

# The Wilson plots

## Robin Ramsay

The 'Wilson plots' is a portmanteau term for a collection of fragments of knowledge about intelligence operations against the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and a great many other people and organisations. 'The Wilson plots' are about a good deal more than Harold Wilson and his governments.

The British state —and the secret state —had never trusted the British left and had always worked to undermine it. The Attlee government came out of the war-time coalition and was considered mostly safe and reliable by the state: and by safe and reliable I mean it did not seek to challenge either the power of the state nor the assumptions about the importance of finance capital, the British empire and Britain's role as world power which underpinned it.

Harold Wilson, a most conservative man, made one large mistake while a young man as far as the state was concerned: he was not sufficiently anti-Soviet. During the 1940s and 50s, while many of his Labour colleagues were accepting freebies from the Americans and going to the United States for nice holidays, Wilson was travelling east fixing trade deals with the Soviet Union. He was perceived by the secret state —by some sections of the secret state, notably but not exclusively, sections of MI5 —to be someone who, in the words of the General Sir Walter Walker, 'digs with the wrong foot'.

In short, Wilson was perceived by some to be a dangerous lefty and his arrival as leader of the Labour Party was thought by some of the professionally paranoid Cold Warriors in the British and American secret states to be deeply suspicious. Wilson had been to the Soviet Union many times: was he a KGB agent, they wondered? Had he been entrapped and blackmailed?

Asking that question was enough for MI5 to begin obsessively investigating Wilson and his colleagues and friends. Nothing was found. But to the professional paranoids, nothing found simply suggested it was better hidden than they first thought. And so they carried on. Meanwhile, the left in Britain was on the rise: trade unions got more powerful. The professional paranoids, noting the influence of the Communist Party of Great Britain in some trade unions, began to see the shift left-wards in the UK in the sixties and early 1970s as somehow under Soviet control. In 1974 Conservative Prime Minister Heath had his fateful show-down with the miners union —and lost — and the Tory right and their friends in the secret state began a series of operations to prevent what they believed —or pretended to believe —was an imminent left revolution in Britain. Some of these operations were done by the secret state; some by people close to but not in the secret state. Bits of the CIA also shared this view and got involved. The South African intelligence service (BOSS) was running parallel operations against Labour and Liberal politicians it perceived as South Africa's enemies, notably the Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe and the then leader of the Young Liberals, now the Labour MP, Peter Hain. It is worth noting here that similar operations were being run in this period against mild, reformist, leftish parties in New Zealand, Australia, Germany, in Canada against the Quebec separatists, and, most famously, in Chile.

This extraordinarily complex period of British history saw covert operations of one sort or another involving serving or former personnel from MI5, MI6, the CIA, Ministry of Defence and the Information Research Department, plus assets in the media and the trade unions, plus allies in the Conservative Party and the City. That it tends to

get summarised as 'MI5 plots against Wilson' is due to the way the information about these areas emerged in 1986-88, through former Army Information Officer, Colin Wallace, and the former MI5 officer, Peter Wright. They both talked about MI5 as the source of plotting against Wilson (though Wallace's allegations were much wider than that) and for much of the left-liberal media and politicians in this country this fitted straight into their vague understanding of the intelligence services and British domestic history which told them that the bad guys were MI5. By the time we had educated ourselves sufficiently to understand what Wallace and Wright were saying, the perception —the false perception —that the story was just MI5 plotting against the Labour government had been established.

### The Pencourt Investigation

It is largely now forgotten that the first attempt to get 'the Wilson plots' story going was made by Wilson himself.

Wilson was aware of the various attempts to get the media to run smear stories about him and his circle, and aware of the stream of burglaries afflicting himself, his personal staff and other Labour Party figures in the 1974-76 period. But he chose to do nothing in public while he was in office. In private he tried to get the Cabinet Secretary, Sir John Hunt, to do something, though quite what Hunt did is still unknown.

