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Successive Prime Ministers told about Blunt—Thatcher

By Colin Brown

SUCCESSIVE Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries were all told about the Blunt affair, the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, told the House of Commons. As the Queen's art-expert, the Palace was told to take no action after Blunt's confession because it would have alerted his Soviet spymasters, she said, opening yesterday's debate on the Blunt affair.

Mrs Thatcher told the Commons: "It is important not to be so obsessed with yesterday's danger that we fail to detect today's. We know what happened to a very few of that pre-war generation who had Marxist leanings and betrayed their country. We find it deplorable and repugnant. Our task now is to guard against their counterparts of today."

In a statement that she described as "very carefully marshalled," Mrs Thatcher said, "The procedures under which the security service is directly responsible to the Home Secretary were scrupulously followed after 1947. Successive Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries were all informed about this case. Immunity was offered to Blunt to get information of Soviet penetration into the public service. Neither at the time, nor since has there been any evidence on which he could be prosecuted.

"I am advised that a confession obtained as a result of an inducement given would not be admissible as evidence in any prosecution.

"Events in this case began well over 40 years ago. Many of the principal figures concerned . . . have long since retired and some have died. It is not possible and never will be to establish all the facts. These are factors we have to take into account in deciding whether there should be an inquiry."

"Professor Blunt has admitted that he was recruited for Russian intelligence at Cambridge before the war. In 1940 he joined the Secret Service. To us today it is most extraordinary that a man who had made no secret of his Marxist beliefs could have been accepted for security work in any part of the public service let alone the security service. But that was with the benefit of hindsight." She pointed out the security service was rapidly expanding recruitment to deal with Hitler's Germany.

Blunt had said that during his period in the security service from 1940 to 1945 he regularly passed to Russian Intelligence anything that came his way that would be of interest to them. The Government did not know exactly what information he passed on, but did know what information by virtue of his duties he had access to.

"There is no doubt that British interests were seriously damaged by his activities, but it is unlikely that British military operations or British lives were put at risk.

Mrs Thatcher added: "He has said that from 1945 to 1951 he passed no information to the Russians. In May 1951, an investigation which had continued for some years caught up with Donald Maclean. It was Philby who warned Burgess to tell Maclean that he was about to be interrogated. It was Blunt who used Burgess as a contact with a Soviet controller to help with the arrangements for Maclean's flight to Russia — a journey in which he was joined by Burgess."

Blunt admitted on one occasion between 1951 and 1956 that he helped Philby to contact the Russian intelligence. He has said he has had no contact with Russian intelligence since then.

The defection of Burgess and Maclean led to intense and prolonged investigation into the extent to which security and other public services had been infiltrated by Russian intelligence. At an early stage Blunt came under inquiry. This was the result of information to the effect that Burgess had been heard in 1937 to say he was working for a secret branch of the Comintern and Blunt was one of his sources, Mrs Thatcher said. Blunt denied that but he stayed under suspicion and was interviewed on 11 occasions over the next eight years.

He persisted in his denial and no evidence against him was obtained. Until his confession the authorities did not know the extent of his involvement with the Russians or the period over which it lasted. It was early in 1964 that new information was received relating to the earlier period that directly implicated Blunt.

"I cannot disclose the nature of that information. It was not usable as evidence on which to base a prosecution," the Prime Minister said. "In these circumstances, the security authorities were faced with a difficult choice. They could have decided to wait in the hope that further information which could be used as a basis for prosecuting Blunt would in due course be discovered. But the security

Mrs Thatcher: 'Deplorable and repugnant betrayals'

authorities had already pursued their inquiries for nearly 13 years without obtaining firm evidence against Blunt. There was no reason to expect or hope that a further wait would be likely to yield evidence of a kind that had eluded them so far."

The Prime Minister stated: "If the security authorities had confronted him with the new information and he still persisted in his denial their investigation of him would have been no further forward and they might have prejudiced their own position by alerting him to information which he could have used to warn others.

"They therefore decided to ask the Attorney-General, through the Acting Director of Public Prosecutions, to authorise them to offer him immunity from prosecution if he both confessed and cooperated in their investigation."

It was not unusual for the Attorney-General to be asked to authorise immunity from prosecution, because it happened from time to time in criminal investigations.

