

BRIEFING FOR SECOND READING OF THE COVERT HUMAN INTELLIGENCE SOURCES (CRIMINAL CONDUCT) BILL

October 2020

The Bill

1. The Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill was introduced on the 24 September 2020 with Second Reading scheduled for 5 October 2020.¹
2. The Bill would amend Part II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) to create a new process of ‘Criminal Conduct Authorisations’. The authorisations would constitute an express power for MI5, police forces and a range of other public authorities to authorise their agents and informants (“Covert Human Intelligence Sources” “CHIS”) to commit criminal offences.

The ‘Third Direction’ case

3. This briefing is produced jointly by Reprieve, the Pat Finucane Centre, Privacy International, the Committee on the Administration of Justice, and Rights and Security International.
4. Reprieve, the Pat Finucane Centre, Privacy International, the Committee on the Administration of Justice are claimants in the ‘Third Direction’ case which has challenged the lawfulness of the previously secret MI5 Guidelines that authorise MI5 informants to commit unspecified criminal offences.
5. In December 2019 the Investigatory Powers Tribunal (IPT) issued an unprecedented divided ruling over the legality of the MI5 policy, with a 3-2 split of judges ruling in the Government’s favour. This is now subject to challenge before the Court of Appeal.

Executive summary: Key issues with the Bill

6. The Bill represents a belated recognition that regulating the permitted conduct of CHIS must be set up by a formal legislative footing. Whilst we therefore welcome legislation in this area we have serious concerns about the content of the present Bill, in particular:
 - Unlike the US² and Canada³, the Bill places no express limits on the types of crimes which can be authorised. There is no express prohibition on authorising crimes that would constitute human rights violations, including murder, torture (e.g. punishment shootings), kidnap, or sexual offences, or on conduct that would interfere with the course of justice;
 - The Bill relies on the Human Rights Act as a safeguard, despite the Government making clear that it does not believe that the Human Rights Act applies to abuses committed by its agents, even torture.
 - Far from putting “existing practice on a clear and consistent statutory footing”, as is claimed in the Explanatory Notes, the Bill provides for the unprecedented ‘legalisation’ of even serious crimes by covert agents. Authorised criminal offences committed by CHIS would be rendered ‘lawful for all purposes’. This would bypass the independent decision-making of prosecutors as to whether the prosecution of a CHIS is in the ‘public interest’. This in particular would roll back key reforms of the Northern Ireland peace process.

- The arrangements for authorisation oversight and post-operational accountability are weaker than those for phone tapping or searches by law enforcement, despite involving potentially far more harmful conduct.
- The Bill also bars survivors of abuses, such as the victims of the ‘Spy Cops’ scandal, from seeking redress through the courts, by protecting those who commit authorised crimes from civil liability forever.

The Bill places no express limits on crimes that constitute human rights violations – even torture, murder, or sexual violence

7. The Bill would insert a new section 29B into RIPA to provide for CHIS criminal conduct authorisations. The criteria for such authorisations contain no express limits as to which crimes can be committed – not even murder, torture, or sexual violence.
8. Rather, the test introduced is that the authorising officers themselves need only to ‘believe’ that the conduct is proportionate, that it is ‘necessary’ on one of three broadly drafted grounds⁴, and that it meets requirements that might possibly be imposed by order by the Secretary of State. The Authorising Officer is also only to ‘take into account’ whether the objective sought could be achieved other than through authorising crime.
9. There is also no express prohibition on the powers in the Bill being used to authorise children to commit serious crimes as CHIS.
10. In November 2019, Lord Evans a former Director General of MI5 when asked in a BBC interview in the run up to the Third Direction case, whether limitations existed on the present MI5 guidelines on informant criminality appeared to suggest that there were none. When asked whether the policy would permit MI5 agents to engage in ‘punishment beatings’, for example, he stated “It’s not possible for that happen without...[pause] ...there are no specific rules on exactly which crimes”.⁵
11. The particular experience of the consequences of using paramilitary informants outside of the law during the Northern Ireland conflict becomes relevant here. Security force intelligence practices of tolerating, facilitating and even directing serious crimes by informants fuelled the conflict, damaged the rule of law and have left a poisoned legacy to this day.
12. In 1989, Belfast lawyer Pat Finucane was shot fourteen times as he sat down to dinner with his family. It emerged that the Loyalist group responsible had been infiltrated by British intelligence, with the Army inserting a covert agent into the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association in the 1980s. Following a review of the killing in 2012, then-Prime Minister David Cameron admitted there had been “shocking levels of state collusion” in Mr. Finucane’s murder.⁶
13. Claims as to the value of these agents were contradicted by subsequent investigations, finding that agents “had not generally saved lives”.⁷ Official investigations have also found that the use of informants outside of the law “needlessly intensified and prolonged” the conflict.⁸
14. Further, the ongoing ‘Spy Cops’ scandal has revealed reportedly widespread involvement of police officers committing very serious sexual assaults as part of their undercover work, and subsequent investigations have found that these abuses should have played no part in efforts to stop crime or public disorder. An internal inquiry in 2014 found that there were never “any circumstances where it would be appropriate for such officers to