It seems clear now that Wilson did nothing publicly for four reasons. The first was that he didn't have anything substantial to go on —merely suspicions and a lot of little wispy bits and pieces of rumours and tip-offs. The second reason for his inaction was his distrust of MI5. Had Wilson instructed Whitehall to do an inquiry, it would have turned to MI5; and it was MI5 that Wilson and his personal secretary, Marcia Williams, suspected of being at the root of their troubles. The third reason Wilson did nothing while in office was his knowledge in 1974 when he won the election, that he would only serve two more years and quit. Wilson, we now know, was afraid of Alzheimers' disease: it had afflicted his father and he told his inner circle in 1974 that he was going to resign in 1976 when he was 60. In 1975/6 ensuring a smooth hand-over of power to his successor —and Labour was a minority government, don't forget —was a much greater priority than finding out who was behind the burglaries of his offices and the rumours about him. Wilson was a loyal member of the Labour Party to whom he owed everything. He didn't want to make bad publicity for the party —and his successor. And the fourth reason Wilson did nothing was his memory of the previous time he had tried. In his first term in office, encouraged by George Wigg MP, he had tried taking on the Whitehall security establishment in the so-called D-notice Affair —and had got his fingers badly burned.

As far as we know Wilson had very little real, concrete information about what was going on in 1976 when he retired. He knew that he and his circle were being repeatedly burgled. He had watched the campaign being run against Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberal Party, by BOSS, and that is why he made his first public remarks not about MI5, the objects of his real suspicions, but about BOSS. But those comments produced all the negative reactions he feared —not surprisingly, since he had almost no evidence —and he let it drop until he resigned.

He then waited a couple of months and contacted two journalists, Barry Penrose and Roger

Courtour (who became mockingly titled 'Pencourt') gave them the little he had and hoped for the best. But without any decent leads into the MI5 material, Pencourt stumbled —or were led: it isn't clear which —into the story being run by BOSS of Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe and his brief affair with Norman Scott —not the story of MI5's campaign against Wilson. There was a brief flurry of interest by the media, notably by the Observer which had paid a lot of money for the serialisation rights to the Pencourt book, but nothing happened and the story disappeared. Wilson tried to get his successor James Callaghan to do something but Callaghan declined.

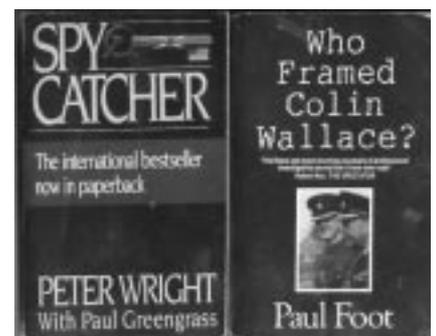
The story disappeared for two reasons. The only journalists or politicians in the late 1970s who knew anything about the secret state were currently or formerly employed by the secret state or were mouthpieces for it. There was no investigative journalism in 1978 in the UK worth mentioning; there were no former British intelligence officers to show journalists the way; there were no whistle-blowers, no renegades. There were no courses being taught in universities. There were almost no books to read. In 1978 the British secret state was, really was, still secret.

After the failure of the Pencourt investigation nothing happened for five years. Harold Wilson became a Lord, presided over a long inquiry into the City of London which was consigned to the recycle bin as soon as it was published, and duly developed Alzheimers' as he suspected he would. His personal assistant for 30 years, Marcia Williams, became Lady Faulkender and has said nothing of consequence since. Barry Penrose and Roger Courtour made a lot of money. Penrose was last seen working for the Express, telling lies for the British state about Northern Ireland. Courtour is in the BBC somewhere.

### Colin Wallace & Peter Wright

By 1979 the extraordinary events of the 1974-76 period —events which included The Times seriously discussing the right conditions for a military coup in the UK, and a considerable chunk of the British establishment wondering if the Prime Minister was a KGB agent —had just slipped by, unexamined. In came Mrs Thatcher with her GCSE understanding of economics and proceeded to wreck the British economy, creating 2 million unemployed in 18 months, and the entire story —or group of stories we know as the Wilson plots — simply ceased to be of interest to all but a handful of people.

