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Daniel W. B. Lomas

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#ForgetJamesBond: diversity, inclusion and the UK's intelligence agencies

Daniel W. B. Lomas 

ABSTRACT

Diversity and inclusivity remain top priorities for UK intelligence, having been much maligned for the largely white, male stereotype. The Intelligence & Security Committee of Parliament has published a number of reports suggesting that, even in 2018, the UK's agencies were still behind Whitehall. Historically, there have been issues with female, BAME and LGBT representation, with the article placing today's criticism of the agencies in historical context with a particular focus on the period after 1945. The article also examines the position now and the steps taken by the agencies to promote change, suggesting there are grounds for cautious optimism.

In February 2021, *The Times* reported that Britain's foreign intelligence agency, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6), was relaxing rules to allow applicants with dual UK nationality, or with one parent being a UK national or having 'substantial ties to the UK', to apply. Sources told the paper it was just the latest move to access a 'larger talent pool', adding: 'We want a diversification of thought, a diverse workforce, not people who all think in similar ways'.¹ Later, marking LGBT History Month 2021, SIS's Chief ('C') Richard Moore followed other agency heads in apologising for the historical treatment of LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) officials and the bar to gay men and women serving in SIS. In a video shared on his Twitter feed, Moore said the ban deprived SIS of 'some of the best talent Britain could offer' and was 'wrong, unjust and discriminatory'.² *PinkNews* also interviewed two LGBT SIS officers. 'I think the legacy of the ban has been ... helping people understand that LGBT+ people aren't inherently untrustworthy', said 'Leia', a member of SIS's LGBT+ Affinity Group. 'It's drawn a line in the sand', she added.³ The statements and media coverage mark just the latest in a series of announcements on the agency's commitment to diversity and change. In January 2021, tabloid newspapers reported on an SIS recruitment drive, specifically an advert, headlined 'Tell me a secret', calling for 'individuals with diverse skill sets and life experiences' to apply for part-time and consulting roles.⁴ Responding, Moore tweeted his service's commitment to 'flexible working' and 'diversity'. '#ForgetJamesBond', he added, acknowledging that Bond often shaped perceptions of the ideal intelligence officer.⁵ Sir Colin McColl, 'C' from 1989 to 1994, once described the fictional intelligence officer as, in his view, 'the best recruiting sergeant in the world', yet successive Chiefs, like Moore, have tried to distance themselves, seeing Bond's legacy as both a blessing and a curse.⁶ In October 2016, Moore's predecessor, Alex Younger, admitted he was 'conflicted' about Bond, on the one hand creating a 'powerful brand', although one that seemed exclusively white and male. 'For too long – often because of the fictional stereotypes I have mentioned – people have felt that there is a single quality that defines an MI6 officer', Younger told journalists in his first public speech in SIS's Vauxhall Cross headquarters, 'be it an Oxbridge

CONTACT Daniel W. B. Lomas  D.W.B.Lomas@salford.ac.uk

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education or a proficiency in hand-to-hand combat. This is, of course, patently untrue'. There was 'no standard MI6 officer'.⁷

Such statements show a clear determination by the UK's agencies to promote diversity and inclusivity, an issue that has received limited attention from academics. This article explores several themes. Firstly, it assesses inclusivity and diversity today, drawing on the reports of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) and from wider government to look at how the UK's agencies have responded to criticism on the recruitment, career pathways and the opportunities open to women, BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic), and LGBT groups. It compares the performance of the UK agencies against the performance of the wider civil service, concluding that the agencies have charted a similar pathway to analogous departments and that, although attracting criticism on occasion, they have moved a long way. Secondly, it also offers insights into how agency performance now is a prisoner of the past, suggesting that the late avowal has had a lasting effect that has been hard to overcome. It also offers insights into the position of such groups in the post-war British intelligence community, making the argument that the experiences of women, LGBT and ethnic minority groups – subjects that are worthy of articles in their own right – need to be studied under the broader subject of diversity as framed by the ISC's July 2018 report to fully understand progress. Thirdly, the article looks at UK agency efforts to promote diversity and change, arguing that the challenge has forced MI5, GCHQ and SIS to think in new ways about recruitment and to increasingly open up to break down traditional stereotypes.

The study of inclusion and the experiences of women, BAME, and LGBT groups across the history of the agencies is patchy and sporadic, the current literature generally conforming to what Jessica Shahan has called a 'white, male, well-spoken and educated' stereotype, that does little to add to perceptions of the social history of intelligence more widely, often confirming to many that the intelligence world reflects the traditional Bond-like cliché.⁸ These stereotypes have real world impact; as Tammy Proctor observes, traditional views of who does intelligence 'still plague the women who try to work for intelligence'.⁹ In April 2019, the polling organisation YouGov asked whether people would like to join the UK intelligence agencies, just 39% of women (compared to 52% of men surveyed) saying they would consider a career in intelligence.¹⁰ A follow up poll in June asked whether respondents would want to join MI5 or SIS; although 33% of men and women said they would join the Security Service, a minority of women (24%) wanted to join SIS compared to men (30%).¹¹

Whereas those studying intelligence have been quick to use new file releases to broaden the history of the UK's agencies and the role of intelligence on policymaking, they have been relatively slow to focus on contemporary social history and themes of diversity and inclusion. Although the 'British school' of intelligence studies deserves plaudits for expanding the subject beyond the narrow 'missing dimension' it was – the subject now described as 'booming'¹² – there has been little examination of the agencies' workforce and how representative it is of contemporary British society. If anything, researchers have been guilty of treading a familiar path that focuses on the operational and policy impact of intelligence, overlooking those 'doing intelligence' and the legacy of past practices still felt by the agencies now. To some extent, although it could be suggested that it has been necessary for intelligence academics to first establish an institutional framework to underpin the social history of the UK's agencies, the field of intelligence studies has been relatively slow to pick up on the work of Proctor and others to study the role of women and minority groups generally, though such themes have started to emerge.¹³ To fully understand UK intelligence, academics must expand beyond what the agencies do and the influence they have on policy. In short, the subject needs to 'diversify'.¹⁴

It is also fair to say that the 'British school' has not been helped by the continued closure of records for much of the Cold War and access to data on who made up the agencies or the policies governing the recruitment and progression. Although the study of women in the Security Service (MI5) and the Government Code & Cipher School (GC&CS) is possible pre-1945 thanks to file releases to The National Archives (TNA), what little we do know of the agencies after this period comes largely from their authorised histories. Christopher Andrew's *The Defence of the Realm*, published in 2009,

builds on themes raised by former Director-General Stella Rimington's memoir *Open Secret*,¹⁵ while John Ferris' study of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) provides a useful history of women and British signals intelligence, and the policies that excluded the BAME and LGBT communities.¹⁶ Both books are an important step forward, even if the social history of SIS after 1949 is yet to be told, and significant gaps remain in the story of diversity and inclusion generally for the second half of the 20th Century.¹⁷ The result is that the social study of UK intelligence remains lopsided, now heavily focused towards the era of the two world wars.¹⁸ Such studies are useful in identifying important themes in the social history of British intelligence, but do little to tell us about the state of diversity and inclusion today or place the recent criticism that the UK's agencies are unrepresentative in contemporary historical context. It is also worth echoing the point made by Jim Beach that the social dimension is still dominated by studies of 'personalities' not of 'personnel' generally, a point also made by Shahan who rightly points out that the search for 'individual and exceptional women' has resulted in a 'patchwork of gender'.¹⁹ It is also worth mentioning that while Chiefs have gone on record in Black and LGBT History Month to apologise for past discrimination and point to the positives today, the detail of what they are apologising for remains hidden. 'My ultimate goal is for more people to consider a career in MI6 and to get rid of the myth that it's all about having studied at Oxford or Cambridge or having advanced hand-to-hand combat skills', Alex Younger said in October 2017, adding: 'That stereotype really couldn't be further from the truth'.²⁰ Yet the stereotype remains strong as we lack the history.

