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Why is Canada so soft on espionage?

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For a long time, it had been a burning question ignored or indifferently understood for the most part by Canada's parliamentarians and government. The question, however, was well understood in the private world of Canada's potent mandarinates, those who strode the corridors of power during the Pierre Trudeau decades.

It was a debate about war and cold war, about Canada's foreign and domestic policies, about terror and subversion, a debate over intelligence operations and national security in a bipolar world. And always the burning question:

Why is Canada the KGB's happy hunting ground, why more so than any other democracy in the NATO alliance? Why, as *Toronto Sun* editor Barbara Amiel puts it, has Canada become "the soft underbelly" of Western resistance to communist espionage? Shouldn't there be a national debate about this agonizing problem which affects the security interests not only of Canada but also those of the United States and other NATO members? After all, Canada has just had a national election, but there was no national debate over the question of the KGB in Canada. The question of civil rights and the KGB violation of those rights was never mentioned in the campaign.

The debate by murmur has been

ticking away ever since the Igor Gouzenko affair exploded almost 40 years ago across the North American sky. The full story of his revelations still lies buried in Ottawa's most secret archives. It has never really been told. It was Mr. Gouzenko who put the finger on Harry Dexter White and Alger Hiss. Igor Gouzenko, the Soviet Embassy code clerk, blew the lid on Soviet espionage in Canada in September 1945 by listing names of Canadians, with dates and places, who were spying for Stalin. The Royal Commission appointed to investigate Mr. Gouzenko's revelations declared in its report that Mr. Gouzenko, who died recently in Canada, "has rendered great public service to the people of this country and thereby has placed Canada in his debt."

What has happened since the tremendous Gouzenko disclosures?

According to John D. Harbon, foreign affairs analyst for the Thomson News Service, "An overstuffed Soviet Embassy, much too large for the kind of trade and other relations we maintain with the U.S.S.R., has existed in Ottawa since the Gouzenko spy scandal of 1945-46."

Some weeks ago in the senate chamber of York University's Glendon campus in Toronto, a Canadian, quietly, unassertively and devastatingly, delivered a paper on Soviet espionage in Canada. He was John Starnes, the first civilian director-general of the RCMP security service from 1970-73 and a longtime Foreign Service officer, now retired and free at last.

Mr. Starnes was addressing on the record a small audience of Canadian and U.S. academic specialists in military and strategic studies and a handful of Canadian civil servants. He spoke from knowledge, personal experience, and from a sense of apprehension about the state of Canada's defenses against the invisible invader; invisible, that is, for those who will not see. He warned his countrymen about "the never-ending attempt by the KGB and others to compromise Canadians through blackmail, entrapment, and coercion."

"To my personal knowledge," he said, "there have been literally scores of such attempts in the past 25 years and probably the numbers are greater, since it must be assumed there are some such attempts which go unreported and thus are unknown to the authorities.

"The victims have included officials, journalists, politicians, diplomats, cypher clerks, businessmen, academics, tourists, and sportsmen

— the KGB's tastes are eclectic. The unsavory methods are designed to take advantage of the human frailties of individuals they consider some day may be of use to them."

Mr. Starnes charged that espionage activities by Soviet bloc agents in Canada included:

- Harassment of ethnic groups for political and other purposes.
- Creation of agents of influence, who, consciously or unconsciously, serve some Soviet purposes.
- Provision of clandestine financial support for causes and political groups serving some Soviet interest.
- Provision of ideological and military instruction for groups and individuals whose avowed aim is "the destruction of our institutions and those of our allies."

In any other democracy, charges like these by a highly informed government official against a country like the U.S.S.R. with a proven record of espionage, disinformation, subversion, assassination, and attempted assassination, could lead to an investigation, or at least a hue and cry — something. But not in Canada, not from the top leadership of the two major political parties — the Liberals, under John Turner, and the Progressive Conservatives under their new leader Brian Mulroney.

As for the socialist New Democratic Party, its policy is: indulge the Soviets, excoriate the United States. And Canadian civil liberties organizations, always on the ready to protect the right of Canadians from Big Brother government? What about KGB activities which routinely violate these rights? Silence. Willed amnesia about the Soviet Union and Cuba is endemic among Canada's ruling elites. Would that the United States, permanent target of these same elites,

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should be as lucky as the Soviet bloc.