"The decision is his alone. In this case the then Attorney-General, Sir John Hobson, decided it was in the public interest to offer immunity from prosecution. In fact, to this day there is no evidence which may be used as the basis for prosecution against Blunt."

Blunt had subsequently cooperated in the inquiries of the security service, provided information about Russian intelligence activity and also told about his association with Burgess, Maclean and Philby.

After the Attorney-General's decision to give Blunt immunity the Queen's private secretary was invited to a meeting with the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office and the director general of the security service. The Queen's private secretary was asked to the meeting because Blunt since 1945 had held an unpaid appointment in the Royal Household for which he was awarded a knighthood in 1956.

At this meeting the Queen's private secretary was told that Professor Blunt was suspected of having been an agent for the Russians and, that provided he cooperated and confessed, he had been granted immunity from prosecution.

"The Queen's private secretary asked what action the Queen was advised to take if Blunt confessed. He was told that the Queen was advised to take no action. Any action would of course have alerted Blunt's former Russian controllers—and others who were already under suspicion—to the fact that he had confessed and could be providing information to our security authorities.

"After Blunt had been interviewed and had confessed the Palace duly followed the advice that had already been given."

Relations between the security service and ministers were governed by a directive given to the director-general of the security service by the then Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, in 1952 and the principles were endorsed in a report by Lord Denning.

This stated that if a director-general of security services was in any doubt as to any aspect of his duties, for instance, if he got information about his ministers or senior public servants indicating they might be a security risk, he should consult the Home Secretary, who would then have to take responsibility for further action.

Mrs Thatcher said: "I can tell the House that in the case of Blunt the director-general of the security service followed scrupulously the procedures that had been laid down."

He had a meeting with the Home Secretary on March 2, 1964, in the course of which he told the Home Secretary about the new information implicating Blunt and indicated he would be discussing with the Director of Public Prosecutions how to conduct the interview with Blunt, bearing in mind the security service needed to get as much intelligence as possible about Soviet penetration. The Home Secretary drew his attention to the need to inform the Queen's private secretary on June 17, 1964.

A further meeting was held between the Home Secretary, his Permanent Secretary and the director-general, who reported that Blunt had admitted spying for the Russians throughout the war when he was serving in the security service. There were opposition jeers as Mrs Thatcher went on to say, "The Home Secretary of the day—now Lord Brooke—at first did not recall being told . . . it is quite understandable."

Lord Brooke, Mrs Thatcher added, "has been reminded of these meetings and has with characteristic integrity accepted that his memory must have been at fault." To more jeering, she said: "There is no more honourable or devoted servant."

There had been no failure on the part of the security service to carry out their duty to inform the Home Secretary and it was for him to decide whether the Prime Minister should be informed. "There is no record on this point—neither Lord Brooke nor Lord Home can recall discussing the matter."

Mrs Thatcher had since laid down new procedures for making sure that the Home Secretary, and, in cases of special doubt or difficulty, the Prime Minister, should be aware of requests for immunity.

"I am advised that since 1967 successive Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries have all been informed about the position of Blunt. As I indicated in my written reply, the matter was also brought to the attention of successive Attorney-Generals in 1972, June 1974, and June 1979, to inform them of the immunity that had been given."

Explaining why Mr Blunt's solicitor had been tipped off by the Prime Minister's Office that the disclosures were to be made last week, Mrs Thatcher repeated that there was no question of prosecuting Mr Blunt so there was no question of enabling Mr Blunt to escape.

For the Opposition, the former Home Secretary, Mr Merlyn Rees warned: "This House will be unworthy of playing any part in security matters if the debate today develops into a witch hunt."

Mr Rees said there should be greater co-operation between incoming and outgoing Home Secretaries. They should meet to discuss security procedures—" and Prime Ministers should do the same because they see the wider picture."

Mr Rees told MPs firmly: "Whatever else this House should consider, any idea of a 1921 Act tribunal of inquiry would be wrong in my view and in no way would I recommend that." But he said he believed the time had come for a review of the procedures and control of the security services.

Mr Sam Silkin, Attorney-General in the last Labour Government, told MPs that he had first been made aware of the Blunt case in June, 1974. He had been informed that of the four Attorneys-General between 1964 and 1974, only Labour's Lord Elwyn-Jones, who had become Attorney-General in 1964 only four months after Blunt's confession—had not been told of the case.