Unfortunately, those looking to complete a comprehensive sociological analysis of agency recruitment and staffing based on archival research will be disappointed for a long time, the gap in knowledge largely filled by anecdote, memoir, and popular stereotype.²¹ The irony is that while UK-based historians are able to study the experience of women and black employees in the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) since 1947, helped by the release of official agency files in 2013, we cannot do the same for the UK in the post-war period.²² It also is much easier study change across the modern-day US agencies, thanks to reports from the Office of Director of National Intelligence (ODNI).²³ In 2015, the ODNI launched its 'Equal Opportunity and Diversity Enterprise Strategy', and in June 2016 released its first intelligence community-wide data on agency demographics – information that had been provided to congressional oversight bodies from 2005. In January 2017, ODNI's Equal Employment Opportunity and Diversity Office, set up in 2006 to support the Chief of Equal Employment Opportunity, released a further report drawing on community-wide data, suggesting there was much room for improvement in policy affecting leadership, organisational culture, recruitment, career advancement, flexible working and maternity, and disability. Although the report concluded much had changed, leadership of the US intelligence community still lacked minority representation, while the agencies struggled 'to provide the type of inclusive workplace culture' to develop talent pipelines for leadership.²⁴

In the UK, access to historical records and detailed data on modern-day recruitment and progression remains patchy. Though Andrew and Ferris provide insights into the experiences of women especially, historians are mostly unable to access historical documents on the in-house policies of the UK's agencies. Moreover, it is also clear that SIS's newfound openness has clear limits, appearing to be restricted to selected briefings and succinct, if largely welcome, statements on the past. While Richard Moore's sincere apology on the treatment of gay men and women in the service rightly received widespread press attention and plaudits, the experience of women in the service after 1949 remains largely hidden and their story largely untold, even if progress was generally positive and one of progressive (if slow) change. Of course, this differs with other parts of Whitehall; the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Historians have written extensively on diversity and the slow evolution of attitudes to gay men, race and gender. James Southern correctly highlights that research in the field 'serves as a basis for the beginning of a long overdue conversation aimed at building a more inclusive organisation' – a salutary lesson for some of the UK's agencies.²⁵

If the history is generally lacking, so is the data. The reports of the ISC, first established under the Intelligence Services Act 1994 and its powers expanded under the Justice and Security Act 2013,

provide broad detail on gender, LGBT, BAME and disability groups.²⁶ Generally, the figures show increasing diversity across the agencies, yet it does not explain what roles are filled by the growing numbers of women in the agencies. The absence of regular figures, detailed data and information also places some limits on the researcher, even if agency public speeches, social media feeds and websites provide more on recruitment and supporting diversity externally. The latest annual report for 2018–19 published in July 2020 contains no data unlike several previous reports; under 'diversity and inclusion' the report noting that MI5 came fourth place in the Stonewall Top 100 LGBT employers list, with SIS also obtaining a Stonewall Top 100 listing, while GCHQ launched REACH, a new network for race, ethnicity and cultural affinity.²⁷ Even the data itself, as the ISC acknowledges, 'is not sufficiently robust'.²⁸ As a result, this article will not be the full story, but it at least starts the conversation and offers a substantial platform for others to build on.

Diversity and the ISC

In July 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee reported on *Diversity and Inclusion in the UK Intelligence Community*. For several years, the committee had collected data on the diversity of staff, hearing first-hand of the importance of a varied talent pool across the intelligence community. The subject was not entirely new; the ICS's 2011–12 annual report, issued in July 2012, stated bluntly that the leadership of SIS, GCHQ and MI5 remained 'largely white, male-dominated'. Analysis of the numbers of staff in Senior Civil Service (SCS) grades²⁹ provided stark reading; just 12% in SIS's leadership were women. Ten of the 47 SCS in GCHQ (21%) were female – compared to 35% of women in the agency generally. For MI5, though women made up 40% of the workforce, just 21% were SCS. The committee also criticised the poor statistics on BAME, reaching the conclusion that, despite MI5 making a 'real effort to create an inclusive working environment', high non-declaration rates and a general lack of progress were worrying.³⁰ GCHQ had come in for particular criticism from the Cabinet Office for 'poor' delivery against targets, then Director Ian Lobban agreeing in March 2012 that performance was 'not good enough'.³¹ The government's response to the ISC noted the agencies had been doing much to create an 'ethnically-diverse workforce' with the long-term aim to recruit a broad talent pool which would in time lead to diversity 'at higher grades'.³² In their next annual report, the ISC acknowledged the cultural and security impediments to quick change, yet added it was vital that the agencies fix the issue, not only to provide 'competitive advantage (increasing innovation and creativity amongst employees, and improving staff motivation and efficiency)', but also to address the range of threats facing the UK and, from an analytical standpoint, guard against the dangers of 'unacknowledged biases' or groupthink.³³ In short, diversity was necessary in the wider drive for equality and inclusion across government, and for operational reasons in light of the changed contemporary threats.

Many of the issues seen in the ISC's earlier papers were reflected in the March 2015 report, *Women in the UK Intelligence Community*. 'Logically, if all intelligence professionals are cut from the same cloth, then they are likely to share "unacknowledged bias"', wrote Labour MP Hazel Blears in the preface. 'Diversity should therefore be pursued not just on legal or ethical grounds – which are important in themselves – but because it will result in a better response to the range of threats that we face to our national security'.³⁴ Generally, the report argued that despite positive work already underway, there was still much to be done to improve the recruitment and retention of women, finding that just 38% of the agencies' staff were female. Worse still, just 19% of agency leadership were women.³⁵ Internally, the report found that the focus on female role models, use of focus groups by MI5 and SIS to shape future recruitment and advice from wider women's networks were positive factors, SIS even seeing a 'small' increase in new female recruits by 2014. Yet the recruitment of women into technical and specialist roles was a particular problem, even if the ISC praised GCHQ's educational outreach programmes on science and computing. GCHQ were encouraged 'to ensure these activities encourage girls to engage at an early age, in order to overcome damaging perceptions that these are not subjects they might be interested in'. By contrast, it was reported that MI5

had looked at a similar programmes, concluding that ‘cover and security issues’ made it near impossible.³⁶ Other than new candidates, the ISC also pointed to difficulties with maternity and flexible working arrangements, often impacting on the retention and progression of women already in the agencies, becoming effectively a ‘brain drain’ of highly talented officers. The ISC also noted that in-house culture impacted heavily on diversity, but remained stubbornly resistant to new ways of working: ‘there still appears to be a sense of “this is the way it has always been done”. Whilst those at the top of the organisation may be personally committed to encouraging diversity, it is by managing and tackling the behaviour of those at middle management level that they can best demonstrate that commitment’. As one unnamed senior female GCHQ official said, ‘Having entered a male-dominated workplace where there are very few female role models, women often feel intimidated or encounter unconscious bias’.³⁷

Claims that diversity and inclusion were not a top priority could not be levelled at the heads of the agencies. In July 2017, National Security Advisor Mark Sedwell, in the forward to the publication *Mission Critical: Why Inclusion is a National Security Issues and What You Can do To Help*, explained ‘we need a national security workforce of different backgrounds, perspectives and ways of thinking’, the paper identifying five ways that diversity was key: performance, recruitment, innovation, public trust, and cultural insights.³⁸ It was a message embraced by agency leadership. In a rare interview to blackhistorymonth.org.uk, Alex Younger said SIS’s success depended on ‘getting the very best and brightest ... regardless of their background’, adding: ‘I want MI6 to be as diverse as the country it represents, and to attract the best from all its communities, including BAME’.³⁹ Speaking to the CyberUK conference in April 2018, GCHQ Director Jeremy Fleming also admitted ‘we don’t always do enough to make a career accessible to everyone who could contribute to our mission’ and, even if things had started to change, GCHQ needed to ‘do better’.⁴⁰ MI5’s then Director General Andrew Parker had also told a meeting of the campaign group 30% Club, committed to gender diversity on boards and senior management teams, that MI5 needed the ‘richest mix of talents’.⁴¹

Such sentiments could only go so far, the ISC’s July 2018 report presenting a mixed picture. The central charge was that the UK’s agencies were still not gender balanced at senior levels and did not ‘fully reflect the ethnic make-up of modern Britain’.⁴² Certainly, the ISC’s findings made unpleasant reading for the agencies if parallels were drawn with the rest of Whitehall. By 2018, over half (54%) of civil servants were women.⁴³ Of the civil servants who declared their ethnicity as of March 2017, 11.6% were from an ethnic minority background, up half a percent from the year before.⁴⁴ By contrast, based on data from 2017, the committee showed that gender representation across all grades in GCHQ stood at 35.2% (in 1995 it was 28%⁴⁵), SIS 38.9% and MI5 42.2%. The report also showed stubbornly low representation of all groups at SCS grades. Although the ratio of women on the Boards of all three agencies compared favourably with FTSE 100 companies, they were in a minority at most senior levels; the 2017 data showing that 31% of MI5’s leadership were women, GCHQ having 27% and SIS just 24%.⁴⁶ This was a modest increase on three years earlier; data given to the ISC in August 2014 had showed SCS numbers for women in MI5 at 26.5%, GCHQ with 17% (10% below 2017 figures) and SIS at 15% (9% lower than 2017). Of course, the smaller number of SCS grades made the data prisoner to fortune; for instance, while the ISC had reported that 21% of GCHQ’s senior leadership were women in based on figures for 2011,⁴⁷ data for March 2015 showed a small drop to 18%. Nonetheless, the data suggested a long-term growth in the number of female SCS grades.⁴⁸ The same could not be said of BAME representation, a situation the committee found ‘lamentable’. Only GCHQ had any ethnic minority staff in a senior position (just 4.8% of SCS grades).⁴⁹ In their reply, the government recognised that despite the good work there was ‘still a long way to go’.⁵⁰ The story was slightly more positive for BAME recruitment generally; 8.6% of MI5’s workforce came from ethnic minority backgrounds, SIS’s BAME staff at 7.7% (up from 6% in 2015). The percentage of GCHQ’s staff from ethnic minority backgrounds remained much lower at just 3.1%.⁵¹

