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Spy fear dismissed after death in Moscow

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The British banker, Mr Dennis Skinner, who plunged to his death from the twelfth floor of a block of flats in Moscow last June, is not regarded in Whitehall as someone caught in a web of espionage. The view is that he was a loner who developed some kind of persecution complex as the day approached for his departure on a British Airways flight to London.

Neither the authorities in Croydon, where the inquest into his death was adjourned two months ago, nor the security experts in Whitehall regard this as a secret matter. No restrictions have been imposed

Mr Skinner's wife came to this country about two years ago and friends in Moscow understood that this was because their son would be going to school in Britain. In the weeks leading up to his death Mr Skinner's behaviour had begun to cause anxiety among his friends. After giving up alcohol and cigarettes he had difficulty sleeping.

Officials say that the delay in the inquest is caused by the process of assembling all the documents in the case. The proceedings are in the hands of the South-east London coroner, Dr Mary McHugh. A spokesman for her office said last night: "The resumption of the inquest has been delayed because of the difficulties encountered in obtaining papers from Moscow."

The Foreign Office said: "It is for the coroner, Dr McHugh, to decide how to hold the inquest. But we have explained to her that we are not aware of any interests of national security which would require the resumed hearing to be held in camera."

Mr Skinner, who was 54, was first posted to Moscow by a British computer manufacturer in 1968.

It was the handwritten note which he gave to a British friend Mr William Cane, on June 15, two days before his death, which caused alarm and concern. This asked Mr Cane: "Please go to the Embassy for guards to be there, in case I try to make a run for it. . . . Please do this for me—or I am dead man."

The note contained a sentence in which Mr Skinner claimed to know that there was a spy in the British Embassy. It seems that he was asking Mr Cane to alert the embassy staff because he feared that the armed Soviet soldiers who stand outside the building would intercept him when he went there for the annual reception marking the Queen's birthday. In the event he attended the reception without difficulty.