

Democratic round-up: Parliamentary scrutiny of the UK's security services

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*Tomorrow, for the first time, the heads of the three main UK security services will be questioned in public by members of the Houses of Parliament on the Joint Intelligence and Security Committee. **Sean Kippin** takes a look at the latest news about the session, the activities of the security agencies, and the effectiveness of the committee as a check on their power.*



MI6's London HQ (Credit: Pavan Shavda, CC BY 2.0)

Since the revelations about the scope and extend of the US and UK Governments mass surveillance programmes, there has been a great deal of discussion about the implications for civil liberties, privacy, and democracy. While the UK has made moves towards great public scrutiny of MI5, MI6, and GCHQ with the passage of the [Justice and Security Act \(2013\)](#), there have been criticisms about the effectiveness of that Government and Parliamentary oversight, which is exercised primarily through the [Joint Intelligence and Security Committee](#).

Over at the Huffington Post, [Carl Miller](#) of Demos has five ideas to 'open up' British intelligence without jeopardising security, the most eye-catching of which would be the creation of 'surveillance juries', which he expanded on in a previous post for the [Left Foot Forward](#) website. The Huffington Post also [reports](#) on the criticisms by Conservative MPs Dominic Raab and Douglas Carswell of the JISC, which the former characterising the current arrangements as 'Grandeess overseeing grandeess'.

Their Parliamentary colleague, Rory Stewart, suggests that the job of Chairman (currently held by former Defence and Foreign Secretary [Sir Malcolm Rifkind](#)) should always go to a backbench MP drawn from the Opposition. In justifying his view Stewart argues that "you are never going to have a government backbencher chairing a committee that is going to criticise the government properly", which may be news to [Michael Gove](#), who has come under heavy and sustained criticism from the Conservative-chaired Education Committee.

Writing in the Observer, [Andrew Rawnsley](#) has doubts that the spectacle of the 'spy chiefs' appearing before Parliament will be particularly enlightening for either the participants or the public, with the classic conundrum as to

how best scrutinise organisations whose work must, by necessity, remain in the shadows remaining unsolved. Rawnsley argues that the breadth of the session – which covers “the terrorist threat, regional instability and weapons proliferation, cyber security and espionage” will prevent a meaningful and substantive discussion.

Shami Chakrabarti, reports [the Scotsman](#), shares their concerns that the committee is not up to the job, highlighting its curious position as a committee of Parliamentarians that is not fully accountable to Parliament. She also pointed out that the committee has not always used its position to enlighten the public about the more controversial activities of the Security Services, noting that it was unwilling or unable to ‘expose [extraordinary rendition](#) using kidnap and [torture](#) at the height of the war on terror’.

Much of the criticism levelled at the JISC stems from a robust defence of the services by Rifkind of their right to secrecy, [reported in the Telegraph](#), in which he agrees with the assessment of the head of MI5, Sir Andrew Parker, who has criticised the Guardian for their reporting of the Snowden files and accused the paper of ‘handing an advantage’ to terrorists. The Observer’s Henry Porter, also quoted in the piece, responds to Parker’s accusations, saying; ‘what we have done is shown how much surveillance we are under. We don’t have sufficient oversight. I don’t have that confidence because of the behaviour of the intelligence and security committee over the last few months, which has steadily come out in favour of the intelligence services’.

Professor [Charles Raab](#) of the University of Edinburgh, writing on the PSA’s Political Insight blog, argues that political science can play a role in helping the public to understand the role of the security services. He says; ‘we should take the current fascination and horror with these profoundly important developments and revelations as an opportunity to reflect upon how members of our discipline can work along with other colleagues to know, understand, and communicate our research into these phenomena, bringing our myriad established perspectives to bear upon them, and forging new tools as well.’

A [coalition of human rights groups](#) from across the world have written to the Prime Minister about the ongoing surveillance controversy and specifically some of the comments made by Cameron in response to the Guardian’s publication of the Snowden leaks. ‘They ‘call on [the Prime Minister] to honour the UK’s international obligations to defend and protect the right to freedom of expression and media freedom, and to end the UK government’s pressure on the Guardian and those who assist them.’

The [revelations](#) continue thick and fast, with a report in yesterday’s Independent reporting that GCHQ have used their Berlin embassy to ‘eavesdrop on the seat of German power’. Intriguingly, the embassy features a ‘potential eavesdropping base enclosed inside a white, cylindrical tent-like structure which cannot be easily seen from the streets. The structure has been in place since the embassy, which was built following the reunification of Germany, opened in 2000’, with the structure said to bear similarities to ‘[Teufelsberg](#)’, the former US spying complex which has lay vacant since the end of the Cold War.

Of course, while the real life heads of the security services have never given evidence in Parliament before, their fictional counterpart “M” did in 2012’s “[Skyfall](#)”, the latest instalment of the James Bond series. While tomorrow’s session will doubtless be an interesting spectacle, we can probably assume that the crescendo of the session will be largely devoid of gunfire.

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