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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN

IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

RECEIVED
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Time 16.30 Date 30/1

cc Taoiseach
Tánaiste
Secretary ✓
Mr O Tuathail
Mr. Barrington ✓
Mr Davenport
Mr. Daly
A-I Secretariat

SECRET

30 January 1987

"BUGGING" AT LONDON EMBASSY

Dear Eamon,

I have nothing specially new to report on this but I thought it might be useful to you to have a note offering some reflections from here on the issue.

I'm afraid the note has become very long but I will send it in any case. Perhaps you might not want to circulate it since it is over-long but rather keep it for reference if the issue continues to run and run (possibly for example in future issues of Magill or Phoenix ?)

Yours sincerely,

Noel

Noel Dorr

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THE "BUGGING OF THE IRISH EMBASSY IN LONDON

1. This note offers some reflections from London on the flurry of news media stories in recent days about the monitoring by the British of Irish Embassy communications.

SUMMARY

2. Four issues are considered below:

(a) on what are these stories based ?

(b) what is their general effect ?

(c) are they true in substance ?

and

(d) can we do anything about it ?

Briefly, the answers, I believe, are that:

(a) the original Irish Times story from which all the other reports derive was rather contrived and not based on any very hard information;

(b) the general effect is to cast us as victims of British duplicity. But we are saved from appearing wholly naive by the account of our special bag/courier system;

(c) we know, nevertheless, that our communications are monitored - whatever about "bugging" of the Embassy premises

(d) there is however very little we can do about it and nothing would be achieved by protest. The British authorities will never admit to it and even if they did and gave an undertaking to stop, no such undertaking could be trusted.

SUMMARY OF THE CURRENT NEWS STORIES.

3. The present wave of interest in the question derives from two reports by Conor O'Clery in the Irish Times of Saturday, 24 January which profess to be based on "information made available to the Irish Times" and to come from "high-level sources in London" respectively. They contain a good deal of circumstantial detail ("SIGINT K Division at Oakley", "a listening post on the upper floor of the Empress State Building near Earls Court" etc.) - which, the ordinary reader would assume, comes from the "high level sources" referred to in the opening paragraph. O'Clery also recounts the story of the "carpeting" of Richard Needham MP following an intercept of a report to Dublin of something he had told Richard Ryan and refers to another incident

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involving another MP whose name "could not be established".

4. Since the initial stories on Saturday, the Irish Times has skilfully "kept the pot boiling" by follow-up stories such as "Commons protest planned" etc. Monday's paper, in addition went so far as to run a further piece by O'Clery which seemed to be, literally, a repeat of the Saturday story - presumably a service to readers who buy the paper only on alternate days.

5. Other newspapers have latched on to the story and run with it. The Observer front-page report, on Sunday, 25 January was lifted straight from the Irish Times, with the single addition of a quote from "a senior British Government source" that "something along those lines has been happening for the past few years". (Such a quote could be obtained easily enough through a series of phone calls to friendly politicians - any one of whom might well answer "well, that kind of thing does go on, you know"). The early editions of The Observer made no reference whatever to the Irish Times, although their story had obviously been lifted straight from there. Later editions added the phrase "first published in the Irish Times" after the words "This revelation" in the third par. of the report.

6. The Sunday Telegraph, on the same day, trying no doubt to steal The Observer's clothes, amplified the story further - with no justification - by headlining it "Irish accuse Britain over Embassy bug". This front page report turned O'Clery's story into a "startling claim" by the Irish Government. There was no mention of the Irish Times. The report seeking no doubt to be ahead of the news, began "A major diplomatic row broke out last night..."allegations of interception.. could reduce relations between the two countries to a new low".

(a) ON WHAT ARE THESE STORIES BASED ?

7. Apart from a few comments or reactions and a good deal of speculative, not to say creative, writing, these stories all seem to derive from O'Clery's Irish Times two stories of Saturday last. One can therefore concentrate on that account.

8. O'Clery's two stories include four main elements:

(i) a brief reference to sources ("information made available to the Irish Times" and "high level sources");

(ii) the Richard Needham/ Richard Ryan story;

(iii) a great deal of circumstantial detail on the operation of GCHQ (SIGINT - K);

and

(iv) an account of measures taken by the Irish side to counteract the bugging.

9. On these points I would comment as follows:

(i) the reference to "information" and to "sources" is vague enough to cover anything;

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(ii) the Needham/Ryan story is not new. It appeared as far back as two years ago in Simon Hoggart's column in Punch and subsequently in Tim Pat Coogan's column in the "Irish Press". In neither case did it attract much public attention.

(iii) the circumstantial detail about GCHQ and the American NSA and their operations is all fairly readily available in a number of recent books ("The Puzzle Palace" by James Bamford, "Secret Service" by Christopher Andrew and - especially - "The Second Oldest Profession" by Phillip Knightley) and in articles over recent years in the New Statesman and elsewhere by investigative journalists such as Duncan Campbell. These books and articles refer to the work of the monitoring agencies in relation to Embassies in general. O'Clery story seems to be based on a deduction that what applies to Embassies in general can be assumed to apply also to the Irish Embassy.

