

Stop shooting the messenger

David Shayer



NEXT MONTH I will have spent 1,000 days in exile. During that time I have been maligning the Government, not only by Her Majesty's Government, who, at least, have some reason to do so, but by Her Majesty's Press, who do not. I have been described variously as a 'flabbermouth', a 'troublemaker' and a 'born rebel'. In these very pages I was described as 'an individual of questionable reputation'. Where does this all come from?

An article that originally appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* contained most of these claims and they have been dutifully repeated by *The Observer* and the *Guardian* as well as the right-wing press. They have never been sourced to anyone. That such flimsy assessments of my character continue to circulate two and a half years after I first went on the record is a testament to the lack of intellectual rigour in modern journalism.

It is as well to remind people of what I did to bring down such wrath and vitriol. In 1997 I wrote a series of newspaper arti-

cles for the *Mail on Sunday* about my time as an MI5 officer and abuses I witnessed. I believe my revelations were in the public interest. At the time a judge and a Special Branch officer decided that these had not damaged national security.

If standing up for the basic principles of freedom of expression, democratic accountability and freedom of information makes me a rebel then, yes, I am a rebel. If pointing out to the British people that MI5 was in possession of intelligence regarding impending attacks which it failed to react for that it put the lives of individuals and the security of the state at risk, then, yes, I am a rebel.

The Government continues to dismiss me from a position of ignorance because it has never bothered to take possession of the evidence I have offered.

For the record, Ministers have only made on-the-record comments about two of my disclosures, the Gadafi plot and the Israeli embassy bombing (where MI5 failed to react to prior intelligence). In both cases, the public has been misled by the official line.

Astute commentators might be led to conclude that the Government has been less than honest all the way through my case. Journalists that claim I am 'unreliable' simply play into the Government's hands.

Let us not forget, I am not talking about some bureaucratic failure to cross Ts and dot Is. I am talking about a cabal

of MI6 officers deliberately plotting to assassinate a foreign head of state, a crime in itself in civilian life. The fact that MI6 went ahead with this operation without even seeking government permission is morally indefensible.

Despite the clear evidence I presented to Home Secretary Jack Straw in November 1999, he had not replied to my letter, nor had he made any statement to Parliament by the time *The Observer* and I spoke in late February. At the expense of a proper inquiry, it appeared that Ministers are not interested in instituting a police investigation into alleged criminal activities.

That is a cover-up in anyone's book. There can be few worse threats to democracy than the executive using its powers to prevent individual members of the intelligence service from being subject to the laws of this country like the rest of us. This is a theme that liberal newspapers should have been pursuing rather than impugn my character.

Thankfully this is now beginning to change. There has been a sea-change in attitudes to my case, but only after the state began to target journalists who reported my claims.

Until recently MPs were happy to make crass statements like the following which also appeared in *The Observer* a month ago:

'If standing up for freedom of information makes me a rebel then, yes, I am a rebel'

[Shayer] has become a media personality, always willing to appear on TV and get quoted in the papers and that does enormous damage to his credibility. Why? I'm only standing up for our basic rights in this country. I am only trying to protect my reputation. What do these MPs expect me to do? Turn the other cheek to their insults while they continue to fail to hold the Government to account.

I do not know which MP gave *The Observer* that quote, but I would hope in future that as a democratically elected official, he or she might have had the courage to make it on the record.

In the meantime, the Official Secrets Act still exists; the intelligence services continue to collude with government at the expense of proper parliamentary oversight; and intelligence documents continue to be routinely held for 100 years.

The mystery is, why has Parliament, the opposition and the media for so long failed to hold the state to account by calling for an inquiry?

As time goes on I am slowly but surely being vindicated. But the real embarrassment for Parliament and government will come, when it is established that I was far from a lone voice within MI5.

I can exclusively reveal that what I have said on the record only reflects the concerns of just about every other thinking officer in MI5 while I was there.

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