Explaining their findings and suggesting the path forward, the committee pointed to nationality rules and vetting as having a disproportionate effect on BAME candidates. In particular, the

committee argued that the nationality and residency rules needed to obtain Developed Vetting (DV) failed to keep up with 'changes in British society' and often had a negative impact on those seeking to join, while many vetting officers conducting interviews were 'white, male and middle-aged' suggesting a diverse pool of officers and unconscious bias training was needed.⁵² At the recruitment stage it was also suggested that the agencies generally should target talent from underrepresented groups, even adopting more widely SIS's return to a traditional 'tap-on-the-shoulder' approach. Also, new ways of engagement and outreach were needed. Internally, other than improve the datasets available on recruitment and the workforce, the identification of new talent across all underrepresented groups was a priority to help individuals 'think more strategically about their careers, raise their ambitions and ultimately fulfil their potential'. Leadership was another area for change; the committee identifying the lack of BAME role models and fully integrating diversity and inclusion into agency objectives with the correct resourcing and effort.

The time factor

If the UK intelligence agencies were not fully representative of society, such criticism needs to be placed in historical context. For one former senior MI5 officer, the ISC's criticism overlooked the fact that the agencies had come a long way, pointing out that the Security Service had 'senior female staff for a long time', notably having two female Director General's – Dame Stella Rimington (1992–1996) and Baroness Manningham-Buller (2002–2007).⁵³ Another former officer points to the significant 'time lag' between the agencies and Whitehall, a factor the ISC itself had recognised.⁵⁴ The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent fall of the Soviet Union marked an important turning point. Even before the end of the Cold War, MI5 had already arrived at the conclusion that public avowal and a new legal framework was necessary, ultimately leading to the Security Service Act (1989). Changing times and the drive for openness in government also led GCHQ and SIS to follow a similar path, becoming statutory bodies under the 1994 Intelligence Services Act, and formally announcing SIS Chief Sir Colin McColl and GCHQ Director Sir John Adye.⁵⁵ But there were limits to openness; through MI5 gradually built up its public profile, McColl, one SIS officer told journalist Mark Urban, concluded that 'mystery and secrecy' remained essential to recruitment.⁵⁶ In effect, recruitment remained largely 'disguised'.⁵⁷ The impact was an uneven approach to transparency. McColl's successor, Sir David Spedding, was publicly announced, yet the recruitment of intelligence officers remained fairly traditional and still 'Cold War focused'.⁵⁸ Even if requirements were changing, the recruitment of intelligence officers still largely revolved around the right universities and the old tap on the shoulder cliché, resulting in the recruitment, one officer recalled, of more 'male white dudes' from a small talent pool dominated by 'white Oxbridge groups'.⁵⁹

In today's digital environment, it seems extraordinary that SIS only set up its website in October 2005, the site receiving 3.5 million hits in the first few hours after going live. It was 'pretty astronomical', one Foreign Office official responsible for SIS media enquiries admitted.⁶⁰ By April 2006, the service went a step further launching its first public recruitment campaign with a half-page advert in *The Times* careers supplement, calling for 'operational officers' and 'efficient administrators'.⁶¹ In contrast, MI5 had launched its first public campaign in May 1997, which exceeded expectations by generating 12,000 calls to the advertising agency Austin Knight on the first day, though just four new candidates joined as a result.⁶² Yet the unbalanced approach to public facing activity, added to the fact that parts of the intelligence community were far behind the rest of Whitehall. In the civil service generally, public facing and open to candidates to apply, women had typically accounted for just under half of civil servants, even if, as Rodney Lowe and Hugh Pemberton write in the authorised history of the UK civil service, they were generally concentrated at the bottom. Slower progress was made on the recruitment of BAME officials, estimated to be just 2% of the overall civil service.⁶³ Towards the end of the 1990s gender was reaching a near 50/50 split, while those Civil Servants who chose to declare their ethnicity reached 5.7% – slightly ahead of the 5.3% of

such groups in the economically active population, though, as before, such groups remained underrepresented in middle and senior leadership.⁶⁴

Gender

Women working in post-war intelligence community long suffered, as with professional women across British society, with the inability to break through the 'glass ceiling' placed upon their careers.⁶⁵ Historically, while women had performed important clerical and administrative work across Britain's agencies – roles that were vital in the development of modern-day intelligence bureaucracies, their experience was certainly far beneath middle and senior management, a situation lasting well into the 1990s. Whether agent running or cryptanalysis, the view generally – as summarised by a former MI5 officer quoted in the service's authorised history – was that women were 'good NCOs' not management.⁶⁶ As future Director-General Stella Rimington found when she joined MI5 in 1969, men were recruited as 'officers' while women had their own career pathways, despite the fact she was ahead of many of the men, having a degree and joining in her mid-thirties. For both SIS and MI5 there was a traditional view that women would not make good agent runners; as late as February 1973, a meeting chaired by MI5 Director General Sir Michael Hanley reached the unanimous decision (supported by SIS's experience) that the running of agents was 'a male preserve', even if Rimington made history later that year by becoming the first woman to be selected for MI5's agent running course.⁶⁷ The pattern was a familiar one in SIS; Daphne Park, who joined in 1948, was a rare exception and no women were made full officers until the 1960s when 'one or two were allowed in before the door was once again slammed shut until the late 1970s'.⁶⁸

For the Security Service, the 1970s was to see a gradual breaking down of the walls between men and women, witnessing Rimington and others being appointed as full, rather than assistant, officers, and the rules changed on who could finally run agents, though Rimington herself would still recall a 'male-dominated, old-fashioned organisation, which was going to take years to change' even in the early 1980s.⁶⁹ The Service was quite late coming to terms with gender equality in the 1970s', recalled one MI5 official, 'and was generally quite insular and conservative on most issues at that period', yet, as another officer recalls, it was the 'younger generation in the Office' who were increasingly supportive of the need to overturn 'artificial barriers'.⁷⁰ The situation was to change greatly, especially under Anthony Duff, appointed Director General in March 1985, who 'brought more modern attitudes to management and relations with staff'.⁷¹ The service, as its authorised history observes, had been appointing ever increasing numbers of women to senior roles; having been made Deputy Director-General (A), Rimington recalls the fact 'I was a female ceased to be relevant to the progress of my career'.⁷²

SIS appears to have been much slower; in 1975 Daphne Park was appointed as Controller Western Hemisphere, the first woman to ever reach the rank and a remarkable achievement, but few followed.⁷³ As in MI5, although SIS recruited a sizable number of female staff they were largely restricted to the clerical and administrative grades, the most powerful women often being personal assistants to the Directors, having risen slowly through the service, with few other women in leadership positions, and a pattern reflected elsewhere.⁷⁴ One female official explains, 'Progress was very slow indeed and it was hard to break out of the box you were in. Women in key roles were few and far between so there were few role models'. The small number of women breaking into leadership had, they recalled, 'almost without exception came up from admin roles and were atypical of the population (eg unmarried, perceived as tough or emulating male stereotypes'.⁷⁵ Even if men and women worked side by side on administrative and clerical work, there was traditionally a divide on operational matters; men were the intelligence officers, dominating recruitment to the intelligence branch, and women, if posted abroad, providing the support, though the artificial barriers gradually broke down.⁷⁶ As SIS itself explains, 'secretaries often assumed real operational roles while employed overseas (often those with the least staff)'.⁷⁷ The career of Valerie Pettit is perhaps representative; having failed to join the FCO due to inadequate shorthand, Pettit joined SIS as

a secretary serving in Poland, Jordan, Iraq and Mexico and in 1972 took an exam to become an officer, later becoming deputy to the head of SIS's Soviet operations section, devising the audacious escape plan of Oleg Gordievsky, a KGB officer recruited by SIS who defected to the west in July 1985.⁷⁸