engage in intimate sexual relationships with those they are employed to infiltrate and target”.⁹

Why the Government’s reliance on the Human Rights Act will not be enough

15. The Bill’s Explanatory Notes stress that public authorities are bound by the Human Rights Act (HRA), which includes matters such as prohibition of torture.¹⁰ However, the HRA cannot be seen as a safeguard against the authorisation of agent criminality because the Government has in fact taken the (fundamentally wrong) position that the HRA does not apply to crimes committed by its covert agents. For example, the IPT were told that even where an agent has been authorised to commit severe abuses such as torture, the Government does not believe the HRA applies because “the state, in tasking the CHIS...is not the instigator of that activity and cannot be treated as somehow responsible for it...it would be unreal to hold the state responsible.”¹¹
16. As a result, the Government cannot convincingly claim that the HRA will provide a sufficient safeguard since it does not believe the Act to apply to much of the conduct of covert agents – even when they become involved in abuses such as torture. As Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee found of the UK’s involvement in torture and rendition, the agencies engaged in “simple outsourcing of action they knew they were not allowed to undertake themselves”.¹² There is a real risk that this Bill will enable them to do the same in the UK.
17. This worrying position is repeated in the Human Rights Memorandum published with the Bill, which makes the following claim:

...it is to be expected that there would not be State responsibility under the [ECHR] for conduct where the intention is to disrupt and prevent that conduct, or more serious conduct, rather than acquiesce in or otherwise give official approval for such conduct, and/or where the conduct would take place in any event.¹³
18. If this analysis is correct, an informant could be authorised to actively participate in, for example, a punishment shooting, on grounds that the perpetrator intended to disrupt crime or that the shooting ‘would take place in any event’. This cannot be right, but it is nonetheless the Government’s clear, public view as to the level of ‘safeguards’ on crimes authorised under this Bill.

Why express limits on crimes will help agents, not place them at risk

19. The Government claims that to set express, public limits on the crimes covert agents can commit would enable the groups they infiltrate to set ‘tests’, probing their willingness to commit certain crimes and thereby determine whether they are acting as a CHIS.
20. But the Government’s argument is contradictory and confused. While claiming that to publish clear limits on conduct would put agents at risk, it also seeks to say the HRA’s ban on torture or killing provide these clear public limits. If the UK’s position – as enshrined in the HRA – on torture, murder and other serious abuses is clear as the Government suggests, then there is no reason why groups could not create a ‘test’ as things currently stand.
21. The UK’s approach stands in contrast to that of other countries, including the US and Canada. Recent legislation governing the use of agents in by the Canadian intelligence services has put clear legal limits on what crimes its agents can become involved in. The Canadian Parliament prohibited the following offences:

