

OCTOBER 1, 1966

Intelligence All Round

The domestic civil service needs to take a leaf out of the Ministry of Defence's book

WHEN people read this weekend of the retirement of the Director-General of Intelligence, most of them will assume that this is someone who has been in charge of all British intelligence, an overlord comparable in power and scope to Queen Elizabeth's Walsingham 400 years ago. They will be wrong. Remarkable though the achievement of Sir Kenneth Strong has been, he has never been in charge of the whole field. For there is in fact no single intelligence service. His authority has been confined to what is now known as defence intelligence, which used to be split up into home, military, air, economic and scientific. For the present integration, which was desirable for intellectual as well as administrative reasons, a large share of the credit goes to Sir Kenneth. It was he who was able, with the help of one or two other senior officers, gradually to push and ease through the abolition of distinctions between the three services which Lord Mountbatten initiated five years ago when he was Chief of the Defence Staff. Indeed, it is fair to say that it is only in intelligence matters that anything like genuine integration exists in the Ministry of Defence. In other circles of staff work the rivalries are as sharp, the service loyalties as intense as ever they were.

But if top people in Whitehall take a few minutes off to consider the significance of this twenty years' effort to move Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry intelligence into a common service, with science and economics and topography adequately represented and the old fantastic overlappings responsibility for security (for which, incidentally, Mr George Wigg constitutionally has none), would have been fully aware of the importance of accurate, current intelligence about coloured immigration. Denied some of the facts it needed by the kind of questions asked, or not asked, in the census and in death and birth certificates, it was unable to inform ministers accurately about the size and future of the problem when it attracted urgent and emotional public discussion. That was, perhaps, pardonable ten years ago. But when Mr Mark Bonham-Carter took charge of his Race Relations Board last February, he found that he had been provided neither with the funds nor the staff to collect intelligence. The need had just not been thought of.

But this, it will be said, is just research under a new name. Why use the word intelligence to describe research, which is flourishing and which is gradually asserting its claim to influence policy-making in government? Intelligence, after all, meant news a hundred years ago—and no more. Now it has all kinds of overtones of surreptitious methods and skulduggery. The answer is, of course, that this picture of intelligence was discarded for ever during the war. Except in the special field of counter-espionage, which has its own standards of behaviour, most of what the fiction writers purvey is years out of date; it is just John Buchan matured in the wood.

Modern intelligence has to do with the painstaking collection and analysis of fact, the exercise of judgment and clear

removed, they would be wise to look all round the circle. Should what has happened in the defence segment happen elsewhere? Is the function of intelligence properly understood outside the Ministry of Defence and portions of the Treasury? Is any distinction made in the minds of ministers and senior civil servants between information pure and simple, research as conducted by scholars (either within the civil service or outside) and intelligence—that is to say, graded and sifted information interpreted for the purposes of a projected or expected operation? Is anyone in the public service—outside the specialists of defence—trained in the methods and techniques of intelligence? The miscalculations and errors that are still made suggest that the answer is No.

This use of the word intelligence is still pretty unfamiliar. For reasons that everyone is supposed to understand, Whitehall thinks it wise not to draw too much public attention to the word or to the activity. Because some of its methods are secret—and, of course, most of its results—it is held that everything should be secret; with the curious result that the obsolete names of our security service and secret intelligence service (MI5 and MI6) enjoy in the western world an almost music-hall notoriety second only to that of the American CIA. The mystery surrounding the work has concealed from all but initiates the fact that there is much to be learnt from its methods of collecting, organising and interpreting information. Take an example from a civil department. It might have been thought that the Home Office, having ultimate and quick presentation. It is not simply what serious journalists would always produce if they had time: it is something more rigorous, continuous and above all operational—that is to say, related to something that somebody wants to do or may be forced to do.

The point to be made now is quite simply that what has been done in defence intelligence should be studied by someone with an eye that can look over the whole of Whitehall. There is a case for providing all home ministries with a common intelligence service; for offering a career in intelligence to first-class talent which is not attracted by administrative duties; for building up a class of trained intelligence officers, women as well as men, interchangeable between departments—even with defence and the police—and for giving them the chance to rise to the top of the civil service.

The associations of the word intelligence might even be valuable; most ministers would talk more proudly and take more notice of "my intelligence adviser" than of "my research department." Such an addition to Whitehall's resources would not cramp the style, say, of the Central Statistical Office or of the Social Survey which provides excellent intelligence service of a broad and long-term kind. What the modern minister and his permanent under-secretary need is the kind of personal, speedy, operational intelligence service that Major-General Strong once organised for General Eisenhower.