As in other areas of British society at the time, the UK's intelligence agencies were also not immune from sexist behaviour, even if restrictions on what women could do largely stemmed from general stereotypes of male and female roles, and the generational differences between leadership and the new entrants. 'I was totally aware I was in a man's world', one female intelligence officer said, 'but that's the environment I was growing up in' and 'I was never going to have anyone telling me I couldn't do it if I was a girl'.⁷⁹ Former SIS officer Richard Tomlinson, recruited in 1991 into the service's intelligence branch, recalls in his memoirs 'it was striking how similar the new recruits were. They were from nearly identical backgrounds, were white, male, conventional and middle class. All of us were university graduates, mostly from Oxford or Cambridge. The homogeneity of the room reflected MI6'. Roughly just 10% of the IB were female, he recalled.⁸⁰ Although for many women in clerical roles, often working predominantly in all-female teams, there was little feeling they were in a patriarchal organisational culture, those working as intelligence officers, even as late as the 1990s, were well aware they were in a minority, even if things were, one officer recalls, no 'different to my experience at university'. Nevertheless, there was a feeling amongst some that women in operational roles had to be 'twice as good as the men' and working in an environment where they were 'outside the club'.⁸¹ The emphasis on male intelligence officers and selective recruitment into such roles also went against women reaching middle and senior management posts, having to complete a series of roles to get further up the ladder, and questions about career and family often led talented female officers to leave the service on unpaid maternity. Even though they were often welcomed back, many women fell behind their male peers who had joined at the same time. Moreover, there seems to have been a lack of female role models, a reflection of the traditional male dominance of intelligence branch roles, a necessary step to progress into the small number of senior roles in the service. But internal policy may also have played a role; SIS itself admitted in 2019 that internal policy was far from 'enlightened' at times and followed Whitehall's 'more restrictive employment practices until their amendment in the 1970s', particularly for women SIS's adherence to 'Diplomatic Service Regulation No. 5', also known as the 'Marriage Bar', requiring women to leave the service having got married, a rule removed by the FCO in 1973.⁸² The impact is impossible to determine; even into the 1990s, the few senior women in the service were unmarried, with SIS perhaps 'losing a very talented generation of women'.⁸³ The Foreign Office's example tells us that the bar had lasting effects. It was not until 1987 that Veronica Sutherland became the first married ambassador, the bar and internal culture, as the department now acknowledges, ending 'the growth of a substantial cohort of talented pioneer women at the Foreign Office'.⁸⁴ The glass ceiling was smashed in 2021 with the appointment Menna Rawlings as the UK's first female ambassador to France, women now holding the ambassadorships to the G7 group of top industrialised nations.⁸⁵

Inside GCHQ experiences were mixed. 'When I joined the department [in the 1980s] as an analyst working against the Warsaw Pact in the intelligence factory that was J Division there was nothing unusual', one former GCHQ officer said, 'about women in the executive class heading analytic teams nor in those teams containing a mix of men and women from the clerical and executive classes'. The numbers decreased as grade increased, 'females running teams were common, running sections unremarkable, but beyond that – at the very top of the executive class and into the administrative class – they were rare'. There was also a fair proportion of women across the linguist class, reflective of the proportion studying languages at university, though promotion was generally slow and the gender imbalance in management generally accepted at the time as the way things were.⁸⁶ 'We'll only have real equality', one female manager said, 'when incompetent women are promoted as easily as incompetent men'.⁸⁷ By 1995 women made up 28% of GCHQ's workforce, although the percentage does not tell the full story. GCHQ's 'support' divisions (HR, finance) tended to be female dominated at the lower levels, though men were more dominant in the higher grades.⁸⁸ It was only

in July 2006 that GCHQ had its first female Superintending Director sitting on the Board, Judith Hodson, daughter of former Director Sir Arthur 'Bill' Bonsall.⁸⁹ Naturally, in light of university education and industry generally, STEM-related aspects of GCHQ's work were largely male. For several women, the imbalance on such work became clearer once GCHQ moved away from the small, compartmentalised office spaces and lab facilities at the Oakley and Benhall sites and into the open plan world of the 'Doughnut' in 2004.⁹⁰ The staffing of intercept sites was similarly dominated by men, largely shaped by the fact that the majority of intercept operators were former military or merchant marine.⁹¹

Race and nationality

If the position of women in the intelligence agencies was a gradual process of evolution, the role of ethnic minority candidates was near non-existent even until relatively recently, the issue, columnist Hugh Muir once observed, 'weighted with historical baggage, burdened by context'.⁹² As with growing gender representation following avowal, the gradual recruitment of BAME officials was a slow and uneven process across the agencies, few non-white candidates entering until the 1980s. GCHQ's authorised history acknowledges the issue remains 'painful and incomplete'.⁹³ Naturally, the traditional methods of recruitment and backgrounds of candidates in parts of the community discriminated against those from non-Oxbridge backgrounds, and the recruitment of BAME staff remained prisoner to past practices. With the exception of a smaller number of specialist linguists or clerical grades, the intelligence agencies even into the 1990s were largely white. One male GCHQ officer who joined in the 1980s recalls the organisation 'was almost pure white – to the extent that anyone black in the place was assumed to be a visiting American'.⁹⁴ This was partially a result of the nationality rules, partly 'a reflection of some of the recruiting pools (e.g., STEM graduates, the military), and partly bloody Cheltenham itself', a place described as 'pretty monocultural' with implications for recruitment ('most of the recruits to the clerical class and other entry level posts were from local school leavers, and they were white').⁹⁵ The adoption of a black candidate, John (later Lord) Taylor, as the Conservative Party's parliamentary candidate for Cheltenham – considered a safe Conservative seat – at the 1992 general election, led to claims of racism and even abuse from his own constituency party.⁹⁶ It was only in the 1980s that MI5 started to recruit staff from ethnic minority backgrounds largely because, as one former officer recalls, 'targets (notably the Russians) did not believe that we employed such people and, in consequence, did not "see" them', drawn from the armed services. 'The consensus ... was that this was a good thing'.⁹⁷ This was not an effort to promote diversity – 'diversity was not a topic of conversation', another former MI5 officer recalls – but a pragmatic response to operational requirements at the time. Nonetheless there were limits on targets with no or limited ethnic diversity, another officer noting it was useless to employ a black surveillance officer against targets where there was no BAME representation.⁹⁸

Another factor was the strict nationality rules. Although there was certainly some flexibility for candidates with dual nationality from Commonwealth or English-speaking countries (in SIS, the rule was that such candidates would need to drop their dual nationality at the request of the other government⁹⁹), the recruitment of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds was complicated by rules governing who could enter secret work. Before 1940, anyone born in Great Britain or the self-governing Dominions, with at least one parent (or two in the case of the Foreign Office and service departments) could join the civil service, with discretion for departments to bend the rules in isolated cases. In wartime, departments had relaxed rules to recruit naturalised British subjects ('foreign' nationals granted British nationality), yet after 1945, the subject of race and nationality was increasingly complicated by the growing non-white migrant population of the UK, traditionally heralded by the Empire Windrush in 1948.¹⁰⁰ The British Nationality Act which came into force on 1 January 1949, allowed anyone formerly with the title 'British subject' to become a 'Commonwealth citizen' with the

right to enter, settle and work in Britain, yet the growth of the 'wrong sort of British subject' led to curbs in security departments.

For SIS and MI5, controlling their own recruitment, migration meant very little, yet for GCHQ recruiting through the civil service channels, restrictions were put in place. In February 1956, GCHQ argued that nationality rules needed to be tightened, ruling out citizens from the Irish Republic, anyone married to an 'alien' or a 'coloured person', defined as 'one either or both of whose parents is not of Old Dominion white stock'. Although GCHQ argued the first two groups were 'quite straightforward' to identify, there would be cases, it was suggested, 'Anglo-Indians for example – where we can't be positive one way or the other on the basis of a visual inspection of the candidate ... we cannot risk a candidate connecting G.C.H.Q.'s refusal to have him with his coloured ancestry'.¹⁰¹ The clear implication of the ruling was that even 'coloured' individuals born in Britain would be ineligible to join, thanks to security concerns about their past. Security departments in other areas of Whitehall such as the Ministry of Defence required individuals to have lived in the UK for a period of ten years before becoming eligible to apply, though there also seems to have been other reasons for the lack of non-white officials often wrapped up in language that would be unacceptable today. In May 1967, MI5 Director General Martin Furnival Jones told the Official Committee on Security that concerns about the employment of 'coloured' candidates in security departments went far beyond time spent in the UK and 'stemmed simply from the colour of a man's skin, which gave him a chip on his shoulder', telling the committee 'It must be assumed that the Communist intelligence services were fully aware of the possibilities of recruiting agents from among disaffected coloured people in this country'.¹⁰² The passage of the 1968 Race Relations Act, making it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services on grounds of race, gave the government the right to discriminate on national security grounds, departments having the mechanism to reject candidates if, having seen evidence, a Minister signed off an exemption from the terms of the Act.¹⁰³