- a) causing, intentionally or by criminal negligence, death or bodily harm to an individual;
- b) wilfully attempting in any manner to obstruct, pervert or defeat the course of justice;
- c) violating the sexual integrity of an individual;
- d) subjecting an individual to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, within the meaning of the Convention Against Torture;
- e) detaining an individual; or
- f) causing the loss of, or any serious damage to, any property if doing so would endanger the safety of an individual.¹⁴

22. In addition, the FBI has for many years run agents using guidelines introduced in 2006 that expressly ban certain criminal conduct. The agency has learnt from bitter experience as to the need to adopt clear guidelines, with FBI officers themselves receiving long jail terms for their involvement in the crimes of their agents.¹⁵

23. Far from such actions having helped stop organised crime, FBI agents were found to have exaggerated the impact of their informants and abetted murders and racketeering committed by one group in place of another.¹⁶ As a result, according to guidelines issued by the US Attorney General, the FBI may never authorise an informant to “participate in any act of violence except in self-defense” or “participate in an act designed to obtain information for the FBI that would be unlawful if conducted by a law enforcement agent”.¹⁷

24. Any remaining concerns can easily be dealt with by prosecutorial discretion. If an agent is truly forced to commit a grave criminal act, he may have a defence of duress and if not, can contend that his prosecution would not be in the public interest. Prosecutorial discretion after the event is the only proper way to deal with such an exceptional situation, if it ever occurs.

Legalising crime: how the bill would end the separation of powers

25. When CHIS criminality has taken place, the independent assessment of prosecutors is essential in determining whether prosecution of a CHIS is in the public interest. But this Bill would not only bypass prosecutors entirely, it would give MI5 and other executive agencies the unprecedented power to declare serious breaches of UK law ‘lawful for all purposes’.

26. This goes far further than the present system for MI5 ‘authorising’ the involvement of CHIS in criminal offences, which does not as a matter of law place ‘authorised’ criminal offences committed by informants beyond the reach of prosecutors and the courts. That is also the case with other law enforcement bodies.

27. The MI5 ‘Guidelines on the use of Agents who participate in Criminality’ (March 2011), themselves state that “RIPA does not provide any immunity from prosecution for agents or others who participate in crimes,”¹⁸ and makes clear that an authorisation under the policy has “no legal effect” and “does not confer” immunity from prosecution.¹⁹ While we continue to have serious concerns about how the system works in practice, this Bill goes far further and purports to give complete legal immunity.

28. The office of the Director of Public Prosecutions Northern Ireland recently made clear the importance of prosecutors’ judgment in assessing CHIS criminal conduct. Commenting on the continuing investigations into the use of a UK agent in the IRA’s internal enforcement unit, believed to have committed multiple murders and torture

during the conflict,²⁰ it emphasised that, regardless of the mechanism which the information is conveyed to the DPP (“the Director”), that:

...it is important that the following matters are clearly understood and adhered to by those involved: (i) the purpose of any process is to bring relevant facts relating to the decision to the attention of the Director; (ii) no undue pressure should be placed upon the Director in relation to any decision; (iii) the decision as to where the public interest balance lies, having regard to all relevant public interest considerations, is one for the Director alone and nobody else.²¹

