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A QUESTION OF MISTRUST: HOW MI6 BUGGED LESZEK MILLER

by
Gordon Thomas

LONDON:

As Leszek Miller, the former Communist with a classic English family name, left office after steering Poland into the European Union on May 1 - a dream he had repeatedly shared with Tony Blair - there is mounting speculation in London whether Warsaw will be the next to follow Madrid to withdraw its troops from Iraq.

"The more the Poles say 'no, of course not', the more we tend to worry", said a senior diplomat in Britain's Foreign Office.

He is not alone in expressing his concern. In the cheerless corridors of the monolithic Ministry of Defence and the rabbit warren of offices in Downing Street, the question is being repeatedly asked.

It is also one that fifteen months ago - on February 9, 2003 - had led to a top-secret surveillance operation being mounted against Miller, then Poland's prime minister for the previous eighteen months.

At the root of the operation was not whether Poland would withdraw its forces from Iraq - but would they ever actually go there to partake in what President George Bush had called "the Coalition of the Willing"?

There was a fear that Miller, for all his repeated assurances, would at the last moment pull Poland out of joining in the Blair/Bush axis to topple Saddam Hussein.

Alastair Campbell, Blair's Director of Communications and close confidante, had said that Miller "is a good guy with a sense of history. A tough guy and very anti-French". The judgement had enabled Blair to publicly proclaim Miller "is a true friend". For Bush to call Poland's premier "a trusted ally".

But there was a mounting fear in the winter of 2003 in both leaders that the will to go to war was evaporating. Already, France and Germany had refused to participate. Spain's government was facing massive opposition from the electorate.

Miller had been on the phone every day to Downing Street, offering constant reassurance

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that, recalls Campbell, "Poland has not forgotten 1939. That Poland knows how important it is to stand up to a dictator. That Saddam in many ways is the reincarnation of Hitler".

Yet underpinning this bullish attitude were hints of Miller's concern. They were noted by Peter Stothard, the former editor of The Times, Britain's newspaper of record. He had been asked by Blair to keep an "independent record" of how the government was defying street protesters, party revolts, government resignations and anger across Europe. In one call, Miller was anxious to know if Blair could count on the support of Parliament. "Then followed a long speech from Miller. He is alarmed at threats from Chirac. Tony Blair punctuates the monologue with 'Mmm' and 'Well' and 'Yeah' while pulling at the side of his face", recorded Stothard.

"Finally Blair interrupted. 'Laszek, if Europe wants to be a rival count us out'. Tony Blair is now grasping his desk tightly. 'What the French have to realise is that they cannot impose their view on Europe. That is not just my view, but George Bush' view", noted Stothard. "And Miller said nothing".

"Was that the moment Tony Blair wondered just how solid would Miller remain when the last dice had been rolled?", recalled a Downing Street insider last week.

What did Miller feel behind the scenes? What had Vladimir Putin told him on those late night phone calls from Moscow? And what had the Chinese leadership conveyed in those private meetings Miller had with its Warsaw ambassador? And those countries in the Middle East where Poland hoped to get a foothold? What were Middle East ambassadors saying to Polish diplomats at the United Nations? And what had Miller told his own Cabinet?

"Those were the questions Blair and Bush needed answers to", recalled George Galloway, a maverick Labour MP and regarded by Blair as a leader of the anti-war movement growing in Britain.

"To find out that Miller, our one alley in Europe could change his mind under all the pressure on him to do so, would be a disaster", recalled a staff member of Foreign Secretary Jack Straw last week. A rumbustious and sharp witted politician, Straw has more than a hint about him of "England first, last and always".

His ministerial responsibilities extend to being the political master of MI6.

What transpired in February 2003 between Straw and Sir Richard Dearlove, the dapper, soft-spoken director-general of the Secret Intelligence Service - MI6's formal name - will remain secret for the foreseeable future.

But by that cold winter's day of February 9, Dearlove had spoken to George Tenet, head of the CIA. Each had a high regard for the other: they were professionals at the top of the increasingly murky world intelligence gathering had become in the run-up to the war with Iraq.

The many other calls Dearlove made about mounting a surveillance operation on Miller - the "trusted ally" - were all aimed at one answer: could Britain and America - Blair and Bush - be absolutely certain Miller would remain as steadfast as his commitment behind the scenes as he was in public?

Dearlove had been in office for four years and was "very much his own man", said a senior intelligence officer in London. "He knew the ways of Whitehall and what to say and when to say it".

The one man Dearlove spoke to on a daily basis was John Scarlett. Tall, ramrod straight with a domed head, he was a former MI6 spy who was the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee - the invisible footbridge over which crossed all MI6 intelligence for Downing Street. It gave Scarlett a seat in Blair's Cabinet.

On that February day, Scarlett's main job was to know what was happening in Iraq, to know what could be known about Saddam Hussein and to predict what would happen as war drew closer. And that included knowing the real intentions of allies like Miller.

In the previous two months, MI6, the CIA and NSA had been involved in bugging UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Hans Blix, the UN chief weapons inspector.

Those operations finally surfaced when Clare Short, a former cabinet minister in the Blair government, claimed a year later - in February 2004 - that she knew secret transcripts had been made of Annan's conversations by MI6 over the looming war with Iraq.

