



OPINION

Styles of Treachery

Robert learns the facts about the spy master he recoils in horror and splutters "But that's impossible - he was one of us!" By which of course is meant not that the gentleman in question was British rather than Russian but that he was a product of that exclusive perpetual elite of public school and Oxbridge which has always governed Britain. And from which of course, as real life has proved, all the top British Communist spies have come: to wit Kim Philby, Burgess and Maclean and Anthony Blunt, establishment figures who were not grubby agents but garnered the secrets of the nation right in the heart of their Whitehall offices and tenure of MI5 posts.

Of course when the fictional Sir Humphrey learns the awful truth his first instinct is to revert to type. The only real problem confronting the civil service is to ensure that no-one ever finds out. The no-one obviously doesn't mean the Russians, since they know everything anyway, but the real scourge and nightmare of the civil servant - the general public. In such an endeavour the civil service, as Yes Prime Minister endlessly demonstrates, has indeed an arsenal of devastatingly effective tools. Which can be summed up in the phrase national security. Everything that happens in a Government office is subject to the Official Secrets Act, from the number of paper clips on order to the nature of the actual nuclear weapons in service. By law, tradition of Parliament and dictat of the mandarin class everything that is confidential, and every thing is confidentially a matter of security, cannot be commented upon, explained, elaborated or told to anyone (except inevitably a foreign power), lest the British system perish from the face of this island nation.

Which brings us deftly to events on the island continent of Australia where the former employee of MI5 is seeking to publish his memoirs. He not only alleges that Sir Roger Hollis, the former head of MI5 was working for the Russians, but that MI5 actually bugged the offices of the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and members of his Cabinet - when they were the elected government of the country. The piquancy of the court case is that Mr Wright is merely seeking to repeat and elaborate under his

own name security matters which he has already told to a journalist who revealed them under the title *Their Trade Was Treachery*, published in Britain in 1981. A publication which led Mrs Thatcher to make a lengthy statement in the House of Commons and her Government to take the decision that there were no grounds upon which to suppress the publication of that book.

In pursuit of a thorough investigation into the state of the security services and their activities which suborn the democratic process, as well as tell all to the KGB, Mr Wright is breaking his oath of confidentiality. Which has brought him face to face with the unyielding determination of Mrs Thatcher that the duty of confidentiality of security matters is eternal. Else how should governments maintain a non-inflationary economy of the truth and keep us all in ignorance of what is really being done to us and for us by our elected and unelected leaders: politicians, civil servants and security services.

Notwithstanding the intimations which have emerged from the Australian court that the British security services and possibly the government have connived in the publication of authorised security leaks in previous spy books to make them deniable and deridable Mrs Thatcher has repeatedly told Parliament that in accordance with imperishable tradition she cannot answer questions on security matters. Economic enterprise knowing a multitude of ways to be economical with the truth, until such time as truth itself becomes undiscernible. Which leads a solid body of opinion to argue that the real object of the Sydney trial is a cover up of monumental government incompetence. Which is of course the ultimate reason for all national security according to the fictional Sir Humphrey.

It all goes to prove that in a modern democracy where the public has the right only to know that with which its masters have been economical the artist and purveyor of fiction is indispensable to the truth. That truth shall not perish from the earth we need art, satire, tragedy and farcical courtroom drama to remind us even economy can only be tolerated under the governance of values which transcend the market place. ■

There are those who maintain that being economical is when you visit the library instead of a department store, or when one indulges inertia until the overwhelming urge to spend money on some new gadgetry subsides. It seems this is merely to be economical with the potential of economical behaviour. In a sound economy of market forces one should not miss out on being economical with, say, friendship, loyalty, patriotism - or even, to take a leaf from the book of Britain's top civil servant, veracity.

This top mandarin, Sir Robert Armstrong, has been extending the range of economical definition while testifying before a Court in Australia. There the British Government is seeking to prevent the publication of a book by former employee and spycatcher Peter Wright. In the process both Sir Robert and the Government have caused everyone concerned to become economical with their credulity.

So far the only thing the trial has achieved is to raise to a new gold standard of accuracy the satirical portrayal of the inner workings of 10 Downing Street, the television, so called, comedy *Yes Prime Minister*. In the midst of the Australian trial the BBC's time warp system threw up a repeat of the *Yes Prime Minister* episode in which it is discovered that the former head of the British secret service was in fact a Soviet agent. Nevermind the speculation whether this was the BBC again being economical with political impartiality. The real question is whether anyone could spot any difference whatsoever between artifice and life. A national opinion poll conducted the next day would, I am convinced, have had unanimous support for satire telling it like it is. Which is exactly what *Yes Prime Minister* teaches us no civil servant would ever contemplate doing. Which is exactly what Sir Robert has had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into admitting as he daily rearranged his testimony before the Australian law courts.

When the fictional apotheosis of Sir