29. The intention of the Bill will be to instead make criminal offences committed by CHIS ‘lawful’ provided that the authorising authorities have given the go ahead for the informant to commit the crime in advance through a ‘Criminal Conduct Authorisation’.²²
30. This is especially concerning given the range of public authorities empowered by draft clause 2 of the Bill to grant such authorisations, which seems unnecessarily broad for the purposes of the Bill. In light of their institutional position and competencies, these authorities cannot be expected to conduct full and comprehensive necessity and proportionality assessments without contemporaneous independent judicial oversight.
31. The intention of the Bill is therefore to ‘legalise’ criminal offences with the purpose and effect that such authorised crimes cannot be subject to investigation and prosecutorial processes, by virtue of ceasing to be criminal offences. Independent decision making by Prosecutors on public interest grounds will no longer take place in circumstances where the evidential test cannot be met. In essence far from putting “existing practice on a clear and consistent statutory footing”, as is claimed in the Explanatory Notes,²³ the Bill as introduced would dramatically erode the separation of powers and deprive independent prosecutors of their ability to prosecute serious criminal conduct where it is in the public interest to do so.
32. This goes significantly further than regimes of two of UK’s closest ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence partners. For example, Canada’s intelligence service can only use their authorisation process to give agents a defence to prosecution, rather than any blanket immunity.²⁴ Even the FBI, which can issue immunity from prosecution, can only do so where the activity is authorised within the express limits set out in its guidance – again demonstrating the importance of clear limits on conduct.²⁵ Where informants are to become involved in the most serious crimes permitted, the FBI also requires federal prosecutors to sign-off on authorisations.²⁶
33. Beyond the broader questions of separation of powers in a democratic society, the independence of decision making by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) has in particular been a cornerstone of the justice reforms of the Northern Ireland peace process. Prior to this there were controversial Executive interventions in decisions not to prosecute State actors. In this context the Criminal Justice Review that flowed from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recommended that legislation should “confirm the independence of the prosecutor”²⁷ Superintendence of the DPP by the Attorney General was removed and prosecutorial decisions are made independently by the DPP on the basis of the statutory Code for Prosecutors. This Bill risks reversing reforms of the peace process in one of the most controversial areas of policing.
34. Scotland also has maintained for hundreds of years an independent criminal justice system, which risks being bypassed by the authorisation process in the Bill.

Weaker oversight on serious crimes than search warrants or phone tapping

35. The Bill includes no system of warrants or independent judicial approval for the authorisation of crimes, meaning crimes by agents would be subject to even weaker oversight than phone tapping or searches by law enforcement. Nor is there even a requirement for approval by the Attorney General or Secretary of State before serious criminality is authorised. Authorisation is granted, for any crime of any severity, internally.
36. Survivors of sexual assault by police officers in the ‘Spy Cops’ cases have rightly sought legal redress for the abuses they suffered. But this bill would mean these claims could never be brought, since it would bar civil action for authorised activity. There are also serious concerns that the Bill appears also to bar victims from seeking compensation under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme.²⁸
37. The only oversight the Bill proposes is for the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to “in particular, keep under review” the use of these powers in its regular Annual Report, reviewing serious crimes long after they have taken place. Published sometimes two years thereafter, the Annual Report is likely to contain only limited public information, if at all. Such information may be reserved to the confidential Annex to the Annual report, but there will be no way to confirm this. The IPC itself has raised serious concerns about the recording and reporting of MI5 involvement in crime, finding in his last annual report that “MI5 lack reliable central records around [participation in crime] activity and that there is no consistent review process.”²⁹
38. Once more, the oversight powers in the Bill are far weaker than those operated by the UK’s intelligence partners. The FBI has repeatedly released details of the number of crimes committed by its agents as part of efforts to increase transparency over the use of this power.³⁰ Canada’s new legislation requires details of the use of CHIS to be issued in an annual report, as this Bill does, but requires it to include not only the number of authorisations issued each year but also the nature of the acts committed – which this Bill does not.³¹
39. The Bill also falls far short of the Patten-commission recommended (but not yet implemented) Commissioner for Covert Law Enforcement for Northern Ireland, which was to be granted powers to ensure informants were only “being used within the law”.³²

In summary, we would urge significant amendments are made to the Bill:

- 1. Introduce clear limits on the face of the legislation preventing the authorisation of crimes such as murder, torture, and sexual violence;**
- 2. Create real-time, effective authorisation and oversight mechanisms to ensure that authorisations to commit crimes have at least as robust authorisation and oversight as search warrants or phone tapping, and effective arrangements for post-operational accountability;**
- 3. Ensure the UK’s prosecuting authorities can independently review crimes committed by CHIS, and remove the power for MI5 and other public authorities to brand crime ‘lawful for all purposes’.**

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¹ <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2019-21/coverthumanintelligencesourcescriminalconduct.html>

² <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2013/0604/Whitey-Bulger-trial-and-the-FBI-How-have-rules-about-informants-changed>

³ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-23/page-8.html#docCont>

⁴ Namely: (a) in the interests of national security; (b) for the purpose of preventing or detecting crime or of preventing disorder; or (c) in the interests of the economic well-being of the UK.

