically accountable. In America, this development is even further along with figures like John Brennan, James Clapper and Michael Hayden prominently employed as commentators. Fortright media advocacy of civil liberties, the importance of due process, and ensuring necessary protections for whistleblowers, have all suffered as a result. One doesn't have to be sympathetic to Donald Trump to be wary of the ultimate political consequences of this, should a similar escalation occur in the UK.

Throughout the book the contrast between the bad but good old days and the slick but worse present is a stylistic tic of Norton-Taylor's, and likely a legacy of his long professional career as a journalist. He can't help but think that now is where the action is. From an analytical point of view this habit can be a weakness. If wrongdoings are considered by the public to be unprecedented slips or out-of-character behaviour, that is partly because the British security and intelligence services have been extremely successful in either suppressing memories of past misdeeds or diverting attention from them. If more people were aware of the historic goings on at (let's say) MI5's interrogation centre in Latchmere House, West London perhaps they would view the 'enhanced' interrogations that have occurred since the 'War on Terror' more critically. *The State of Secrecy* is a book where the significance of the

past is invariably downplayed so that the dangers of present and the future can be emphasised. But it might have been more powerful to do it the other way around; official misdeeds can be understood as part of a much longer and troubling pattern of behaviour.

We already know that organisations like the Integrity Institute, and its notorious sort of predecessor the Information Research Department, have anonymously distributed state propaganda through networks of journalists and academics. *The State of Secrecy* adds to these examples. We learn about British spies writing under pseudonyms for mainstream news organisations, as well as the close relationships that have existed between a number of significant British journalists and the secret intelligence services. Mark Laity, the BBC's former defence correspondent, was furious at the Leveson hearings when he was accused of being 'too close' to the Ministry of Defence. He is now a spokesman for NATO.

Even more strikingly, Norton-Taylor recalls moments where supposedly independent journalists have suspended their critical faculties out of deference to the intelligence services. In one anecdote Ed Vulliamy – the journalist played in amusingly ham fashion by Rhys Ifans in the recent film *Official Secrets* – is briefed by MI6 that Bosnian authorities are attacking their own citizens in order to provoke NATO into military intervention. MI6 provided no evidence for their claim but the story spread quickly through the British, American and European press. It seems to Norton-Taylor that the British state has authored and propagated a highly damaging conspiracy theory. Such incidents often make this book a depressing read. Before long you wish you find yourself wanting to read a book about spies failing to penetrate the British media.

Of course, there have been significant moments where political and media scrutiny has come to rest on the security services. But these moments invariably have less to do with the efforts of determined investigative journalists than bureaucratic turf wars between the various security and intelligence agencies. Northern Ireland provides examples par excellence. Sir Maurice Oldfield, the former Head of MI6, was smeared as a homosexual (and possibly entrapped by male prostitutes) shortly after being appointed as Security Coordinator by Mrs Thatcher in 1979. This may have been the work of MI5.

One of the book's limitations, which seems to reflect Norton-Taylor's status as an insider and a long-term survivor of this world, is its treatment of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. From 'Cablegate' onwards, Assange and *The Guardian* had a turbulent relationship, a relationship which goes entirely unexamined here. (Interestingly, when it comes to the internal politics of *The Guardian*,

Norton-Taylor is not afraid of using euphemisms and careful evasions.) When WikiLeaks is fleetingly referenced in *The State of Secrecy* it's referenced damningly and in the abstract. In one of the few mentions, he scolds that: he scolds that 'WikiLeaks has demonstrated how [. . .] with the direct or indirect cooperation of a hostile government, [leaked documents] can interfere in democratic elections'."

Considering the severity of the accusation, you would think that this might have been worth justifying and expanding upon. Instead, what you take from this is that Assange is very much outside of the club. It's a hugely disappointing omission. No matter how wayward Norton-Taylor believes him to be, you would hope he doesn't endorse the American government labelling Assange as 'a terrorist'.

The idea that scrutiny is a necessary tool of careful reform also seems to collapse a bit in the closing sections. Early in the book Norton-Taylor argues that in the Cold War the military knowingly overstated the strengths and military capabilities of the Soviet Union. Budgets and institutional power depended on 'talking up' threats. Yet *State of Secrecy* concludes with a somewhat gushing appraisal of the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), the MoD's think tank. According to the DCDC, the UK faces a future where it may have to deal with insect warfare, fish shaped swarming torpedoes and undersea robotic warriors. At the same time, mass migration will weaken loyalty to the nation state, multinationals will begin to create their own armed forces, and criminals will start to make use of drones and other new technologies. While all of these things are possible, and some of them may even be likely, it seems seriously remiss of Norton-Taylor not to point out that this kind of alarmist futurology is itself a product of the Cold War. On the evidence of similar efforts from the past, the predictive utility of the DCDC's reports will be somewhere between marginal and negligible. Catastrophising is also a consequence of the selective sharing of information by the secret state, but not one that the author is interested in addressing.

During the Cold War British spies strove to find hidden killer insights into the real nature of the Soviet system, when in actuality the slow collapse of the Eastern bloc might have been discerned from economic and social information freely available to anyone who bothered to study it. By the same token, the catalogue of failures by the British state during the current pandemic seem more revealing of the nation's vulnerabilities than anything in a DCDC report. On the evidence of the pandemic things have already moved on from when Norton-Taylor began writing this book: the British state is no longer even any good at either cultivating mystique or convincingly bullshitting.

*Scott Anthony is a journalist and historian
based at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.*