One of that handful was Colin Wallace, who in 1980 began a ten year sentence for a manslaughter he didn't commit. Wallace was interested in the Wilson plots story because he had not only been a minor participant in the plots, and had knowledge of other areas of secret activities, he





Wallace had the job he said he did in Northern Ireland. Wallace claimed to have had access to secret intelligence material in his capacity as a psy-ops/ war unit was officially deniable, i.e. officially didn't exist, the MOD line was that Wallace was simply a press officer —his official, public role — and the rest was fantasies. We were trying to establish the veracity not only of his claims about events but also his claims about his own CV.

**The jumping log book**

Wallace was a sky-diving enthusiast and eventually the Army in Northern Ireland began including sky-diving in its psychological operations. Wallace formed a free-fall team which did displays all over Northern Ireland and was used to try to create positive feelings about the Army —basic hearts and minds stuff. Wallace's speciality was descending dressed as Santa Claus and giving out presents to kids. Sky-diving in this country is very tightly controlled: every jump is recorded by the British Parachuting Association. As you do more jumps you get differing kinds of licenses: beginners, intermediate, advanced. Wallace had an advanced, 'D' license —or so he said.

In the summer of 1987 rumours began spreading through this little group of journalists that Wallace's claims to have been a sky-diver were a fake. He was a fantasist, a Walter Mitty. These rumours arrived at Channel Four News via an old colleague of Wallace's who knew an ITN journalist. The rumours seemed inexplicable at first: we had lots of pictures of Wallace sky-diving with and without his Santa Claus outfit. But when I finally rang the British Parachuting Association to check their file on Wallace I found they had no record of him. Eventually Paul Foot, also working on the story, discovered that a duplicate set of records were held by the international parachuting body and Wallace's records were there, confirming that he was what he said he was —as far as sky-diving went, anyway. Undaunted by this, a journalist now with the BBC called John Ware, still ran the 'Wallace-is-a-fake' parachuting story some months later in a double page spread in the Independent smearing Wallace and Fred Holroyd.

The point here is, we can now work out some of what this MOD-MI5 operation against Wallace consisted of. First, they picked one area of Wallace's CV, his parachuting, and set out to discredit him with it. If they could show he was lying here, they believed, journalists would not believe his other claims. They burgled his house and stole his jumping log book; they burgled the British Parachuting Association and removed his file, substituting a fake file for the one with his number on it. Then they began spreading the word through their press contacts that Wallace was a fraud, knowing that Wallace didn't have his jumping log and knowing that —eventually —some journalist would ring the British Parachuting Association

knew he was in prison to stop him talking about them. The other interested party was the former MI5 officer, Peter Wright. He had also been a participant in the plots and had also been maltreated by his erstwhile employers in the secret state. Not framed and imprisoned like Wallace, but denied a decent pension on a technicality after a lifetime's service to the state.

Here is one of the outstanding lessons of this episode. The British secret state is an astonishingly inept employer of people. None of those who became well known whistle blowers in the 1980s and 90s, Wright and Wallace, John Stalker, Captain Fred Holroyd, Cathy Massiter, David Shayler and Richard Tomlinson wanted to be whistle-blowers. They were converted into whistle-blowers by the stupidity of their employers in the state. Wallace, Holroyd and Wright, for example, were loyal Queen and Country men to a fault, right-wingers through and through. Unfortunately, our secret state has only one response to internal dissent or the possibility of public revelation of its own errors: smash, crush, smear, destroy, frame, cover-up and lie. The secret state perceives itself to be defending the national interest and in the national interest anything is permitted.

In prison in the 1980s Colin Wallace began writing letters about his wrongful conviction and accounts of his experiences working for the British Army's psychological warfare operation in Northern Ireland. In that capacity he had witnessed some of MI5's attempts to smear Wilson and other politicians as communists, drug-takers, homosexuals etc. The major media took no notice. Duncan Campbell at the New Statesman, did take notice but had an enormous amount on his agenda and did nothing. So Wallace ended up working with me instead.

