



“PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND POWER”

Democratic, Western society is clearly going to have to renegotiate its constitutional and psychological relationship with its Intelligence Agencies. Nearly all of us active in public affairs today have been unconsciously marked by the great Manichean struggle of the Cold War in which the KGB, CIA and the rest locked horns and fought a series of ‘cloak and dagger’ engagements. If Mutually Assured Destruction has really been replaced by the doctrine of Preventative War, then the role of the intelligence agencies must change. Intelligence Agencies have moved from being a feared and unseen provider of information to Government to being the most politically vulnerable of the military and security services. As both British and American governments are now finding out, questions of the accountability, legitimacy and transparency of the intelligence services move centre stage if there is any hint that nations have gone to war on false premises. What is now being played out in both London and Washington is a version of the ‘blame game’ in which public trust in the omnipotence of the intelligence services is undermined by association with the incompetence of mere politicians. We saw a similar process at work with “government scientists” at the time of the Brent Spar/Shell debacle. The adjective government undermined the word scientist. The word politician undermines the credibility of “intelligence”.

For weeks the British public have been treated to “Yes, Minister” without the funny one-liners of the television series. Each revelation has shown a government determined to go to war and desperate to find intelligence justification. This is an inversion of the way in which the process is supposed to work. It is also the basic flaw at the root of most public affairs failure – the fervent desire that the real world will conform to what the CEO wishes to see from his windows rather than what a good public affairs function is actually reporting.

Throughout the difficult months before the attack on Saddam Hussein, many felt as I did. We said to ourselves “The US and UK Governments must know something that they cannot tell the rest of us.” I certainly believed that while cooperation between Iraq and Al Qaida had been non-existent at time of September 11th 2001 and very unlikely before the escalation towards war – it certainly did look like a good reason for not backing down in March. A triumphant Hussein, who had outfaced the Anglo-Saxon world, could have sought to take a revenge on their cities by means of Al Qaida. Now we discover the reverse to be true. British Intelligence specifically warned the Prime Minister that it could be more likely rather than less that WMD would get to terrorists if Iraq was attacked. And still the attacks went ahead. Whatever the historians finally decide, British and American governments have just lost another chip of their governing mystique. The British public will feel that bit less serene, that bit more fearful and they will tell the opinion pollster that they trust government less for trust is the currency in which the British public measures its fear.

Lord Hutton’s enquiries into the circumstances surrounding the suicide of a top civil servant expert on WMD has cast a harsh light on the way in which HM Government works in a crisis. Tutors on Crisis Management must already be writing this one up as a roleplay or a board game. Any corporate public affairs practitioner can imagine the smell of fear in those illustrious sunlit corridors. The CEO is much too interested for his own good. The normal deniability defences break down. The Press are at the door, their deference having deserted them. Henry Plumb and I watched a somewhat similar spectacle from Brussels when the British Government had to admit that BSE could “jump the species barrier” etc. For four days Henry and I were left to make up British Policy on BSE in front of the European Parliament and Commission while HMG fought out the allocation of blame between Ministries and Downing Street. In those days however there was no e-mail trail to follow publicly within weeks of the events.

How elegant that the Government’s obsessive desire to read everybody’s emails should have caught them out so rapidly in a week that in retrospect would have been a ‘good time to bury emails’. Readers will recall Echelon, an Anglo-Saxon agreement to listen-in on the e-mails and other electronic messages of a large number of politicians, businessmen and societal leaders world-wide. The European Parliament studied the matter via a special committee procedure in 2000/2001. One aspect of the affair that caused particular offence on the mainland was the privileged provision of information so-gained to American and British companies. Indeed James Woolsey, former Director of the CIA, justified the existence of the whole Echelon system on the grounds that European companies bribed their way

around the world while American companies did not, and that mass eavesdropping merely levelled the playing field. The European Union has made substantial progress in co-ordinating many sensitive issues relating to power in society in the months since September 11th. But it would be interesting to know whether or not they have yet agreed to stop spying on each other. As recently as the last British Presidency in 1998, Robin Cook, in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, took refuge in a standard formula when faced with the assertion that the British were using their intelligence services to listen into Franco-German summits. Almost everything to do with technology nowadays has a covert angle, from Europe's Galileo challenge to the GPS system or the negotiation of apparently technical protocols to transport and communication agreements between the USA and the European Union. So perhaps we should apply a little more accountability, legitimacy and transparency to these discussions.