Nationality remained a significant factor. In October 1996, former soldier, Luigi Manelfi, challenged nationality rules in the High Court claiming they were 'irrational, wholly unreasonable and unlawful'. The son of a German mother and Italian father who had resided in the UK since 1959, Manelfi had been born in the UK but, in a case supported by human rights group *Liberty*, sought to overturn GCHQ's rules that the agency would not employ anyone with non-British parents save for rare exceptions.¹⁰⁴ Sources told journalists that under GCHQ rules, while spouses or partners of staff could be American or EU citizens, parents needed to come from a Commonwealth country.¹⁰⁵ Nationality rules became more of an issue in the 2000s as the UK's agencies moved away from traditional targets to 'international terrorism' in the post 9/11 world. For the Security Service especially, the need to attract British Asian recruits was a reflection of the need to target Islamic groups themselves, and operational benefits of having officers able to run informants or penetrate such communities, and also having the necessary cultural awareness.¹⁰⁶ In June 2002, the ISC was 'concerned' the agencies had limited flexibility to cover the necessary languages they needed,¹⁰⁷ raising the issue a year later and citing 'nationality' rules and vetting as one reason for the failure to meet targets on the recruitment of staff with 'specialist languages'.¹⁰⁸ Although having raised the subject of nationality rules being too restrictive, the ISC reported in April 2005 that 'individuals with key language skills, such as naturalised immigrants and the children of immigrants' were disproportionately affected by nationality restrictions:

Candidates must be British citizens, with one parent either also a British citizen or with substantial ties with the UK. British nationality can have been acquired by any lawful means, whether by birth, descent, registration or naturalisation. The nationality rules also state that candidates must normally have been resident in the UK for 10 years prior to the date of application, although the Agencies told us that they were willing to consider a five-year minimum wherever possible.¹⁰⁹

GCHQ had opened a specialist office where individuals with key language skills, but without the highest clearances, could still work on 'appropriate material', but the agencies failure to hit targets for ethnic minority recruitment targets was a matter of concern for Home Secretary David Blunkett

and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. Figures reported by the committee revealed that while 15% of applicants to SIS were from a BAME background just 9% of staff overall were from a minority group, and, despite concerns about operational impacts, had not applied for a nationality waiver – a rule that agencies could in rare cases employ candidates not usually eligible to work if the relevant Secretary of State had signed off – in 16 years. Over 17% of MI5's applicants were from BAME backgrounds in 2004–5, with 8% of the overall workforce from such backgrounds. The service had one nationality waiver during this period.¹¹⁰ Interestingly, the number of BAME staff at all grades in SIS and MI5 reflected patterns in the civil service generally.¹¹¹ By June 2006, the ISC had been told that Charles Clarke, who had succeeded Blunkett in the Home Office, had taken the decision to delegate nationality waivers to a 'senior official', a process also followed by the FCO, though vetting and nationality rules remained important.¹¹² In July 2006, security sources told *The Guardian* that several Al-Qaida sympathisers had tried to join MI5 but weeded out in the vetting process.¹¹³

Perceptions of the agencies also mattered. Even in the late 1990s, having turned to a recruitment specialist for help, one MI5 officer noted the general view was that 'many people from ethnic minority communities would think "there were crocodiles in the corridors"' (specifically it was too frightening to think about working for MI5), although ethnic minority recruitment had significantly improved by the early 2000s.¹¹⁴ 'There was certainly no organisational hostility to such recruitment', the officer recalls.¹¹⁵ By 2004 an MI5 recruitment drive was targeting Britain's Asian community responding to the events of 9/11 and in the face of 'intense opposition from private companies and other government agencies for Arabic speakers'. It was reported that 9% of the service's recruitment were from ethnic minority backgrounds, although figures released to the BBC three years later revealed the number of ethnic minority staff overall was 6.5%.¹¹⁶ In 2006/7, SIS was also able to use targeted advertising to attract 10% of new entrants from ethnic minority groups.¹¹⁷ 'I feel very, very strongly that if you are able to do something to make a difference, you should make that difference', an SIS officer only identified as 'Yasmin' told *BBC News*, in November 2007. SIS's head of recruitment told reporters, 'We want to be truly representative and reflective ... we do need to have Muslims in our organisation because of the insight and understanding they bring'.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, despite the positive steps forward, as with other parts of government and police, the perception the agencies were not a place for ethnic minorities took hold in some communities. In 2010, a review, leaked to *The Sunday Times*, admitted the number of BAME candidates in GCHQ was 'very small' with some feeling they were 'constantly challenged about my loyalty to Britain' or asked questions that were often 'culturally inappropriate, insensitive and offensive'.¹¹⁹ Two years later GCHQ made an out of court settlement with a former employee alleging racial harassment.¹²⁰ Views amongst some ethnic minority groups about what the agencies do and who joins them were limiting, tapping into a wider suspicion, as Steve Hewitt has written, that government policy was failing to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the communities terrorists and terrorist sympathisers came from, adding to long-held inherent suspicions of government generally.¹²¹ 'I think if people found out that someone was working for the security services, people would be wary of that person', one interviewee told the *BBC Asian Network* in November 2016.¹²² Even Nikesh Mehta, a Director at GCHQ, admitted there was the 'unspoken belief' that intelligence was a 'career for "them" and not for "us"'. He explained, 'There are so many falsehoods ... These falsehoods may deter ethnic minorities from applying to join MI6, MI5 or GCHQ. Contrary to what some people think, recruits will not be asked to spy on their own community'.¹²³ A GCHQ spokesperson admitted in May 2020, 'It has historically been difficult for GCHQ to de-mystify and translate its mission and values, particularly to those communities from an ethnic minority background'.¹²⁴

Sexuality

The position of LGBT officers was also problematic. Officially, there were no gay officers in the agencies, their sexuality hidden thanks to Positive Vetting (PV) rules banning gay officials dealing with secret information, though certainly there were many officers who had joined having hidden

their sexuality for career purposes. Concerns about the security risks of employing homosexuals went back to 1951 and the fallout from the defection of Foreign Office officials Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, leading to rules emanating from the Cadogan report on security in the department that sexuality was a mark of unreliability that would also undermine the ability of the department to manage Britain's diplomatic relations.¹²⁵ Here, the Foreign Office appears to have been ahead of the rest of Whitehall; generally, it seems, although homosexuality was illegal, the issue of sexuality as a security risk *per se* was never considered before the 1950s with several staff at Bletchley Park known to be gay.¹²⁶ The report of a committee of Privy Counsellors in 1956 placed increasing emphasis on the so-called character defects and effectively brought the rest of government in line with the Foreign Office, suggesting that greater emphasis needed to be 'paid to character defects as factors tending to make a man unreliable or expose him to blackmail, or influence by foreign agents', especially 'serious failings such as drunkenness, addiction to drugs, homosexuality or any loose living that may seriously affect a man's reliability'. These rules applied to Whitehall departments and the intelligence agencies.¹²⁷ In 1951, MI5's Graham Mitchell noted that homosexuals were 'maladjusted to the social environment and may therefore be of an unstable character', often stuck together and were 'backward in giving information' and 'in so far as their activities are felonious they are at least in theory open to blackmail by a hostile intelligence agency'.¹²⁸

For security officials the threat of the gay men was realised with the case of John Vassall, recruited by the KGB while serving as a clerical officer in the staff of the British naval attaché in Moscow, having been photographed at an orgy and blackmailed into spying. Vassall's career as a Soviet agent ended in 1962, yet fears of homosexuality continued even resulting in MI5 obtaining warrants for telephone checks on four gay civil servants which revealed conversations of a 'revolting nature' but little in the way of security related issues.¹²⁹ The passing of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 did little to change the situation. In December 1967, the Official Committee on Security ruled that, despite a change in the law, the 'risk of blackmail or pressure in homosexual cases' remained significant, while 'importuning in public' was still a criminal offence, and the 'social stigma' of homosexuality meant there were still significant reputational risks in coming out.¹³⁰ Moreover, while seen as a landmark piece of legislation, the 1967 Act still made homosexual activity with anyone under the age of 21 illegal and did not apply to Scotland or Northern Ireland. Additionally, although homosexuality was no longer a bar to employment in the home civil service, it continued to pose issues for the Foreign Office, armed forces and intelligence agencies.