Despite Wallace's allegations made while in prison and published by me in Lobster and distributed all over the British media in the months preceding his release from prison, the media took almost no notice. They only sat up and paid attention when the first rumours about a book being published in Australia by a former MI5 officer called Peter Wright began circulating in the UK. One nut-case talking about the Wilson plots could be ignored; two, apparently, could not.

We now know, from a senior civil servant called Clive Ponting —another whistle-blower in the 1980s —that in the months before Wallace's release from prison, the Ministry of Defence set up a committee, with MI5, to deal with him. It is worth noting here that this committee did not simply order his murder. Outside Northern Ireland our secret state seems to kill people very rarely. But it is also worth noting that the committee was set up to pervert the course of justice. Precisely what this committee did is not known, but its general remit was to discredit Wallace and so discredit his allegations. Two of its operations were detected and they show what can be done with unaccountable power.

By mid 1987 despite the huge amount of space devoted to the allegations filtered back from Australia from the Peter Wright book, Spycatcher, there were only three groups of journalists actually trying to research the complex tales Wallace told: Channel Four News, where I was briefly; David Leigh and Paul Lashmar at the Observer; and, a bit later, Paul Foot at the Mirror. Other journalists dropped in and out, did odd stories, but only those three groups were seriously at it. We all had the same basic problem: Wallace had been described as a 'Walter Mitty' by Ministry of Defence briefings during his trial in 1980 and the Ministry of Defence was simply denying that

and ask about his record. Finding nothing, because his file had been removed, such a journalist would consider the allegation that he was a fantasist proven and would thus dismiss him as the 'Walter Mitty' figure described at his trial. This operation was certainly run at Channel Four News and John Ware, then working for the BBC. In effect, the MOD tried to convert Wallace into the 'Walter Mitty' they said he was. Unfortunately for the MOD, Paul Foot was a better journalist than that and found the duplicate set. Without Foot we would have been struggling to rebut the Wallace-is-a fantasist line. Another disinformation project about Wallace was fed through Professor Paul Wilkinson, then at Aberdeen University. A former RAF officer, Wilkinson was ITN's official consultant on terrorism. Somebody in the MOD or MI5 fed him some material about Wallace which accused him of trying to get a man in Northern Ireland killed so he —Wallace —could have the man's wife. This smear story had been created just before Wallace left Northern Ireland —presumably in case they ever needed to get at Wallace. Wilkinson wrote a letter, passing this derogatory material on to ITN. Fortunately, by this point, Channel Four News' management were pretty sure Wallace was telling the truth and showed us journalists Wilkinson's letter. The allegations it contained were refutable, and Wallace wrote to the University authorities. Wilkinson was reprimanded and apologised and lost his job as ITN's consultant on terrorism.

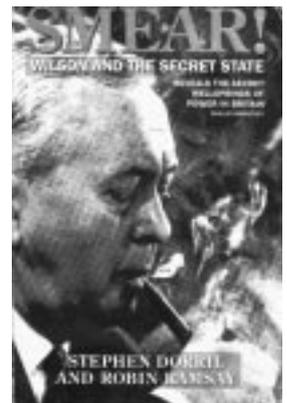
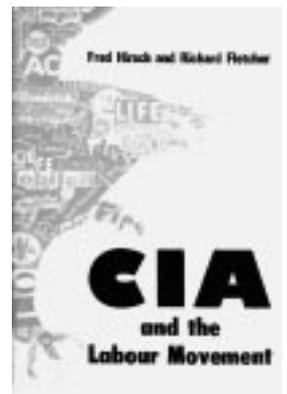
The point here is this: Wallace had already been framed for manslaughter and convicted in a rigged trial. Having failed to shut Wallace up with six years of imprisonment, the secret state then set about discrediting him. If you could get to the people on the MOD/MI5 committee which planned this and asked them why they were doing it, they would simply say, it was in the national interest to prevent Wallace talking. In the minds of the secret state the national interest —as defined by them — overrides the competing claims of justice and democracy.

