



Special branch helping themselves to films during the Zircon raid

Kinnock's Big Secret

Neil Kinnock's handling of the Zircon affair has inevitably raised doubt about the priority which a Kinnock government would give to reform of the Official Secrets Acts and the enactment of freedom of information laws.

The nub of the issue was the Labour leader's decision, on January 22, to support the government in its attempts to prevent public disclosures about the Zircon spy satellite project. The project was the subject of one programme in a six part television series made for the BBC by *New Statesman* journalist Duncan Campbell. In the Commons on January 22, Kinnock told MPs that he supported the government's view that their film was prejudicial to national security and that ministers had 'properly' moved against Campbell the previous day.

Campbell's Zircon prog-

ramme had been passed for transmission in December 1986 by the BBC after thorough top-level scrutiny. Early in January, however, the programme was axed by the then Director-General, Alasdair Milne, following pressure from the head of the Cheltenham-based GCHQ intelligence centre. On January 22, the government took direct legal moves to prevent private showings of the Zircon film and restrain Campbell from discussing it. By then, however, the *New Statesman* had published most of the details from the banned film.

To understand why Kinnock backed the Conservatives over Zircon, it is essential to understand the scale of the humiliation which the Labour leader had suffered over the Peter Wright case at the end of 1986. Kinnock's attacks on the government

over its Australian courtroom attempts to prevent publication of Wright's book about MI5 had rebounded badly. A series of phone calls between Kinnock's office and Wright's lawyer had made him appear over-eager to see the government embarrassed. This was a serious setback to a Labour leader who is both vulnerable to charges of inexperience and who aims to carry through a controversial non-nuclear defence policy. Labour, which had led the polls in the autumn, began to slide in the ratings.

Faced with another national security scare, Kinnock's instincts - and those of his senior colleagues - were to play safe. They decided to back the government and to accept the Foreign Office's assessment of the Zircon disclosures - without ever having seen Campbell's film.

When the *New Statesman* came out, Kinnock found he could even outflank the Tories by attacking them for incompetence. Anxious to confirm his credentials (not least to the Americans) to manage national security and Britain's intelligence gathering efforts, it was an irresistible opportunity.

To civil libertarians and journalists, events since January 22 have exposed the folly of this short-sighted approach. The Zircon bans have been used to justify major Special Branch raids not merely on Campbell and the *New Statesman* but on the BBC itself. The Conservatives have been able both to get off the hook about their deception of parliament over Zircon (the actual subject of Campbell's film) and to engineer a wider attack upon independent journalism. Labour does not appear to have profited from Kinnock's decision anyway, though many Labour MPs believe he judged the public's mood better than those who have attacked him.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Kinnock's stance over Zircon has dismayed many of his supporters. Labour's libertarian plans for reform of official secrecy are one of the few policy legacies of the 1979-83 period which had survived more or less unscathed through the re-evaluations of the Kinnock era. And for a good reason. The Callaghan government's repressive use of official secrecy and national security (not least, of course, against Duncan Campbell himself in 1977) was one of the most discreditable aspects of the last period of Labour rule. Until now, even very few ministers of the period would have tried to defend it.

Neil Kinnock is by no means the first leader of the Labour Party to feel under great political pressure to prove his reliability in security matters. Most Labour leaders have been viewed with great initial suspicion by the security services and, latterly, by their American 'cousins'. Most voters are not reformers in this field. The

temptation to over-compensate, to prove themselves more populist than the pope, is therefore extremely powerful and few Labour leaders feel themselves under sufficient counter-pressure to make liberalisation worth the fuss.

If he ever gets to Downing Street, Kinnock says he remains unwaveringly committed to repealing the Official Secrets Act and to introducing a freedom of information act. But he will face the defensive hostility of a Whitehall machine which remains determined either to destroy or to minimise the effect of such measures. Especially if he heads a minority government, he will also face the same pressures not to appear 'soft on security' that electorally insecure Labour governments have always faced. This time, committed also to a more radical defence policy than its pre-



Backing Thatcher

decessors, Labour will be positively anxious to display its toughness on security.

Far from being a panic aberration, Neil Kinnock's stance on Zircon could point to a more consistently strict Labour policy on information and security in the future. •
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