Mr Silkin went on: "I advised that Lord Elwyn-Jones should be told (in June, 1974) and that was passed to the Secretary to the Cabinet, and he told me it had been approved." He added that he had assumed that the approval had been given by the then Prime Minister, Sir Harold Wilson.

Mr Silkin then told MPs of the second time he had reviewed Blunt's case, in 1978, when it became known that Andrew Boyle was writing his book, The Climate of Treason. Having reconsidered the matter I remained very firmly of the opinion that there was no prospect of embarking on a successful prosecution."

Mr Willie Hamilton (Lab, Fife Central) said: "This squalid conspiracy of high places has had part of its mask torn from its ugly face by the courage and determination of Mr Boyle. Whatever is said in this debate we in this House, and still less the people outside are never, never, never, going to know the truth." They were battling against the determination of establishment "to protect its own."

Mr Hamilton said: "Here was a noted ex-public schoolboy, a known homosexual and traitor for 20 years within the Palace gates. And when the Queen was told, if she was, of the manifest qualifications of this man, she must have been deeply shocked and very angry, greatly alarmed and greatly embarrassed."

For the Queen to have been advised to keep such a "creature" in her employment the reasons must have been "overwhelming and irresistible. What were they?" Mr Hamilton demanded. "Perhaps she was never told, perhaps she was kept in the dark."

Mr Hamilton demanded a "far-reaching public inquiry" into the Blunt affair, claiming there had been a conspiracy to keep the Commons and the public in the dark.

He also suggested that the timing of Mrs Thatcher's announcement last week might have been to take attention from the record rise in the Minimum Lending Rate.

The former Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath told MPs that he was informed about the Blunt case when he became Prime Minister in 1970. "I was informed in February, 1973, about the details of this particular case in full because of certain other matters associated with it which had arisen. I didn't have to consider the question of immunity because that had been granted. All the Attorneys-General have said that they believed that the right decision was taken."

Of the original granting of immunity in 1964, Mr Heath said that the then Attorney-General, Sir John Hobson, had thought that "if immunity was granted, a great deal of information was going to be obtained." Mr Heath said that the information obtained from Blunt at the time he confessed was valuable.

Mr Tony Benn, the former Labour Minister, said that an inquiry into the Blunt affair "would lead to the naming of two others, both of whom are dead, and we would be no further forward." However, "the central question is how to secure democratic control of security services," Mr Benn said, and there was a need for an inquiry on this matter.

The Blunt case had suggested that the security services were not efficient, and that there was confusion as to who was responsible to whom, he said. He said it was a constitutional question and said that without the House "hounding" ministers they were in danger of forming a "cosy relationship" with the security service.

An inquiry into certain aspects of the Blunt affair was called for by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Callaghan, who suggested it might be headed by Lord Diplock. It would look into the relationship between ministers and heads of services.

He said: "This has been a very sorry story in our history. It is one in which no one can feel any sense of pride and it is one which I wish had never happened. I fear that the morale of the service was damaged. I would not wish it to be damaged further."

Mr Callaghan, rejected an inquiry. He said "I don't believe that much, if any, of the earlier conspiracy remains today alive and active but I do believe that there are people who remain undiscovered and still alive though probably inactive."

It was unlikely that the affair would ever be fully cleared up. "It will only be known in the deepest recesses of the Kremlin," he said.

The Attorney-General, Sir Michael Havers, said there was no need for an inquiry. He refused to go into details on whether the Queen was informed about Mr Blunt, though he was pressed by Mr Hamilton.

But he gave this description of how Blunt was confronted with his treachery. He said: "On April 23, 1964, Blunt was interviewed at his home. He was told of the new information and maintained his denial. He was then offered his immunity. He sat in silence for a while. He got up, looked out of the window, poured himself a drink, and after a few minutes confessed." Later, Mr Blunt cooperated and continued to do so. Mr Blunt was the only person in security matters to be given immunity since the war, said Sir Michael. He said he had been "given a promise that he would never be prosecuted for his previous spying activities."

He attacked Mr Hamilton for a "squalid speech" which suggested that the Blunt affair was made public to take the headlines away from other Government announcements.