**Politicians and the Secret State**

I offer these anecdotes by way of introduction to some comments on the relationship between the media, politicians and what we might call historical truth. Many people vaguely assume, as I did at the beginning of the Wallace affair, that politicians and journalists are concerned with 'the truth'. This simply isn't the case.

Most journalists —at least 99% of those I have met —are interested first in their careers, and aims subsidiary to that, such as getting a story or doing better

Colin Wallace in Northern Ireland: image from Paul Foot's book.



Above: MI5 HQ  
Below: MI6 HQ



than their rivals, or having a good time or padding their expenses. Journalist are just people doing a job. They have mortgages and families to support; and theirs is now a very insecure business. All the unions in the media were smashed in the past 15 years. Contracts are short. You can be fired on the spot.

Politicians, most of them, are simply interested in power or aims subsidiary to that, such as getting re-elected, getting re-elected; pleasing the whips to get promotion; or simply getting press coverage. The pursuit of the truth is not on the agenda of most politicians; the pursuit of the truth, when it means going against prevailing media opinion, or the wishes of their party's leaders, or the wishes of the state, is on the agenda of a handful. This is particularly true of stories in the field of intelligence and security policy. Nothing makes MPs more nervous than security and intelligence issues.

In the first place, if they've got half a brain, MPs simply won't go near subjects about which they are ignorant—which is sensible enough. And to my knowledge other than those who have worked for, or have been close to, the security and intelligence services, there are no MPs who have a decent knowledge of this field. Not even Tam Dalyell. In the second place, MPs all have a healthy respect for the damage to careers tangling with the spooks can inflict. You might think that MPs then have a massive vested interest in bringing the security and intelligence services under their control. But this hasn't happened yet and, in my view, short of some massive, earth-shaking scandal, never will.

In the House of Commons in 1987 we got some help from Ken Livingstone, Tam Dalyell and Dale Campbell-Savours. These days Dalyell is still at it, as is Norman Baker a Lib-Dem MP, a new member of the so-called awkward squad. Livingstone has moved onto other areas and Campbell-Savours has become a Blair loyalist.

The British political and media systems are not equipped to deal with major issues concerning the behaviour of the secret state. In the political arena the Intelligence and Security Committee setup under the Tories is a joke, without investigative powers. But it is a joke useful to the secret state. When the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee was conducting hearings into the Sierra Leone affair last year it asked for an interview with the head of MI6. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook denied them access on the grounds that that the security and Intelligence Committee was the appropriate forum for such questions. MPs are still unable to ask questions about the Security and Intelligence services: the House of Commons Clerks simply will not accept them. The secret state is still, officially, not accountable to Parliament.

At its heart, the Wilson plots story was the attempt by a handful of people to persuade the

major print and broadcast media and parliament that their view of the British political universe was false. I was writing articles which implied: you—the media, the politicians—do not know what you are talking about: the world isn't the way you say it is. At the beginning, before the major media took any real interest in the Wallace story, this was a peculiarly difficult message to sell. Who was I to tell experienced journalists they didn't know what was what? I was on the dole, living in the sticks, in Hull, producing a magazine with a tiny circulation. In the weeks before Wallace came out of prison I had circulated a great deal of material to the major media about Wallace, his case and his explosive allegations. I got only one response, from a journalist at Newsnight. As big-time journalists are prone to do, he said, don't tell me over the phone, come down to London. So down I went to Newsnight's office. It was my first exposure to the major media. I delivered the spiel and the journalist was interested and said he would take a camera crew down to the prison to interview Wallace when he got out.

I had been told by Wallace that among the visitors to his secret psy-ops unit, Information Policy, in Northern Ireland, had been Alan Protheroe, who at the time of my Newsnight visit, was Assistant Director General of the BBC. Nicknamed 'the Colonel' in the BBC, Protheroe was, and may still be, a part-time soldier-cum-intelligence officer, specialising in military-media relations.

