

cal reasons, will be the future of Blair.

This is the most important thing in the Blair universe, and all else is subordinated to it. But there is a moral aspect, that awkward factor for a prime minister who claims that he is "a pretty straight sort of guy". The probability that British surveillance included listening to the conversations of the UN Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, is largely irrelevant - illegal, indecent and unnecessary, of course - but not of great importance compared with the main fact revealed, which is that Britain was asked by Washington to spy on allies.

Methods of intercepting communications are comparatively simple, and anyone who is interested in such things is well aware of at least the outline of the process. After all, over thirty years ago it was common knowledge that foreign intelligence services could intercept car telephone messages in Moscow. Since these days America, Britain and others — notably Australia — have refined procedures and skills to an almost unimaginable degree.

Following from this is the present embarrassment for Blair which began with the revelation by an employee of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the main interception agency, that Washington asked Britain to collect communications involving nations critical to Security Council's deliberations on Iraq, with the aim of being aware of their intentions regarding support of the US/UK line. The employee, Ms Katharine Gun, made it known publicly last year that this squalid little operation had been on the cards, but recently there was a strange official reversal of declared intention to bring her to trial for what was undoubtedly a grievous infringement of the Official Secrets Act.

Ms Gun said that her conscience had been so moved by the nature of the proposed arrangement that she felt she had to reveal its existence. This was a criminal offence, and the fact that she did not deny committing it made the case against her open-and-shut by any interpretation. She declared her guilt and expected to be punished. Accordingly she was charged with betraying her country, and the process of law continued right up until the time when her appearance in court was scheduled; then the prosecution backed down. There was no possibility of government interfer-

out at the express orders of government.

There is no way out of this, because the alternative is to assume that the security services act independently of Blair's guidance and control. Blair should either say that the security services committed illegal acts on grounds that had nothing whatever to do with national security, or he should deny the allegation. Simple. But, being a moral coward, Blair whined that "Our security services, particularly today, particularly with global terrorism as it is, perform an absolutely vital task on behalf of this country... Many of their people work in circumstances of very great danger and it really is the height of irresponsibility to expose them to this type of public questioning and scrutiny in a way that can do absolutely no good to the security of this country."

This example of the now-popular 9/11 defence at its most pathetic has seemed to work. Ms Short has been reviled in the most outrageous terms by Blair's party hacks and sycophants who appear to be competing in a contest to win the great leader's approval by indulging in ever more vicious personal attacks. Not only this, but a senior civil servant, the cabinet secretary, has taken it upon himself to scold an elected member of the British Parliament in a manner that is not only condescending but unconstitutional. He sent a fax to Ms Short saying: "I have to admit to being extremely disappointed by your behaviour."

I very much regret that you have seen fit to make claims which damage the interests of the United Kingdom." One wonders upon what meat this man has fed that he is grown so great. The only damage has been to Blair. There has not been the slightest compromise of security or national defence.

The British government's handling of the affair is a dire example of the depths to which pretty straight guys can sink. Blair called Ms Short "totally irresponsible" in an attempt to disguise his basic moral failings. He invariably seeks to place the blame for his deficiencies on others, and his use of the 9/11 defence and 'national security' is contemptible. Clare Short and Katharine Gun are not heroines, but they deserve credit for showing the world the essentially cowardly nature of the present British administration.

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