Let me repeat: the Canadian who is making these charges would be the equivalent of someone like Judge William Webster, FBI director. If anyone should know the state of internal security in Canada it would be John Starnes and he told it like it is.

"Canadians do not perceive," he said, "that they are threatened by foreign espionage activities, international terrorism or activities of groups and individuals in Canada working to subvert the system."

And why the faulty perceptions? Mr. Starnes replied in a charitable gesture smothered in euphemism:

"Successive [Canadian] governments have never learned the knack of using effectively the information derived from various intelligence and security services. In particular they have often failed to take sufficient account of such information in the formulation of foreign, defense, trade, and security policies."

Note the phrase, "successive governments" — Liberal and Conservative — and their prime ministers, no exceptions. Someday, soon I hope, Mr. Starnes will answer the question as to why otherwise clever Canadian political leaders haven't learned the "knack" of using intelligence information effectively or why they have "failed" to use this information in formulating government policy. What's so difficult about learning the knack?

"Many Canadians apparently are unwilling to believe," Mr. Starnes said, "that anyone would wish to carry out such unfriendly activities against them. This is partly because we tend to think that we are universally liked and that others perceive us as we see ourselves — peace-loving, honest brokers filled with goodwill towards everyone.

"What secrets do we possess that could possibly interest the Russians or anyone else?" I recall a senior and influential Cabinet minister arguing exactly in that vein, I

believe with genuine conviction."

A Cabinet minister who believes such arrant nonsense would anywhere else but Canada have disqualified himself for public service.

Perhaps the most devastating accusation by Mr. Starnes is that "Soviet bloc intelligence activities rarely are taken into account at the official and ministerial level when policies and strategies are being formulated for the conduct of our overall relationships with the Soviet Union."

In other words, it would be fair to say that when former Prime Minister of Canada Pierre Elliott Trudeau was busy fashioning a policy towards the Soviet Union, one which led him to criticize President Reagan's policies on arms control in the face of Soviet superarmaments, it was quite probable that Mr. Trudeau was ignoring Soviet bloc intelligence activities in Canada, knowledge of which was available to him. As Mr. Starnes might say, Mr. Trudeau never got the "knack."

Mr. Starnes described to his colleagues and the academics "a worrying development," namely, the extent to which the Russians and "their friends, including the Cubans, recently have stepped up their espionage and disinformation activities throughout the world" and, even more important, "the much more aggressive manner in which they are carrying out these activities."

(One way of documenting the extent and increase in Soviet espionage activity are statistics of expulsions of Soviet officials from countries outside the bloc. From 1978 to August 1983, 316 Soviet officials were expelled from 43 countries. Of the 316 espionage expellees, a large proportion were expelled during the first eight months of 1983. From January to August 1983, 111 Soviet officials were expelled from 16 countries, a 116 percent increase over the average expulsion rate for the years

1978 to 1982.)

For Mr. Starnes, Soviet approval of "the more aggressive stance being displayed by the KGB and the GRU [Soviet military intelligence] ... raises some very serious questions in terms of our future relations with the Soviet Union, how we manage those relations and what it may reveal about Soviet intentions."

All these revelations and accusations by The Man Who Knows the Secrets ought to arouse Canada's political leadership. It is, however, a safe bet that Mr. Starnes's exposé will shake Ottawa not at all. It took 15 years of commission hearings, reports, and parliamentary debates for the Liberal government at the last House of Commons session to enact, over the filibustering protests of the NDP and the Progressive Conservatives, a law establishing a new counterespionage service entirely separate from the RCMP. It is called the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

In a democracy, an intelligence agency without public support or, at the very least, public tolerance — and in Canada, two of the three national parties opposed creation of the new agency — will go nowhere.

To some extent that is why the CIA has lost a large measure of public support, not so much because of what it is doing now but because of the idiocies and malfeasances perpetrated in the past, often with presidential approval. Canadian parliamentarians hesitate to get involved with intelligence issues because it's too hot dealing with KGB activities.

I asked Mr. Starnes whether he'd ever briefed members of the House of Commons about Soviet espionage activities in Canada. Oh, yes, he had at the members' request delivered briefings. How did they go?

"My grandson who's 16 could have asked better questions than did the parliamentarians," said Mr. Starnes.

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