It is worth noting that O'Clery is due to leave for Moscow at the end of February to open a new Irish Times bureau there. For obvious reasons he has become interested in Soviet "bugging" (as I know from casual conversation with him before the present stories appeared). I think it very likely that he has been reading up on the subject in books such as Knightley's (mentioned above). This may easily have given him the idea, and a good deal of the circumstantial details, for his present story about this Embassy.

(iv) Of the information on the Irish "counter-measures" given by O'Clery some is correct and some is quite flatly wrong. We have indeed had, for some three years now, a system of special diplomatic bags delivered to Aer Lingus pilots on Dublin flights twice a week; and for important and urgent despatches we have sent special couriers in either direction. On the other hand we have not ceased to use electric typewriters and word-processing; we do not have radio transmission facilities; and the suggestion that we have bought coding equipment (now useless) for a million pounds is simple fantasy. (If there is any substance to that figure, it must presumably relate to the total provision for coding equipment for the Department of Foreign Affairs and all its Embassies over several years. To be fair to him, O'Clery does not say specifically that the London equipment cost a million pounds - though the casual reader would assume that this was indeed what he meant.)

His account of our special bag system is however accurate. I would take it that in preparing his story, he got something by way of reaction, (legitimately enough) from one of our officers here or in Dublin about our courier/special bag system. It might of course be said that anyone speaking to him should not have admitted even to the information about our special bag system but in the event it was useful from our viewpoint that the original story contained that information since it has at least saved us from appearing naive and not knowing that our messages were being read).

(b) WHAT IS THE OVERALL EFFECT OF THESE STORIES ?

10. The fact that the reports did contain the information about our special bag and an (erroneous) account of precautions about use of electric typewriters, has, I think saved us from appearing completely naive. The main effect of the stories is to cast us as victims of British duplicity but

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victims with at least the wit to know what was happening to us. The reports do however imply that the British cannot be trusted even at a time when cooperation appears close. This will provide further proof for some people in Ireland that Albion is perfidious and to that extent might seem to reflect badly on the Government's assumption of goodwill on Britain's part in its approach to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

ARE THE REPORTS TRUE ?

11. Granted that O'Clery's reports on which the others are based, do not themselves appear to be very well founded, one must still ask if the central point of the story - that GCHQ monitors Irish Embassy communications and deciphers our codes - is true ? I think it is virtually certain that the answer is yes.

12. We have direct evidence of this. While we have generally made a point of NOT sending any really sensitive material by coded telex, it is true that this was done on one occasion a few years ago and that Needham was subsequently confronted with a de-crypt of our message and reproved for having passed on information to us. From time to time a contact in Whitehall who has something interesting to say will ask that it NOT be passed on to Dublin "by electronic means"; and John Huston, Howe's political adviser, in a recent conversation with Richard Ryan, talked fairly explicitly about the monitoring of communications. Furthermore, we had some time ago, very specific evidence that the Americans too, monitor our coded telex traffic - all of it, and not just traffic from this Embassy.

13. None of this should be news to anyone who reads recent books on the subject. Phillip Knightley, for example, in his book "The Second Oldest Profession" (published by Andre Deutsch in 1986) says on page 370:

"NSA, with its main partner, Britain's GCHQ, now monitors the entire globe, helped by similar but smaller agencies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and some NATO countries.

" NSA/GCHQ monitors military, diplomatic and commercial messages sent by radio, telex, teletype and microwave. It eavesdrops on satellite communications and private telephone calls. It has lists of individuals and organizations whose communications are automatically intercepted. These include certain oil companies, banks, newspapers, commodity dealers, civil rights leaders, radical political groups, politicians, embassies, trade missions, terrorists and their sympathizers. NSA's computers, which cover eleven acres at the agency's headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland. can be programmed to home in on a telex or cable message by picking up a 'key' word that the intelligence consumer considers significant. The computers look for the key words at the rate of 4 million characters a second, which means that they can read the average daily newspaper before you could pronounce its title....

" In a rare public reference .. a NSA official said in 1980 'there are three satellites over the Atlantic, each capable of transmitting on about 20,000 circuits. Their are eight transatlantic cables with about 5,000 circuits. We

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listen to them all...'

Knightley goes on

"...The scale of the NSA/GCHQ operation has only recently emerged, yet the collaboration between the two agencies and its purpose go back to 1947 [and] a secret treaty known as UKUSA...

"Until the 1980s NSA/GCHQ concentrated mainly on listening to people communicating with each other, but rapid technological changes soon had the agency talking of 'sweeping the entire electro-magnetic spectrum' - that is, listening to ALL noises and ALL images...