In a world where Western intelligence services need data on terrorist organisations who collaborate via the Internet from the tri-border region of Paraguay to the tribal territories of Pakistan, they all need ears and eyes on the ground. What should be more natural than that Western governments should turn once again to companies and non-governmental organisations for agents already in country? But what should be the attitude of companies who are recruited, co-opted or pressured into collaborating with intelligence services? Should they be invited to make statements in their Annual Report as part of Corporate Social Responsibility, explaining that they and their staff take part in espionage? This could lead to yet more torturing of the English language in the Annual Report of oil companies – and not just in English! French companies are traditionally closer to the State than Anglo-Saxon ones and may have trouble distinguishing between their interest and those of the French State. How do such issues play in German or Japanese board rooms? Are they discussed by Supervisory Boards? Are their workforces consulted? How indeed do Russian companies, increasingly active on the world stage, regard their relationship to the FSB/KGB?

Do retired spies make good public affairs practitioners? Is this yet another of the ill-defined responsibilities of the public affairs function? Nowadays it seems impossible to have a dinner party of public affairs practitioners without discovering at least two people with intelligence backgrounds. Is it possible to maintain such links in a world where the divisions between Civil Servants, Corporates and NGOs are rapidly breaking down due to recruiting policies that stress the interchangeability of talent in the organisations that dominate the global political space? I am not myself a reader of spy novels: however, as I recall 'The Quiet American' by Graham Greene, the CIA Agent presented himself as part of a medical NGO. So should we require NGOs to make clear their attitude to involvement in intelligence work as part of the new transparency we demand of them? We had terrible trouble in Counterpart International along these lines a few years ago. Amongst Counterpart's activities in 60 countries it has been very successful in exporting unwanted Defence Department launderettes and bread-baking units from Germany to Central Asia. Once they arrived in the "stans", Counterpart would work its capacity building magic to set up women's co-operatives to operate them as profitable businesses. This soon escalated into stories of CIA agents hiding in tumble driers and would-be Bonds breaking open bagels to read the news from the neighbouring yurt.

Actually of course they do these things differently in the States. I well remember the disbelieving looks of my teenage daughters in a bagel bar near the White House six years ago. A black suburban screeched to a halt outside. In came six hungry Americans dressed like a SWAT team in black BDU's with big shoulder flashes announcing they were "Secret Service". What is wrong with this picture? The real danger of broken boundaries and ignored distinctions are reported on in the Summer Edition of Humanitarian Affairs Review, the excellent periodical published by Giles Merritt. It carries a section on NGO/Military relations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The former US Ambassador to Somalia, Liberia and Niger (sic) makes a passionate appeal not to confuse genuine humanitarian personnel with the military in civilian clothes "doing good" as "force extenders".

Nowhere is power closer to public view than in the question of failed and failing states, which are flavour of the month. The Australians recently dispatched forces to the Solomon Islands in a preventative intervention designed to stop the failed micro-state becoming a home for international crime and terrorism. Bodies piled up outside the US Embassy in Liberia as a dramatic way of requesting intervention from the New Rome, whose ancestors established the state for freed slaves. West Africans acknowledge the inter-relationship of state failure in Sierra Leone, Liberia the Ivory Coast and Guinea. In the Western Balkans, the European Union has still not really bitten the bullet of

the failed states represented by Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, or on a bad day, the potential for failure in Albania and Macedonia. The Thessaloniki EU Summit did however take an important step forward in explicitly offering membership of the Union as the goal for all the states of the Western Balkans, when they have survived their period as 'protectorates'. I have long believed that it would be easier if we moved to full membership via a period of formal EU rather than UN 'trusteeship' in Kosovo. With an overstretched Pentagon desperate to find more troops for the unscripted Iraqi morass, perhaps we are now ready for the long-needed Europeanization of Balkan security – so that the incorporation of former Yugoslavia into the EU can proceed logically and democratically.

Those who object to future interventions in the event of state failure being decided purely on the basis on Anglo-Saxon preferences and values had better equip the United Nations with a set of objective criteria that begin to move failing states into some form of trustee status. This would be a historically interesting reversal of the process by which many existing states of the UN emerged from the colonial experience via the Trustee Council. Perhaps the UN could begin by creating a structure equivalent to that by which Transparency International ranks nations according to the prevalence of corruption in their societies. The objective criteria would have to be chosen with a certain care. Defining state failure has statistical pitfalls. It is complex to calculate the number of terrorists, people smugglers, drug rings or money launderers in any one territory, which could be deemed to make it a threat to the international community. All this could play havoc with UN etiquette. UN Ambassadors are like certain famous Iraqi Information Ministers in that they fall silent only after the ultimate failure of their states. Until that moment, they assert, however unconvincingly, their state's total control over its territory and the probity of every one of its citizens. However unlikely it seems, we should equip the United Nations with its own intelligence agency capable of reporting back to the Secretary General on the failure potential of any individual State. The alternative is to rely on information provided by potentially rapacious neighbouring states or the intelligence networks of former colonial powers.

Public affairs is one way in which we decide on the division of power within and between societies. In more cases than we perhaps feel comfortable with, it decides who lives and who dies as well as who lives well or badly. The public affairs function does itself no favours by denying its relationship to power – public, private, principled or perverse – because power is what decision making is about.

