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A Postscript on P.M.S.2

NICHOLAS HILEY and JULIAN PUTKOWSKI

Since the publication of an article on P.M.S.2 in this journal,1 more information has come to light about the activities of this domestic intelligence unit during the First World War. Most interestingly, it is now evident that although its internal files were carefully destroyed at some time during 1917, reports from a number of its agents were nevertheless preserved among other groups of papers.2

The four documents which we publish here date from the final phase of the unit's activities, and demonstrate how far relations between the civilian staff of the Ministry of Munitions and the military officers of P.M.S.2 had deteriorated by February 1917.3 The first document is a report by William Rickard, a former journalist employed by the unit under the alias 'Alex Gordon', who submitted such reports 'almost daily'.4 This one describes with some relish how he attended a meeting at Chandos Hall, the London headquarters of the British Socialist Party (BSP), which stood just two streets away from P.M.S.2's own central offices in Durham House.5 At this time Rickard was posing as a representative of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), and claiming to be a friend of the Clyde deportee Arthur McManus — whom he had met briefly in 1916.6

The second and third documents are comments on this report by Frederick Kellaway, Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions, and by Christopher Addison, who had recently been appointed as Minister. They reflect the growing criticism of P.M.S.2 which was evident at the beginning of February 1917, after three of the unit's officers had been called as witnesses in a conspiracy case at Derby, and had revealed how the prosecution relied on discoveries made by the mysterious 'Alex Gordon'. Before P.M.S.2 could reply to the criticisms levelled in the minutes printed here, this controversial case at Derby had already been raised in the House of Commons, and Kellaway had become convinced that 'Labouchere and his crew' had to be dropped as soon as possible.7

As the final document shows, Frank Labouchere, the head of P.M.S.2, found himself able to agree in principle that agents provocateurs should never be employed 'under any circumstances whatever', but could manage this only by employing the narrowest possible definition of provocative action. He apparently instructed all officers of P.M.S.2 not to act in any way 'which was not playing the game', and if not in fact have reprimanded them if individuals, they merely 'joined in their ranks as they were'.8 It was this bizarre form of Kellaway quickly realised was political dys- banding of P.M.S.2 in April 1917.

[A]

CONFIDENTIAL.
31 January 1917.

On Tuesday January 30th, at 9.15 p.m. Noticing a light in the B.S.P. headquarters, I button-holed the solemn-looking Chair comrade? I am a delegate from McManus things hot at Liverpool, and wish to put the branches to the gathering.' The Committee shake hands with me all together, and I walk them.

The meeting, which was an extraordinary deal with two important matters — firstly, for 'Brother Potter', their general secretary, a probable dilution of labour in their electric. The Chairman straffed brother Potter when neglecting branch meetings and the handling of being unable to articulate properly in officials when heading deputations, the duty

'I propose he be dismissed his job, for which now for some years now' concluded the Chair, jumped up like a jack-in-a-box. 'I second the surprise and some laughter greeted this action, suffered quite a deal.)

A brother at the back of the hall jumped up

'I should beg to remark Mr. Chairm ...

Mr. Chairman: 'Sit down brother.'

A delegate from the Fulham branch next time. He said: 'It is with mingled disgust that I rise to the Chairman's decision to sack Brother Pot
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way 'which was not playing the game', but later admitted that he would not in fact have reprimanded them if, when investigating particular individuals, they merely 'joined in their talk and pretended to be as bad as they were'. It was this bizarre form of industrial relations which Kellaway quickly realised was political dynamite, and which led to the final disbanding of P.M.S.2 in April 1917.

[A]

CONFIDENTIAL.
31 January 1917.

On Tuesday January 30th, at 9.15 p.m. I wandered along Maiden Lane. Noticing a light in the B.S.P. Headquarters, Chandos Hall, I turned into the building and found the large hall packed with men. A bird could have perched on the smoke-laden atmosphere, and I knew by the general bearing of the crowd that there was going to be some fun. I pressed my way to the top of the hall where, seated with judicial mein [sic], were the District Committee of the London Electrical Trade Union. Mounting the platform, I button-holed the solemn-looking Chairman and said: 'How are you, comrade? I am a delegate from McManus, who, as you know, is making things hot at Liverpool, and wish to put the position of the A.S.E. northern branches to the gathering.' The Committee all smiled at once and tried to shake hands with me all together, and I was given a seat of honour among them.

