

British spies sought help from Canada

by Jim Bronskill

British spies sought help from Canada OTTAWA (CP) - British spies asked Canada to help infiltrate the Cold War-era government of what is now the South American country of Guyana, a newly declassified study reveals.

Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, better known as MI6, sought assistance in placing a Canadian as "special economic adviser" to Dr. Cheddi Jagan, prime minister of British Guiana in the 1950s, says the study.

"The British hoped that the Canadians might be able to provide an economist who could moderate what they termed Jagan's 'extreme left-wing tendencies' and guide his policies along 'sound lines.' "

The scheme, which never came to fruition, was just one episode in the cloak-dagger relationship between the transatlantic allies, according to the top-secret study prepared for the federal government by Wesley Wark, a University of Toronto historian.

A draft version of the 265-page document, based largely on still-sealed records, was released to The Canadian Press in response to a request under the Access to Information Act.

Jagan served as chief minister of British Guiana following the victory of his People's Progressive Party at the polls in 1953.

Jagan's government gave more rights to farmers, improved pay for workers and overhauled drainage and irrigation systems, exacerbating relations with colonial masters in London.

British troops rolled into the country on Oct. 9, 1953. London suspended the constitution, fired the government and set up a new legislative council.

Jagan, however, would re-emerge as leader in 1957.

John Starnes, who served in the intelligence section of Canada's External Affairs Department in the late 1950s and early '60s, said he has a "vague recollection" of seeking a Canadian economist to serve Jagan.

"I believe our inability to find someone was simply that we could not find a suitable candidate, willing to serve in that capacity," Starnes, 87, said in an e-mail message.

Following the Second World War, Canada looked at creating its own foreign spy service but did not follow through with the idea.

Still, the Canadians "did not in fact shy from the spy game," writes Wark, providing assistance to Britain in exchange for a steady stream of secret intelligence reports.

A candid 1960 archival document that summarizes dealings with MI6 mentions a small number of special cases, including the Jagan file, involving "help to the British beyond the arena of simple intelligence collection," Wark writes.

Numerous pages of his study, including a section detailing the memo's contents, were withheld from release - deemed too sensitive to make public even decades later.

The document suggests Canadian authorities were generally "quite prepared" to assist their trusted ally and that negative responses to requests were rare, Wark says.

Starnes remembers at least two occasions when Norman Robertson, his deputy minister at External Affairs, refused requests for "direct Canadian support" of MI6 operations in the Middle East.

Starnes said in these instances Robertson would not agree to Britain's proposal that a Canadian foreign service officer posted abroad become involved.

There were fears that "if the officer concerned was caught by the very active counter-espionage agents of the country in question, despite his diplomatic immunity, he most certainly would have been declared persona non grata, with the inevitable political brouhaha which would ensue," Starnes said.

Indeed, caution seemed to prevail when it came to Canadian forays into international espionage.

In 1947, Canadian officials turned down a proposal from Canadian-born Sir William Stephenson, who made his mark with British security during the war, to become an intelligence adviser to Ottawa.

Four years later, a senior External Affairs official developed a detailed plan for a Canadian foreign spy service to complement the counter-espionage work of the RCMP. But it went nowhere.

Canada chose instead to build on ties with Britain cultivated during the war, fulfilling requests for MI6 as the price of staying in the western spy loop.

"And why not?" Wark asks. "At the cost of little expenditure and low levels of political risk, the Canadians were able to reap a significant amount of intelligence."