"...the NSA station at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire intercepts all international telephone calls made from Britain..." (p.373)

Bamford in his book "The Puzzle Palace" (pages 209/210) quotes a former employee of the Kirknewton (Scotland) listening post'

"Intercepted telegrams came through on telex machines. I was provided with a list of about 100 words to look out for. All diplomatic traffic from European embassies was in code and was passed at once to a senior officer. A lot of telegrams - birthday congratulations for instance - put into the burn bag. I had to keep a special watch for commercial traffic, details of commodities, what the big companies were selling...all traffic was sent back to Fort Meade in Washington..."

14. I might add that a conversation which Richard Ryan had with Needham in 1984 on which he reported at the time, implied that the British eavesdropping extends to local telephone calls in Dublin.

(d) IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT ?

15. Two different points arise:

(i) Can we do anything in the Embassy to circumvent this eavesdropping ?

(ii) Can we, or should we, protest to the British about it ?

16. Without a major, sophisticated and sustained effort, it is virtually impossible to secure this Embassy against such activity. Even with such an effort, one could never be sure.

17. A total of fifty-one people work in the building (Chancery). All are Irish. But cleaning of the offices every evening after hours is done by a firm of contract cleaners, who seem to employ mostly low-paid, West Indian

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workers. Supervision by Embassy staff would not be feasible and fulltime cleaners (an option we have considered) would be expensive. A new telephone system was installed last year. Visits by telephone staff to check or repair telephones have always been frequent. It would be extremely easy for any of them to instal bugging equipment and check it regularly. It may be indeed that that is not even necessary and that any phone, even when not in use, can now be used as a "bug" without any need for physical entry on the premises. Our photo-copying machines too, require regular visits by technicians for service purposes. If it were possible, as I presume it is, to instal some kind of microfilm equipment in such machines, that would be an easy way to keep track of everything photo-copied in the Embassy.

18. We have - and, contrary to O'Clery's story, use - electric typewriters and word-processing equipment. (This present report is being typed on a small word-processor and will probably be photo-copied when completed). We also make some use of dictation equipment. Any or all of these can be picked up electronically by sensitive listening equipment outside the Embassy itself; and there are, indeed, enough slightly mysterious buildings near us to house any necessary listening posts.

19. Our coding system, though sophisticated enough, is probably easily dealt with by NSA's "eleven acres of computers...at Fort Meade" (Knightley p.370) or GCHQ's 6,500 personnel at Cheltenham (not counting service men elsewhere) . Our practice - virtually impossible to eradicate throughout our service - of speaking fairly freely on the telephone and at most using easily understood allusions is, no doubt, a simple matter for NSA/GCHQ to handle.

20. It may be said that we could have the Embassy "swept" regularly. That is possible. We did have it done before the 1984 Chequers Summit; and we took fairly elaborate precautions against eavesdropping for a briefing meeting with the Taoiseach and Ministers at that time. This would mean regular visits by Gardai experts from Dublin and there must be a question as to how sophisticated their equipment is in comparison with that which they would be dealing with. It would probably also be necessary for greater effectiveness to follow some other Embassies in having a round the clock security/watchman service provided perhaps by Garda or Army personnel or retired members of either force posted to the Embassy for the purpose.

21. These and other steps taken by Embassies of some other countries, would be costly enough and they would have to be monitored by a security officer of some kind - perhaps on occasional visits from Dublin. Even at that however we should not expect that they would be sophisticated enough or sufficiently sustained to be really proof against the sophistication now available to those who would want to "bug" us.

22. There are however some steps which can be taken - not to safeguard the Embassy as a whole, but to maintain a fair degree of security around a more limited "perimeter". This would mean confining certain information to one or two named people; keeping a limited number of files in a very secure way; not using telexes, even when coded; discipline in use of the telephone; a

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stepped up system of special bags and couriers; and, ideally, not usin electronic typing or dictation facilities. Except for this last point, this is essentially what was done at crucial stages during the Anglo-Irish negotiations when it was necessary to preserve confidence on negotiating positions.

23. Should we protest to the British about the substance of the recent reports ? In my view that would be futile. The British tradition is not to admit to anything in this field. This is carried to ludicrous lengths at times - see for example Robert Armstrong's refusal in the witness box in Australia to admit that MI 5 exists and then, when shown that he had already acknowledged that a named person had headed it, his limited acceptance that it had existed at least for the period in question. The Prime Minister's refusal to answer a written question in the House this week and an earlier oral question from David Steel indicate clearly what would be their reaction to any protest from us about something of which current newspaper reports give little hard evidence (and which is in theory not permissible under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations) Furthermore, even if we were to get some kind of soothing assurance - could we ever rely on it ?

24. All in all, the best reaction seems to be that of the Taoiseach in his radio interview last Sunday - on the lines that we don't know if it IS happening but we had always acted on the assumption that it does. At the same time however, we might look in a limited way some of our present practices with a view to ensuring and sustaining, a somewhat greater degree of confidentiality for a certain limited number of papers and information than we probably achieve at present.

ND
London,
30 January 1987

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