Nonetheless, several homosexuals joined and ran the risk of dismissal. 'It could happen at any moment', one former officer said. 'Same sex relationships were impossible in the current understanding of the term forcing any attempt at relationships deeply into the shadows'.¹³¹ Perhaps the most extraordinary example is that of Sir Maurice Oldfield, SIS Chief between 1973 to 1978, who lied about his sexuality, having told vetting officers in 1966 he had 'never felt any leanings or temptations' on the matter.¹³² Oldfield had been appointed security coordinator in Northern Ireland in 1979, only to return to London a year later through ill health and adverse reports from Special Branch on his private life, resulting in a review of his vetting history. Remarkably, Oldfield was interviewed by MI5 thirteen times between April 1980 and January 1981, during which it emerged he took an 'undue interest' in young male clerks employed by SIS, disclosing that, although he had never slept with SIS officers or agents, he had been 'introduced to homosexuality at university' and 'engaged in homosexual practices intermittently' until 1979. Oldfield admitted his relationships were, for the most part, with 'restaurant waiters and the like'.¹³³ A final summary of the case by MI5 Director General Sir Howard Smith, noted: 'It is clear that he was not very discreet in his homosexual relations and that he laid himself dangerously open to compromise, notably through his admitted homosexual relations with hotel stewards in the Far East during the 1950s'. Though he had never been targeted by a hostile agency, Oldfield was, Smith wrote, 'indiscreet and vulnerable' and had been 'less than frank'.¹³⁴

Others were less fortunate. In 2016, GCHQ Director Robert Hannigan apologised to 'Ian', who had transferred to GCHQ from the RAF in 1961 who, after several years of exemplary service, was found to

be gay and dismissed. Although finding a new role in the civil service, 'Ian' had no help from GCHQ and his 'health suffered and the psychological effects of that humiliation were long-lasting'.¹³⁵ In April 1981, having reviewed security concerns about homosexuals, MI5 ruled that restrictions for PV posts would stay, citing fears of blackmail by hostile intelligence agencies.¹³⁶ Later that year the report of the Security Commission ruled that 'homosexuality, even if acknowledged, should continue to be a bar to employment in any PV post', though the rule was not binding on GCHQ a reflection, perhaps, that the agency had started to recognise the total bar was counterproductive for candidates with specialist skills.¹³⁷ However, as the Security Commission later noted, there was a 'rigorous' adherence to vetting standards across the agencies.¹³⁸ In April 1983 MI5 reported that transsexuals and transvestites were 'in general treated by the public with humorous derision or aversion' and ineligible for PV posts meaning they were effectively excluded from the agencies.¹³⁹ Only one declared homosexual was granted a PV status in the second half of the 1980s, even if across the agencies and Foreign Office there was pressure for a change in the rules despite cultural, political and organisational pressures for a maintenance of the status quo.¹⁴⁰ Within MI5 there were differences over policy and, as one former officer recalled, many discreet gay officers slipped under the radar.¹⁴¹ By 1990, Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary Sir Patrick Wright had already started to push for a change in the rules, nothing in his diary that even SIS was now 'positive' to change.¹⁴² In July 1991, Prime Minister John Major announced that 'no posts involving access to highly classified information for which homosexuality represents an automatic bar to security clearance', except the military where such acts continued to be subject to the service disciplinary Acts.¹⁴³

By 1997, following MI5's first ever newspaper advert in *The Guardian*, Security Service sources told journalists at the *Pink Paper* that homosexuals were not to be 'discouraged' from applying, while GCHQ told staff that being gay was 'not of itself a security worry'.¹⁴⁴ Yet limits on gay men and women in the intelligence agencies remained and the effects of the bar 'lingered'. One SIS officer recalled, 'There were three communities – those who embraced the change, those who opposed it openly or in the background by their actions, and those in the middle who drifted in the wind according to events'.¹⁴⁵ 'John', a member of SIS's LGBT+ Affinity Group who joined in the early 2000s, recalled it was not 'terribly safe to start with ... In those early years I was quite reticent [about being out at work], both for personal reasons and also wondering, 'Will there be an impact on my career?'.¹⁴⁶ As with women and BAME officials, change was slow and it took a generational change for a new culture of inclusivity and diversity to emerge, possibly even accounting for the lower than usual declaration rates across the agencies in ISC data.¹⁴⁷

Although there is still much to learn about historical inclusion and diversity across the UK's intelligence agencies, the picture now emerging suggests that – despite starting relatively late in Whitehall – the agencies have come a long way. The ISC's criticism that parts of the community are still behind Whitehall figures generally, and the data on senior leadership, suggests that there is still much work to be done, yet the general criticism that the agencies are unrepresentative in some areas generally overlooks the point that late avowal, recruitment, nationality and the legacy of past policy, mean it will take a significant period of time for SIS, MI5 and GCHQ to catch-up with the rest of government. Nonetheless, as even the ISC's report acknowledged, the latest data suggests that recruitment is becoming increasingly representative, though still behind comparisons with the civil service and UK demographics. In 2018 about 13.8% of the population came from ethnic minority backgrounds,¹⁴⁸ women making up 51%.¹⁴⁹ Within the agencies, on gender, 46.8% of MI5's recruitment and 45.2% of SIS new entrants were women (a significant increase from just 34% in 2006/7¹⁵⁰), even if GCHQ remained far behind at 30.1%.¹⁵¹ Internally, things have changed 'beyond recognition' – a point made by several officials across the agencies.¹⁵² The government response to the ISC's July 2018 report also suggested there had been further progress in leadership with '38%, 35% and 27% of staff at Senior Civil Service level in MI5, GCHQ and SIS respectively being female (increases of

nearly 7%, 8% and 3%'), though there were no new statistics on BAME leadership. 'Across the Intelligence Community', the response went on, 'departments and agencies continue to innovate through working with external partners and sharing best practice'.¹⁵³ These figures are also affected by the small numbers of senior officials involved; one individual moving in or out of leadership is going to have a significant impact on the percentage figures, compared to the civil service. There are also limits; SIS's gender pay gap reports actually show there has been a slight drop in the number of women from the ISC's July 2018 report, with the service's workforce headcount made up of 37% of women in 2019,¹⁵⁴ and 38% in 2020,¹⁵⁵ down from 38.9% in 2018.¹⁵⁶ There were slight increases in the proportion of female staff in GCHQ and MI5. The reports also highlighted the ongoing issue of women being concentrated in lower pay quartiles.¹⁵⁷ Analysis of the civil service also suggests that besides diversity as set out in this article, the socio-economic background of candidates might in future be another benchmark to examine, though access to recruitment data and policy for the agencies remains an issue.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, while more women and minority groups are entering the agencies, it remains to be seen whether they are doing similar jobs as before or whether there is a growing proportion now breaking into frontline intelligence roles. Public speeches, news articles and ISC data provide overall percentages of groups in the workforce and at SCS grades, yet, to fully understand diversity and inclusion, the question that needs to be looked at in future is what roles are women, BAME, LGBT and disability groups doing now?

Today, change is certainly needed. For HUMINT agencies, agent recruitment is no longer – as one former officer says – the realm of 'hard driving, hard drinking blokes'.¹⁵⁹ Speaking to *The Times* as part of an SIS recruitment campaign in March 2014, 'Lisa', a serving officer, said that women make 'bloody good spies', adding: 'We are quite good at multi-tasking. We are quite good at tapping into different emotional resources. You can get into a lot of places'.¹⁶⁰ Other former officers would agree; though both men and women make excellent agent runners, each can bring important skills and run agents differently.¹⁶¹ In April 2018, it was reported that Alex Younger had 'made sure' that one of three candidates vying to succeed him as 'C' was a woman. Sources told journalists the officer had run agents across the world and had 'strong operational capabilities', even being honoured by The Queen for her services, though Younger was succeeded by Richard Moore, first announced in July 2020.¹⁶² Yet even though positive change is being made, there are internal and external factors that mitigate against quicker shift. History is certainly one factor, another is that organisational culture and career pathways take time to change. Traditionally, as one former officer said, 'your entrée to more outward-facing work ... was looking and sounding middle class'. Although change was the buzzword, living up to a 'middle-class stereotype' was prized while female role models in management were 'white and middle class'.¹⁶³ In effect, diversity would result in more women, but 'more women just acting like the men'. Also, even if change is happening across the board, a 'macho culture' will undoubtedly remain in places.¹⁶⁴ There have been significant efforts to change internal culture and promote change, all three agencies having well established networks for women – SIS (DEUCE) and MI5 (GENIE) – and BAME groups – SIS (EMBRACE), MI5 (My5), GCHQ (REACH). LGBT and disability networks have also been formed.¹⁶⁵ For GCHQ, the REACH network has 'led to increased engagement across the organisation, a change in approach to recruitment and traction with BAME communities across the country'.¹⁶⁶ Thanks to internal work the Security Service was named best employer of the year by Stonewall in 2016,¹⁶⁷ remaining in the organisation's top 100 LGBT list of employers. Both SIS and MI5 were also listed in *The Times* top fifty employers for women in 2018.¹⁶⁸