But unlike the journalists I had been talking to up to that point, Protheroe knew who Wallace was and what the Information Policy unit had been doing in Northern Ireland. To Newsnight I therefore said something like this: 'Protheroe's a spook; you'll have to watch him. He'll try and block anything you do with Wallace in it.' 'Really, old boy,' said the BBC people I was talking to, 'it isn't like that in the BBC'.

Their response was comical, really. It was then only just over a year since there had been several weeks of intense media interest in the revelation that the BBC actually had its own in-house MI5 office vetting BBC employees (still there, as far as I know)—prima facie evidence that, au contraire, the BBC was exactly 'like that'.

The Newsnight journalist, Julian O'Hallorhan, interviewed Wallace the day he came out of prison and then had his piece yanked out of a programme at the very last minute. I was actually watching Newsnight at the time and saw the confusion in the studio as the running order was rejigged while they were on air. We subsequently heard that Protheroe had indeed blocked the Wallace interview, and when asked, the BBC denied that they had ever interviewed Wallace. (Paul Foot has seen a bootleg of the film—which didn't exist.) Protheroe's action in blocking the Wallace interview was reported four months later in the Sunday Times and has been confirmed since by a senior Newsnight staffer who has now left the BBC.

Thirteen years later, have things improved? Yes and no. The media is potentially more difficult to manage for the state than it used to be. The Ministry of Defence employs 150 press officers to spin-doctor the media and even MI6 has a media department whose job it is to wine and dine journalists and editors to get the departmental line across. The days when a quiet word in the ear of a handful of editors would ensure a media blackout are gone. And there is a good deal more information available than there was in 1986—if journalists could be bothered to read it—which, mostly, they can't. But the fundamental attitudes of the media towards the state and secret state remain the same as far as I am aware. British journalists—and, more importantly—British editors, do not see themselves in an adversarial relationship with the state and secret state. If the secret state says 'national security' to them, most journalists and virtually all editors will still back away. And in some ways the situation today is even worse than

it was then. Investigative journalism is expensive, offers no guarantee of publishable articles, or broadcastable TV programmes, and there is less of it now than there was then. There has been a visible dumbing-down of the few TV documentary series, such as World inAction, into consumerism programmes. Not counting the journalists who are simply mouthpieces for state, who go under the titles of diplomatic or defence correspondents, there is currently only one journalist in the whole of Britain who is seriously interested in the intelligence and security field, and that's Paul Lashmar at the Independent.

In 1990, I think it was, a resolution of mine, became the North Hull Labour Party's conference resolution. It called for a full-scale public inquiry into Northern Ireland, the dirty war there, the Wallace affair and the Wilson plots; it called for the introduction of a system of real parliamentary accountability for the secret state. The resolution went to the Labour Party conference where it was passed without opposition. As such, according to the rules of the Party, it became party policy. Of course nothing happened, the whole thing has been forgotten and we are where we were in 1986 before the Wilson plots story got going. Short of a bug being found in Tony and Cherie Blair's bedroom with 'please return to MI5' stamped on it, New Labour is not likely to challenge the secret state—and maybe not even then.

Although Britain is a democracy in some senses, the 'will of the people' has never been extended to cover the key areas of interest to a state which was developed to run and service an empire. Defence, foreign policy, security and intelligence policy—in none of these areas can MPs or their constituents have access to official information or have any input into policy. During both World Wars the state co-opted the mass media of the day for its propaganda; and this continued to some extent after the war in the Cold War with the Soviet bloc when large chunks of the media were co-opted again to run anti-Soviet propaganda—this is what is described in the new Paul Lashmar book about the Information Research Department; and is presumably the reason it has been so widely ignored.

At the end of the day, as the cliché has it, its down to the politicians. As long as the politicians remain content not to have any influence over foreign and defence affairs—and the intelligence agencies which service them—the media will remain relatively impotent and the subject will remain off the agenda. And, unfortunately, this present intake of Labour MPs shows every sign of being at least as supine before the state as those who came before it.