⁵ The Guardian, MI5 policy ‘gives agents legal immunity to commit serious crimes’, 5 November 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/05/mi5-policy-gives-agents-legal-immunity-to-commit-serious-crimes>. See also BBC Radio 4, Today Programme, 5 November 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0009zbd>.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/dec/12/david-cameron-pat-finucane-murder>

⁷ The Rt HON.Sir Desmond de Silva, *The Report of the Patrick Finucane Review*, December 2012 (The Stationery Office, London 2012), paragraphs 31, 32 and 24.226, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/246867/0802.pdf

⁸ In relation to the Stevens Investigations see: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/apr/17/northernireland.northernireland2>

⁹ https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/foi-media/metropolitan-police/priorities_and_how_we_are_doing/corporate/operation-herne---report-2-allegations-of-peter-francis-operation-trinity

¹⁰ Explanatory Notes, paragraph 14.

¹¹ As stated by Government at the public hearings in the ‘Third Direction’ case before the Investigatory Powers Tribunals 5-6 November 2019.

¹² <https://fas.org/irp/world/uk/isc-detainee.pdf>

¹³ [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0188/CHIS%20\(CC\)%20Bill%20-%20ECHR%20Memo%20FINAL.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0188/CHIS%20(CC)%20Bill%20-%20ECHR%20Memo%20FINAL.pdf) paragraph 16

¹⁴ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-23/page-8.html#docCont>

¹⁵ <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2013/0604/Whitey-Bulger-trial-and-the-FBI-How-have-rules-about-informants-changed>

¹⁶ https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/dick-lehr/blackmass/9781610391092/?utm_expid=.OyywKqKNOqfK0ZgN1WBZtg.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/21/assets-and-liabilities>

¹⁷ <https://fas.org/irp/agency/doj/fbi/chs-guidelines.pdf>

¹⁸ MI5 Guidelines on the use of Agents who participate in Criminality (March 2011), paragraph 3.

¹⁹ MI5 Guidelines on the use of Agents who participate in Criminality (March 2011), paragraph 9.

²⁰ <https://www.opkenova.co.uk/> “Former chief constable Jon Boutcher is leading an independent team to conduct the investigation into a range of activities surrounding an alleged individual codenamed Stakeknife. Many are concerned at the involvement of this alleged State agent in kidnap, torture and murder by the Provisional IRA during ‘the troubles’ and believe they were preventable.”

²¹ Correspondence from Michael Agnew, Deputy DPP, Public Prosecution Service to CAJ, 8 Feb 2019.

²² Explanatory Notes: Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 24 September 2020 (Bill 188), paragraph 23.

²³ As above, paragraph 2.

²⁴ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-23/page-8.html#docCont>

²⁵ <https://fas.org/irp/agency/doj/fbi/chs-guidelines.pdf>

²⁶ <https://fas.org/irp/agency/doj/fbi/chs-guidelines.pdf>

²⁷ Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland. HMSO. March 2000 Para. 4.162-3 see also <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/26/section/42>

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/thebrieftweet/status/1309513260379631617>

²⁹ <https://ipco.org.uk/docs/IPCO%20Annual%20Report%202018%20final.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/21/assets-and-liabilities>; <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/fbi-informants-otherwise-criminal-activity-report-foia/>

³¹ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-23/page-8.html#docCont>

³² ‘A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland’, The Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, September 1999 (Patten Report) para. 6.44. “A *Commissioner for Covert Law Enforcement in Northern Ireland* – a senior judicial figure with a remit to oversee surveillance, use of informants and undercover operations; with powers to inspect the police and other agencies acting in their support and compel disclosure of documents; responding to direct representations or referrals from the Police Ombudsman or Policing Board, and powers to act on their own initiative to ascertain if covert policing was being used within the law and only when necessary;”