The meeting, which was an extraordinary one, had been summoned to deal with two important matters — firstly to secure the order of the sack for 'Brother Potter', their general secretary, and secondly, to deal with the probable dilution of labour in their electrical sphere and condemn same. The Chairman straffed brother Potter who was accused of generally neglecting branch meetings and the handing over of subscriptions and also of being unable to articulate properly in the presence of Government officials when heading deputationes, the direct result of alcoholic excess. 'I propose he be dismissed his job, for which he has received £3.10 a week now for some years now' concluded the Chairman briefly. Brother Potter jumped up like a jack-in-a-box. 'I second that', he cried excitedly. General surprise and some laughter greeted this action. (I laughed inwardly and suffered quite a deal.)

A brother at the back of the hall jumped up at this juncture and shouted: 'I should beg to remark Mr. Chairman ...'

Mr. Chairman: 'Sit down brother.'

A delegate from the Fulham branch next tortured the momentary silence. He said: 'It is with mingled disgust that I rise at this 'ere meeting to support the Chairman's decision to sack Brother Potter. I 'ave given him very strong
advice about 'is "goings on" for the past two years. I cannot say that I ever 'ad occasion to see 'im drink because I 'ave been working mostly at nights (laughter), but my branch 'as sent me down to say that Brother Potter could get drink when we 'adn't the chance because the pubs as you are aware is all closed at certain stipulated times. I do not blame our brother, but biz' is biz' and 'e ought to go.'

Brother at back of hall jumping up: 'I should beg to remark Mr. Chairman ...'

Chairman: 'Sit down brother.'

Brother: 'I beg to remark that it's wrong to always tell me to sit down; 'ow can I tell wot I am going to say if you keeps saying "sit down brother"?' (Loud laughter.)

Brother Potter arose at 9 o'clock and said: 'I am fed up with the job, I resign. I only hope this meeting will be over before 9.30.' At 9.15 his resignation was formally accepted and he made a bee-line for the exit.

The question of dilution of labour by women was then broached, and a delegate seconding the proposal to wire their objection to L. George and Dr. Addison, said: 'I am aware that a woman can't very well 'elp being a female, it's an haxident of birth (laughter) but we aint responsible for that, and I objects to them taking our bread out of our mouths (applause').' A hush fell on the crowd when Comrade Muir, a Scot, and I believe a Clyde Deportee, rose to speak.2 He spoke about the bloodthirsty capitalist and his desire to crush the workers by warfare and general exploitation. He advocated that all shipping centres should demand 3d. per hour rise or down tools. 'If you say humble prayers' he said, 'you will only get the East wind, my brothers; demand what you want and you will get it. Since the way an attempt was made to introduce blacklegs into Haig's Arsenal while I was working there, did we eat humble pie? No! We said to the boss: 'Remove these men in two hours, or we down tools', and by God boys they had to. Although we were surrounded by police and military, we won the day. No munitions act can frighten the boys from the North (cheers). I am at Gregson's now, and we come out shortly for a rise and we'll get it too.'

A resolution to send wires protesting against labour dilution to L. George and Dr. Addison was passed amid great cheering, and I was called upon to address the meeting. I sketched the progress made by McManus in the North, and amid loud cheers I felt the pulse of the audience by hinting at big trouble in the North that was then brewing. After my speech a delegate rose and suggested that a collection be made to defray my expenses but I refused to sanction same. Comrade Muir asked me: 'Is it not a fact comrade, that men like yourself are touring

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the country advocating industrial revolution of Unions as now constituted?' I replied: 'Yes, so.' (Loud cheers.) I then wished the 'boy ovation, I made my exit.

It was a scream!

[B]

CONFIDENTIAL.
The Minister.

I have read the report signed 'A.G.' regarding it. This sort of thing ought to be monstrous that the Ministry, either directly or through agents provocateurs, is trying to get men to go about posing as extreme agents provocateurs, and I am indeed sorry that any officer, allowed to employ such persons. I do not know whether the Ministry was doing this sort of thing instrument. It is right up against the English.' I had my way I would clear out from the Ministry, the people responsible for it.