There are also factors outside agency control. GCHQ's difficulties can be explained by a general shortage of women in STEM subjects; according to UCAS and HESA data just 35% of STEM students were women. Representation in 'Computer Science' and 'Engineering and Technology' was just 19% and GCHQ has been forced to reach out and promote women in STEM subjects to develop a talent pipeline.¹⁶⁹ Equally, the collapse of languages in UK higher education is worrying; according to a January 2020 report in the *Financial Times*, 19 university language departments were downsized or cut entirely thanks to a significant drop in student numbers. The report also warned that just 32% of 16–30 year olds can read and write in another language. 'We are looking for people with top end

language skills', 'Chris', a GCHQ linguist told the BBC in 2011, adding: 'we are not finding as many as we were finding at the beginning of the 2000s'.¹⁷⁰ Though speakers of French, German and other European languages with language aptitude still form a core of GCHQ's intake, speakers of Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Mirpuri, Russian, Urdu and other sought after languages are still hard, placing a growing focus on candidates that may not pass nationality rules.¹⁷¹ Another factor against GCHQ has been location; the ISC's July 2018 report said Cheltenham was 'less diverse' – a conclusion others would agree with.¹⁷² One BAME Whitehall official once remarked he avoided oversight stays because Cheltenham was 'not my sort of town'.¹⁷³ Nikesh Mehta has also pointed out, 'Unlike most civil service departments, our main office is not in a diverse urban metropolis like London ... This might put some people off'.¹⁷⁴ The opening of GCHQ's new Northern or Manchester hub, first announced in October 2019, at the heart of a thriving tech sector and one of the most culturally diverse cities in the UK has the potential to challenge such views.¹⁷⁵

One solution to the problem of perception and the conscious decision by some groups to self-select a career in intelligence has been wider engagement, though these efforts are not entirely new. The successful launch of SIS's website in 2005 'significantly increased the number of applications' to the service, followed by a national media campaign'.¹⁷⁶ In the same year, MI5 ran adverts for 'older, wiser women' to join the service.¹⁷⁷ GCHQ reached out in new ways; a campaign in 2007 to place in-game advertising in two Ubisoft titles, 'Splinter Cell: Double Agent' and 'Rainbow Six: Vegas', led to a 500% increase in visits to the agency's dedicated recruitment site. One GCHQ official said, 'There is no doubt that the gaming idea and subsequent media publicity has significantly increased awareness of GCHQ as a potential employer'.¹⁷⁸ GCHQ officials told the ISC in early 2009 they were considering the use of video boards on the London Underground and mass marketing on commuter routes into the capital as well as dedicated websites to attract 'internet specialists, those with particular language skills, and technologists'.¹⁷⁹ Though such campaigns and speeches by heads of agencies were not new, what is different now is the visibility and growing occurrence of recruitment and outreach work. Initiatives such as GCHQ's 'Cyberfirst' – alongside wider engagement work such as Code Club, language programmes and summer schools – have challenged women to join areas traditionally dominated by men. In addition, initiatives such as 'GCHQ-Decoded' have been used to ensure 'that many more applicants from an ethnic minority background are maintained throughout the recruitment pipeline and increased their success rate at interview', leading, to 'further tailored engagement with applicants from across a number of different backgrounds'.¹⁸⁰ GCHQ has also tried to expand knowledge of the organisation by joining the social networking site Twitter in May 2016, reaching over 133,000 followers by May 2021.¹⁸¹ They are not alone; MI5 joined Instagram in April 2021, Director-General Ken McCallum writing in *The Telegraph* (ironically behind a paywall) that his service needed to become 'more open' and 'tap into the diversity and creativity of UK life'.¹⁸² SIS also reached out in new ways; the service launched its first cinema advert in spring 2017. The advert, titled 'But She Can', aimed to attract applications from 'all backgrounds' and featured a young, mixed-race women handling everyday situations before concluding she had the right emotional intelligence and people skills to join the service.¹⁸³ A year later, the service launched a new 'Secretly We're Just Like You' (#SecretlyWereJustLikeYou) campaign. The first advert, aired during the Channel 4 evening news, featured a young mother comforting her child, the aim being to challenge the popular perception of Bond.¹⁸⁴ A follow-up 'Barbershop Advert' was released on YouTube and Google Display in January 2019.¹⁸⁵

The intelligence agencies have certainly come a long way, even if much still needs to be done around BAME recruitment and progression, the development of female leadership role models and in demystifying the work of the UK's agencies whilst maintaining the necessary secrecy to continue to function effectively. Judgements of current issues regarding diversity and inclusivity need to be taken in historical context, though it remains difficult to research the social history of intelligence for much of the post-war period thanks to a lack of documents and secrecy. Even so, the picture that does emerge is that even into the 1990s, the UK's agencies were far behind Whitehall generally and were relatively slow to grasp that change was necessary. While women had always played an

important role historically in the UK's intelligence agencies, their role was often in clerical and support roles, few breaking the artificial 'glass ceilings' put in place. Recruitment practices, organisational cultures and the closed nature of British intelligence often meant that the agencies were divorced from experiences elsewhere in government, and even into the 1990s were effectively running on a pre-avowal outlook that effectively maintained the status quo, a legacy still left today. Although change in some areas remains frustratingly slow, today's intelligence agencies have, it seems, come a long way in representing an increasingly diverse Britain, drawing on new talents and expertise for pragmatic and image reasons falling increasingly in line with the rest of Whitehall. There remains much work to be done by future researchers; agency heads have gone on record to discuss disability, particularly GCHQ, which has talked about the positives of 'neurodiversity'. In future, it is hoped that researchers will look at such issues, as well as the areas identified in this article. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, though the ISC's criticisms are certainly valid and a catalyst for continued change, placing these criticisms in context shows how far the UK intelligence community has come.

Notes

1. Brown, "MI6 recruiting foreign-born spies for first time to improve diversity".
2. < <https://twitter.com/ChiefMI6/status/1362733197449170953?s=20> > For just some of the coverage, see Warrell, "MI6 chief apologises for historical ban on gay employees"; Sabbagh, "MI6 boss apologises for past ban on LGBT staff"; and Bunkall, "MI6 chief apologises for LGBT+ ban that "blighted lives and shattered dreams"".
3. Maurice, "Queer spies reveal homophobic legacy of MI6's "illogical" LGBT+ ban – and how far things have come".
4. Rayment, "MI6 spy chiefs advertising for part-time James Bonds who "must love to travel""; Dickinson, "MI6 looking for part-time James Bond-style spies to 'spice up dull lives'".
5. < <https://twitter.com/ChiefMI6/status/1355822524823646208> >
6. McCrisken, "James Bond, Ian Fleming and intelligence," 807.
7. MacAskill, "James Bond would not get job with real MI6, says spy chief".
8. Shahan, "Spying Gender: Women in British intelligence, 1969–1994", 2.
9. Proctor, *Female Intelligence*, 256.
10. "Would you ever like to work for GCHQ, MI5 or MI6 (Britain's security services)?"
11. "Would you rather be in MI5 (the secret services focused on Britain) or MI6 (the secret services focused on British interests around the world)?"
12. Moran and Murphy, "Intelligence studies then and now," 1.
13. See Bean and Fischer. "Queering intelligence studies" and Shahan, ""Don't keep mum"".
14. Van Puyvelde and Curtis, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," 1048. See also Johnson and Shelton, "Thoughts on the State of Intelligence Studies," 109–120; Johnson and Phythian, "Intelligence and National Security at Thirty," 7. On the subject of diversity and intelligence generally, read Callum, "The case for cultural diversity in the Intelligence Community"; and Martin, "America's Evolution of Women and Their Roles in the Intelligence Community," 99–109.
15. Rimington, *Open Secret*.
16. See Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*; Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*, 437–52.
17. Jeffery, *MI6*.
18. For an example see Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*; Toy and Smith, "Women in the shadow war," 688–706; Hubbard-Hall and O'Sullivan, "Wives of Secret Agents," 181–207; Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*.
19. Beach, "No Cloaks, No Daggers," 212; and Shahan, ""Don't keep mum"" , 2.
20. Alleyne-Lawler, "MI6 speaks to diversity dashboard".
21. On the impact of stereotype in the US, see Zegart, "Spytainment," 599–622.
22. See Van Puyvelde, "Women and black employees at the Central Intelligence Agency".
23. "Diversity and Inclusion".
24. Diversity and Inclusion: Examining Workforce Concerns Within the Intelligence Community.
25. See Southern, *Homosexuality at the Foreign Office, 1967–1991*; Southern, *Black Skin, Whitehall: Race and the Foreign Office*, and *Women and the Foreign Office*.
26. On the work of the ISC see Gaskarth, *Secrets and Spies* and Bochel, Defty and Kirkpatrick, *Watching the Watchers*.
27. HC. 633, 12–3, 15. The committee also did not publish a 2014–15 report thanks to the May 2015 General Election and the delay in appointing a new committee even though the committee has a statutory requirement to publish annual reports (see Defty, "Coming in from the cold," 31).

