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 government.

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 wartime coalition and was considered mostly safe and reliable by the state: and by safe and reliable I mean it did not seek to challenge 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.

Hugh 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, when 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 M15 — 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 become actively 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 leftwards in the UK in the sixties and early 1970s as somehow under Soviet control. In 1974 Conservative Prime Minister Heath had his fatal 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 the then leader of the Young Liberals, Thorpe and the then leader of the Liberal Party, General Sir Walter Walker, ‘digs with the wrong foot’.

One of that handful was Colin Wallace, who in 1976 accused Thorne 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 affected 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 bungling 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 while in office 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 — the so-called D-notice Affair — and had almost no evidence — and he let it drop until he resigned.

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 him, 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 Hope, to look into 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 whispy bits and pieces of rumours and tip-offs. The second reason for his inaction was his distrust of M15. Had Wilson instructed Whitehall to do an inquiry, it would have turned to M15, and it was M15 that Wilson and his personal secretary, Marcia Williams, suspected of being at the root of their troubles. The reason Wilson did nothing while in office was his knowledge in 1974 that he would only serve two more years and quit. Wilson, we now know, was afraid of Alzheimer’s disease: it had affected 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 bungling 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 while in office 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 — 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 bungled. He had watched the campaign being run against J eremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberal Party, by BOSS, and that is why he made his public remarks not about M15, the objects of his real suspicions, but about BOSS. But those comments produced all the negative reactions he feared — not surprising — since he had almost no evidence — and he let it drop until he resigned.

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 Percourt 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 Alzheimer’s as he suspected he would. The paranoid personality — some 35 years, Marcia Williams, became Lady Faulkender and has said nothing of consequence since. Barry Penrose and Roger Courtoir made a lot of money, Penrose was last seen working for the Express, telling lies for the British state about Northern Ireland. Courtoir 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 Mr 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 gave a ten year assuredness 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
know 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, J ohn Stalker, Captain Fred Holroyd, Cathy Masliss, 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: smear, 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 account 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 others by adding sexual improprieties, homosexuality 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. Only when there was a story in the papers about his claims and reports in the papers could be ignored; two, apparently, could not.

We now know, from a senior civil servant called Clive Ponting—and another whistle-blower in the 1990s—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 protect MI5. All 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 on the Wright book, Sycamore, there were only three groups of journalists actually trying to research the complex tales Wallace told. Colin and I worked for Channel Four News, where I was briefly; David Leigh and Paul Latham at the Observer, and, a bit later, Paul Foot at the Mirror. Other journalists dropped in and out, did odd stories, but none of those three groups were seriously at it. We all had the same basic problem: Wallace had been described as a 'Walter Mitty' by Defence briefings during his trial in 1980 and the Ministry of Defence was simply denying 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 I 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 R A F 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.

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 display all over Northern Ireland and was used to try to create positive feelings about the Army—basic hearts and minds stuff. Wallace's specialty 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 was a fake' parading a 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/M15 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 officers that Wallace was a fraud, knowing that Wallace hadn't had his jumping log and knowing that—eventually—some journalist would ring the British Parachuting Association and ask about his record. Finding nothing, because his file had been removed, such a journalist would conclude 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 I 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 R A F 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.

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Politics and the Secret State

I offer these anecdotes as 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—about 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
than their rivals, or having a good time or padding their expenses. Journalists are just people doing a job. They have mortgages and families to support; and their 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 reselected, getting re-elected; pleasing the whip 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 everybody 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 concern- ing the behaviour of the secret state. In the political arena the Intelligence and Security Committee setup under the Tories is a joke, without investigatory powers. But it is a joke useful to the secret state. When the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee was conducting an inquiry 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 the security and Intelligence Committee was the appropriate forum for such questions. MPs are still unable to ask questions about the Security and Intelligence service. As a result, MPs and their 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 what you say it is. At the beginning, before the major media took any real interest in the Wallace story, this was a particularly difficult message to sell. Who were these so-called ‘experts’? When I had circled 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 bigtime jour- nalists 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 where he was. I had been told by Wallace that among the visitors to his secret pay-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 hiit had been doing in Northern Ireland. To Newsnight I there- fore said something like this: ‘Protheroe’s a spook; you’ll have to watch him. He’ll try and block any thing 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, real. 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’Halloran, interviewed Wallace the day he came out of prison and then had his piece yanked out of a pro- gramme 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 even 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 staff who has now left the BBC.

Thirteen years later, have things improved? Yes and no. The media is potentially more difficult to deal with major issues concerning the behaviour of the secret state. 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 sens- es, the ‘will of the people’ has never been extend- ed to cover the key areas of interest to a state which was developed to run and service an empire. Defence, foreign policy, security and intel- ligence 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 cliche has it, its down to the politicians. As long as the politicians remain content not to have any influence over for- eign and defense affairs — and the intelligence agencies which serve them — the media will remain relatively impotent and the subject will remain off the agenda. And, unfortunately, this present intake of LMPs shows every sign of being as at supine before the state as those who came before it. It was then. Investigative journalism is expensive, offers no guarantee of public recognition 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.