[C]

Col. Labouchere.

I agree with Mr. Kellaway. The function of the administration should be confined to proper investigation and action as agent[s] provocateur[s]. Will you please put the thing & let me have a report as to how far the Ministry employs.

[D]

The Minister of Munitions.

I entirely agree with Mr. Kellaway that the loathsome figure, whose employment can be circumstantial whatever.

The strictest possible injunctions have been placed on P.M.S.2 to all agents employed by them.
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the country advocating industrial revolution and the scrapping of Trade Unions as now constituted?' I replied: 'You are quite right comrade, it is so.' (Loud cheers.) I then wished the 'boys' farewell, and amidst quite an ovation, I made my exit.

It was a scream!

A.G.

[B]

CONFIDENTIAL.
The Minister.

I have read the report signed 'A.G.' and I take a very serious view regarding it: This sort of thing ought to be stopped at once. It is simply monstrous that the Ministry, either directly or indirectly, should be employing men to go about posing as extreme agitators with a view to inciting workingmen to crime. The agent-provocateur is a most loathsome figure, and I am indeed sorry that any officer, acting for the Ministry, has been allowed to employ such persons. I do not hesitate to say that if it were known the Ministry was doing this sort of thing it might bring down the Government. It is right up against the Englishman's sense of fair play, and if I had my way I would clear out from the Ministry lock, stock and barrel the people responsible for it.

F. Kellaway 9.2.17.

[C]

Col. Labouchere.

I agree with Mr. Kellaway. The function of our officers in your Department should be confined to proper investigation work, and they should not act as agent[s] provocateur[s]. Will you please put a stop to this kind of thing & let me have a report as to how far such like methods have been employed.

C. Addison 13.2.17.

[D]

The Minister of Munitions.

I entirely agree with Mr. Kellaway that the agent provocateur is a most loathsome figure, whose employment can never be justified under any circumstances whatever.

The strictest possible injunctions have been given by the Officers of P.M.S.2 to all agents employed by them, directly or indirectly, against
anything approaching provocation, and the agents have been told repeatedly that they will be instantly dismissed if it is discovered that they have done anything which might be construed into 'inciting to crime'.

It is obvious that no information of value can be obtained by agents who attend secret and other meetings unless they appear to identify themselves with the sentiments of the company they are in, and the particular agent whose report is objected to was, in fact, an ardent Socialist and a member of the B.S.P. before the war.

Whilst I think, on re-reading the report in question, that he went too far in addressing the meeting in Maiden Lane at all, I am unable to find anything in his statement which can be said to 'incite to crime'. He was asked a definite question by Comrade Muir, and he gave an answer which was in the main correct, inasmuch that it is indubitable that men like Arthur McManus, Walton Newbold, and others, do 'tour the country advocating industrial revolution and the scrapping of Trades Unions as now constituted.'

Is it possible that, owing to its somewhat ambiguous wording, Mr. Kellaway has misread this paragraph in the agent's report and has taken it to mean that the Ministry of Munitions employs people to tour the country in the guise of agitators with the object of fomenting disaffection? This, I need hardly add, is entirely contrary to the policy and to the practice of this Department.

F. A. Labouchere, Major.
P.M.S.2
16.2.17.

NOTES


2. Julian Putkowski has located numerous typescript copies of P.M.S.2 reports in the Bodleian Library, preserved in Addison Papers, Box 62, and in Milner Papers, Dep. 377. They provide a fascinating insight into the surveillance of domestic opposition during the war.

3. The documents come from Addison Papers, Box 62, File entitled 'Investigations: Munitions 1917', and are reproduced by the kind permission of Viscount Addison. Of the originals, [A] is a typescript copy, [B] is a signed typescript, [C] is a holograph added to [B], and [D] is a signed typescript.


5. At the start of 1917 P.M.S.2 was based in Durham House, 16 John Street: PRO HO 43/10809/311425/files 31 and 37.


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9. Rickard obviously thought the speaker was the C., but was mistaken, for on 30 January 1917 John W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, (4th ed. 1919),