28. HC. 1297, 19–20.
29. Senior Civil Service is “the most senior grade of the civil service made up of the senior management team” (‘Grade structures of the civil service’).
30. Cm 8403, 65–6.
31. HC. 970, 9. For some of the coverage of the report read Helm, “Spying has been an old boys’ club for too long”.
32. Cm. 8455, 9.
33. HC. 547, 40–1. On groupthink, see Omand, *How Spies Think*, 122–5.
34. HC. 970, 2. Read MacAskill, “Look to Mumsnet for new recruits, British intelligence agencies told”.
35. HC. 970, p. iv.
36. *Ibid.*, 22–3.
37. *Ibid.*, 37–9.
38. *Mission Critical: Why Inclusion is a National Security Issue and What You Can do To Help*, 2, 7–8.
39. Alleyne-Lawler, “MI6 speaks to the Diversity Dashboard”.
40. Director’s Speech at CyberUK 2018.
41. “MI5 host a meeting of the 30% Club in Thames House”.
42. HC. 1297, 1.
43. “Gender balance in the civil service”.
44. “Dataset: Civil Service Statistics”.
45. Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*, 719.
46. HC. 1297, 14.
47. Cm. 8403, 65.
48. HC. 444, 14.
49. HC. 1297, 14–15.
50. Cm. 9696, 2.
51. HC. 1297, *Diversity and Inclusion*.
52. *Ibid.*, 29–30. On vetting see Scott, “The contemporary vetting landscape”.
53. Private information.
54. Cm. 8403, 66.
55. See Beesley, *The Official History of the Cabinet Secretaries*, 555–6; West, “The UK’s Not Quite so Secret Services,” 23–30.
56. Urban, *UK Eyes Alpha*, 266.
57. Cm. 6864, 17.
58. Private Information.
59. See note 53 above.
60. Cowell, “Britain’s Secret Service Indeed! Spy on It on Its Web site”.
61. “MI6 ad for operational officers”.
62. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 791.
63. Lowe and Pemberton, *The Official History of the British Civil Service*, 115–121.
64. *Ibid.*, 298–9.
65. Read Deavanny and Haddon, *Women and Whitehall* and McCarthy, *Women of the World*.
66. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 549.
67. *Ibid.*, 550.
68. Corera, *The Art of Betrayal*, 101–2. On Park read Hayes, *Queen of Spies*.
69. Rimington, *Open Secret*, 170.
70. Private Information.
71. Private Information.
72. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 774; Rimington, *Open Secret*, 222.
73. Hayes, *Daphne Park*, 245.
74. Private Information.
75. See note 53 above.
76. Private Information.
77. “SIS is celebrating International Women’s Day!”
78. Macintyre, “Revealed: women who sprang Gordievsky from KGB clutches”. Pettit is referred to as Veronica Price in Macintyre, *The Spy and the Traitor*.
79. Private Information.
80. Tomlinson, *The Big Breach*, 46.
81. See note 53 above.
82. “SIS is celebrating International Women’s Day!”. There is some debate over when the ‘bar’ ended in SIS; Hayes suggests it only ended in the 1980s (see Hayes, *Queen of Spies*, 244). On the FCO bar read McCarthy, *Women of the World*, 283–90. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 550.
83. Private Information.

84. McCarthy, *Women of the World*, 296; *Women and the Foreign Office*, 20.
85. Wintour, "New UK Ambassador".
86. Private Information.
87. Private Information.
88. Private Information and Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*, 448.
89. Omand, "Bonsall"; and Private Information.
90. Private Information.
91. Read Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*.
92. Muir, "MI6."
93. *Ibid.*, 457.
94. Private Information.
95. Private Information.
96. See Taylor, "Race, parochialism and politics," 135–46; and "Profile: Lord Taylor of Warwick".
97. Private Information.
98. Private Information.
99. Private Information.
100. Harris, "Configurations of Racism," 3.
101. TNA: CSC 5/1139, Somerville to Hayes, 27 February 1956.
102. TNA: CAB 134/3256, SM (O) 2nd Meeting, 24 May 1967.
103. Read Lomas, "Crocodiles in the Corridors," 20.
104. "GCHQ hiring bar is upheld".
105. Norton-Taylor, "Soldier's court action over GCHQ post fails".
106. Hewitt, *The British War on Terror*, 109.
107. Cm. 5542, 26.
108. Cm. 5837, 14.
109. Cm. 6510, 20–21.
110. *Ibid.*, 1.
111. See "Percentage of BAME staff in whole civil service and senior civil service, 1990–2020".
112. Cm. 6864, 21.
113. Dodd and Norton-Taylor, "Al-Qaida plan to infiltrate MI5 revealed".
114. Private Information.
115. Private Information.
116. Sengupta, "MI5 recruitment drive will focus on Asians"; "Asian MI5 and MI6 officers speak".
117. Cm. 7542, 25.
118. "Asian MI5 and MI6 officers speak".
119. Lappard, "'Racism' at GCHQ is undermining fight against terror".
120. Taylor, "GCHQ spared having inner workings made public".
121. Hewitt, *The British War on Terror*, 108.
122. Arthanayake, "Why GCHQ needs to fix its diversity problem".
123. "Why British Asians should consider a career in intelligence"; "Recruiting diverse talent to protect modern Britain".
124. Private Information.
125. Lomas and Murphy, "Security or Scandal?," 72–91.
126. See Drabble, *Angus Wilson*, 100.
127. Cmd. 9715, 3.
128. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 398.
129. *Ibid.*, 399.
130. TNA: CAB 134/3256, SM(O)(67)19, Security Implications of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967.
131. Corera, "The challenge of being gay and an MI6 spy".
132. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography, Volume Three*, 257.
133. Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) KIN-104288, memo to Sir Robert Armstrong, 31 March 1980.
134. HIAI: KIN-104317, Smith to Armstrong, 19 February 1981.
135. "Director GCHQ's speech at Stonewall Workplace Conference – as delivered".
136. TNA: CAB 134/4564, PSC(81)3, Security policy in regard to homosexuality, 28 April 1981.
137. PREM 19/1634, 'Report of the Security Commission, December 1981' reproduced in Lomas, 'Security, scandal and the Security Commission Report 1981', 745; Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*, 460.
138. Cmnd. 9923, p. 10.
139. TNA: CAB 134/4743, The Security Implications of Transvestism and Transsexuality, 9 March 1983.
140. Private Information.
141. Private Information.

142. Entry for 13 March 1990 in Wright, *Behind Diplomatic Lines*, 221. On the end of the bar Southern, *Homosexuality at the Foreign Office* and Lomas and Murphy, "Security or Scandal?".
143. Hansard, HC. Deb, 23 July 1991, Vol. 195, Cols. 474 W.
144. Norton-Taylor, "Gay spies allowed to come in from the Cold".
145. See note 131 above.
146. Maurice, "Queer spies reveal homophobic legacy of MI6's "illogical" LGBT+ ban".
147. HC. 1297, 15.
148. "Population of England and Wales".
149. "Male and Female Populations".
150. See note 117 above
151. HC. 1297, 25.
152. See note 53 above.
153. Cm. 9696, 1.
154. Secret Intelligence Service: Gender Pay Gap 2019, p. 2.
155. Secret Intelligence Service: Gender Pay Gap 2020, p. 2.
156. HC. 1297, 14.
157. See Secret Intelligence Service: Gender Pay Gap 2020, p. 3, MI5 Gender Pay Gap 2020, p. 2, GCHQ Gender Pay Gap 2020, p. 6.
158. On this see *Navigating the Labyrinth*.
159. Private Information.
160. Haynes, "Women are great spies. We save the world and we pick up the children".
161. Private Information. See also Macintyre, "Move over 007, this is a job for a women".
162. Kerbaj, "Pay attention, 007: next real-life M will be a woman".
163. Private Information.
164. See Lomas, "Different Perspectives," 23.
165. See HC. 1297, 35–6.
166. Private Information.
167. "MI5 employed employer of the year by Stonewall".
168. "The Times Top 50 Employers for Women"
169. "Women in STEM". On diversity and cyber, read *Decrypting Diversity*.
170. Galpin, "GCHQ staff teach"; *Lost for Words*, 29–30.
171. See Skapinker, "How to remedy Britain's language deficit curse"; Pozniak, "For Queen and Country".
172. HC. 1297, 25.
173. Private Information.
174. "Recruiting Diverse Talent to Protect Modern Britain".
175. "Location of new GCHQ site in Manchester revealed".
176. Cm. 6864, 21.
177. Johnson, "MI5 seeks "older, wiser women"".
178. Elliott, "GCHQ pleased with Tom Clancy campaign".
179. Cm. 7807, 10.
180. Private Information.
181. McLoughlin, Ward and Lomas, "Hello, world," 233–51.
182. McCallum, "To keep Britain safe".
183. Bunkall, "MI6 releases cinema advert in attempt to recruit more diverse candidates".
184. Corera, "MI6 airs TV ads to recruit more women and ethnic minorities".
185. "News: New SIS "Barbershop Advert" released on YouTube and Google display".

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Notes on contributor

Dan Lomas is author of *Intelligence, Security and the Attlee Governments, 1945 – 1951*, published by Manchester University Press (2016), teaching on intelligence and security issues at the University of Salford. He is currently writing a forthcoming book for Bloomsbury on the history of security vetting, and a documentary reader on reviews of the UK intelligence community for Edinburgh University Press.

ORCID

Daniel W. B. Lomas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4254-2225>

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