PROFESSOR Blunt receives no pension from state funds for any of his public service posts, the Prime Minister said in the Commons yesterday. Mrs Thatcher was answering a written question from Mr Robin Maxwell-Hyslop (C, Tiverton).

Mr Michael Meacher (Lab, Oldham West) asked her how many people had been questioned, how many were civil servants, what action followed the interrogations.

She replied: "Thorough investigations were undertaken following the defection of Burgess and Maclean and many interviews of public servants and members of the public took place. Not all those questioned were themselves under suspicion and it would not be in the public interest to give numbers.

"A number of people left the public service or were transferred to work which did not involve access to classified information. I am satisfied that all appropriate steps were taken to safeguard national security."

She also said she would continue to refuse to answer questions on the security services.

In a further answer she said that the guidelines issued to the security services for their relations with Ministers were unchanged since the early 1960s.

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Friction between NEB and Rolls

The mass resignation on Tuesday of National Enterprise Board directors followed "friction over a considerable period" between the NEB and the Rolls-Royce aero engine firm, the Industry Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, told the Commons yesterday.

Confirming the switch of control over Rolls-Royce from the NEB to the Industry Department, Sir Keith said: "I decided it would not be right to paper over the cracks but rather to remove the source of the difficulty."

He named a new board, headed by Sir Arthur Knight, chairman of Courtaulds, but said his decision was in no sense a reflection on NEB members or their staff.

But the Shadow Industry Secretary, Mr John Silkin, warned: "The new board know perfectly well that if they differ from you in any matter of management they will be out on their necks too."

Sir Keith said he had left some board places vacant and had written to the TUC about them.

But Mr Silkin asked: "How, in these circumstances, do you expect—or even hope—the vacancies you have left will be filled by trade unionists?"

Sir Keith confirmed, as the new head of Rolls-Royce, Sir Frank McFadzean to replace Sir Kenneth Keith, who wants to retire after seven years at the helm. He told MPs: "I have concluded that the friction is not a passing problem of personalities or a difference of opinion on the management of the company but is inherent in the relationship and would tend to survive a change of management.

"Rolls-Royce is a company of a scale and importance such that the supervision of its board by another board—however eminent and accomplished—is bound to give rise to strain."

Sir Keith said that when the Industry Bill — now before Parliament — became law he would issue an Order directing the NEB to transfer its shareholdings in Rolls-Royce to his department. The move was a judgment that the rôle of the NEB had been given in relation to "this major company" was not an appropriate one.

He had been told that if he adhered to his proposal all the board members would resign. He had accepted "with regret" the resignations of chairman Sir Leslie Murphy and the other members — "distinguished people from business and trade unions who cooperated to serve the country with dedication."

Mr Silkin asked whether it was true that when the chairman of the NEB had presented his half-yearly account he had made a number of criticisms of the administration and management, particularly the financial administration of Rolls-Royce. That statement had been previously endorsed by Sir Keith, Mr Silkin claimed.

If that was so how could Sir Keith reconcile it with the description of the difference between the holding comiany and the subsidiary company as being a difference inherent in the relationship?

Then Mr Silkin asked Sir Keith: "What is going to be your reaction to the open and avowed desire of Sir Michael Edwardes and British Leyland also to leave and stop being a subsidiary of the NEB?"

Sir Keith replied: "I do adhere to my view that there is an inherent impracticality between expecting a high-powered board of an important international company like Rolls-Royce to be supervised by another board and then to have its results monitored again by the Government."

"The board of British Leyland has also indicated its desire to be outside the NEB. There are some similarities between BL and RR in relation to the NEB, but I don't regard those similarities in any way complete. I must listen to the case the BL board have to make."

The Liberal leader, Mr David Steel, said that the statement was "astonishing" coming from a Government so "dedicated to non-intervention."

A former Industry Minister, Mr Gerald Kaufman, said that a board of "proven integrity" had been replaced by "a gang of stooges whose only qualification is that unlike the previous board they are ready to do Sir Keith's bidding."

Today in Parliament

House of Commons: Debate on the EEC general budget.

House of Lords: Insurance Companies Bill (HL) (3rd reading); Milk (Extension of Period of Control of Maximum Prices) Order 1979; Bill of Rights Bill (HL) (Committee).

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