In the aftermath of Clare Short's revelations that Kofi Annan had been spied upon, Inocencio Arias, Spain's Ambassador to the UN said: "everybody spies on everybody. And when there's a big crisis, big countries spy a lot. If your mission is not bugged, then you're really worth nothing".

While bugging the Polish mission at the UN would present no foreseeable problems for MI6, the question of mounting one against Miller needed considered care. After its decades of being under Moscow's control, Polish intelligence services still had a deep-seated suspicion of its counterparts in the West.

"Bugging Miller would require some sophisticated equipment. But even then the risks were high. Discovery could lead to not only a major diplomatic crisis, but the probable end of any Polish support", suggested David Shayler, a former MI5 officer.

But until now, details of how Miller was bugged - and the reasons why - have remained secret.

Across the River Thames on that February day in 2003, Dearlove had been making his own calls to finally set up the operation. The MI6 chief had to know the answer to the

ever more deeply troubling question for Blair and George Bush: would Poland's prime minister remain committed to the ever louder drum-beat of war, or would he waver and undergo a mind-change that could wreck the military plans being finalised in London and Washington to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein?

The story of how that question was answered has emerged from credible intelligence sources in the British and American intelligence services. Some I have known for twenty-five years. They have spoken now because they feel a genuine fear that the intelligence world - their world - is at serious risk of being dangerously politicised by their political masters in London and Washington.

By the end of that cold February 9 day in London, the decision to bug Miller had been taken. Those directly involved were Sir Richard Dearlove, George Tenet and John Scarlett. In support were the director of GCHQ - Britain's electronic "spy in the sky" at Cheltenham - and the director of the National Security Agency, NSA, headquartered at Fort Meade outside Washington.

With its 40,000 staff, NSA is the world's largest electronic spying organisation. Its key base in Europe is at Menwith Hill, a windswept, high-security facility near Harrogate in the North of England. Its futuristic radar domes are linked to NSA satellites spinning in outer Space or geo-positioned halfway to the moon. The listening station can intercept two million phone calls an hour from satellites.

Menwith Hill is linked to GCHQ by secure lines. Its 7,000 staff are regularly "tasked" by Britain's two main intelligence services, MI6 and MI5. Its computers trawl millions of phone calls and emails every day.

MI6, on that February day, had recently reinforced its six operatives "working the UN beat" by another five. Their task was to cultivate diplomats, secretaries and even lowly clerks. The information they obtained was fed back through safe computers to MI6 HQ overlooking the River Thames. There it was sifted and analysed.

The day before the decision was taken to bug Miller, Frank Koza, a senior analyst in NSA, had sent his counterpart in GCHQ an email asking for a surveillance "surge" against key members of the UN Security Council. Koza asked for "the whole gamut of information that could give US policymakers an edge". He also wanted "good information about Miller's position".

His request was marked TOP SECRET/COMINT/XI. The "XI" coding signified the request must never be declassified. It must stay Top Secret.

However, it has now emerged that a copy of the message somehow found its way to the computer modem of GCHQ translator Katherine Gun. She passed it to an intermediary, who gave it to the British writer Yvonne Ridley, a strong supporter of the anti-war movement. She passed the memo to a journalist on the Observer, a London Sunday newspaper. Gun was arrested under Britain's Official Secrets Act. But the case collapsed.

Next day Clare Short dropped her bombshell that Kofi Annan had been spied on. But on that February day just a year ago, this was all for the future. The focus in British and US intelligence included spying on Miller.

The operation would be run out of Menwith Hill. Its state-of-the-art computers were at the core of the station's Echelon system. At the heart of Echelon is a system called the Dictionary: its computers can target specific telephone numbers, words and "voice prints".

A segment of Miller's voice was fed into the Dictionary computers. These are linked to the worldwide network of NSA satellites in Space. The Dictionary was programmed to track every word Miller and his key officials spoke in relation to Iraq.

UN Ambassadors know their missions are bugged by a number of spying weapons. One is a laser beam fired at a window to detect minute vibrations in the glass caused by people speaking. Another is a computer system known as "Tempest" which also deciphers voices by equipment in a room. The operation against Miller was run through the Echelon Dictionary.

All the information obtained was downloaded to the Menwith Hill computers. There, interlinked banks of computers decoded and analysed the data and fed down a secure line to GCHQ. There the material was turned into transcripts. All were marked "Highly Classified". These were then sent to John Scarlett, chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee in his Whitehall office.

The data became an invaluable tool in helping Tony Blair to judge the real mood of Miller and his officials. The information was carried by Scarlett to Downing Street in buff-coloured files. Each file had the bold Cross of St George on its cover. It was an open indication of Scarlett's patriotism. The intelligence supremo also had to frequently step over the toys of Leo, the prime minister's youngest son who often used the ground floor of Downing Street as a playground.

James Woolsey, a former director of the CIA has said: "yes, my Continental friends, we have spied on you. And its true we use computers to sort through data using key words". The revelations about the spying on Leszek Miller will undoubtedly cause huge embarrassment to an ever-more embattled Tony Blair as he formally welcomes Poland into the European Union.

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