

Whiplash

by SIMON HOGGART

LIKE SOME fearsome creature emerging from a dark laagoon, this week's great row in the Commons has its birth in the unfathomable mysteries of parliamentary procedure. Add to this the latest play from Mr Walter Harrison, deputy chief whip, and one of nature's most engagingly failed cheats, and you have a unique incident in constitutional history.

For weeks MPs have been complaining about the guillotine on the Scotland Bill. By cutting short debate at the end of each long period, it ensures that only a fraction of the Bill is discussed. So the Government had the bright idea of chopping each day into a set of mini-guillotines which would mean shorter but wider-ranging debates. The idea was suggested a week last Monday, the 16th and discussed in the business committee two days later.

This committee meets in utter secrecy. It has three Labour members, three Tories, a Liberal and an SNP man, none of whom may breathe a word about its arcane deliberations. It turns out, however, that last week one Labour Minister was absent and the committee was deadlocked on the plan, which it only agreed on Tuesday last. Just after this, MPs discovered that the deputy speaker's choice of amendments meant that Mr Cunningham's controversial plan to make the new assembly depend on 40 per cent of the electors turning out to vote "yes" would not be debated. Instead of coming at the beginning of a debate, it would come at the end of a short one. Without a debate, back-bench amendments cannot be voted on.

Early on Wednesday afternoon, seeing the weight of feeling in the House, Michael Foot changed his mind, loudly and truthfully protesting that he had not tried to cheat. Mr Cunningham's 40 per cent amendment was swiftly reached, and a lively debate began, not surprisingly since it was designed and intended in killing Scottish home rule.

The next in line was Mr Grimond's amendment, allowing Orkney and Shetland to opt out of devolution. The Government was nearly as keen for this as it was for the 40 per cent amendment, and as the deadline drew near the Government was being debated and a miss being voted on. Because the 40 per cent scheme was an amendment to an amendment, there had to be two votes, and as the deadline drew near the Government was being debated and a miss being voted on. Because the 40 per cent scheme was an amendment to an amendment, there had to be two votes, and as the deadline drew near the Government was being debated and a miss being voted on.

He faced a barrage of noise from Tories trying to make him stop and make way for the vote. Enoch Powell tried to close the debate. The shouting and the noise and no doubt fearing that the deputy speaker, Sir Myer Galpern, would shut him up soon anyway, Mr Smith sat down a few minutes before 10.30. It was just over half an hour before the guillotine was due to fall.

The first vote, was most people's surprise, was lost by the Government to loud cheers. Just before the next one, an MP who favoured the Grimond amendment went up to the Chief Whip Michael Cocks and his deputy Walter Harrison and asked them not to allow Labour members to delay the second vote so as to shut Grimond out.

Mr Douglas Haig suggested to him that they had exactly that plan in mind.

Votes in the Commons take up to around 16 minutes, depending on how many people are voting and how long they have to reach the lobbies. The lobbies are long wide corridors, lined with books and desks, even provided with lavatories. A vote isn't over until all the MPs have made their way out.

At the end of the second vote, the "no" lobby was the scene of a prolonged argument between three Labour whips: Mr Harrison, Mr Jack Dormand and Mr Jack Stalard, and three SNP members: Mr Hainish Watt, Mr Douglas Haig and Mr Andrew Welsh. It was perfectly clear to the people who watched them, Willie Hamilton, David Steel and later the Sergeant-at-Arms, dispatched briskly by the amazingly content and happy Sir Myer Galpern, that they were lurking with the sole aim of making the vote last beyond the guillotine hour of 11 p.m.

It was a valid argument—about whether the Government should vote against the whole mutilated clause on the Referendum—but it was not the place to hold it. Whatever outraged expressions of innocence are heard in public, the people involved in private say they knew perfectly well what they were doing.

What's so extraordinary is that it was always certain they would be found out. Even if they had stopped Mr Grimond's amendment coming up, furious MPs would have demanded and probably got a vote later. The clue lies in the character of Mr Walter Harrison, the MP for Wakefield, a former electrician, and one of the great loyalists of the Labour movement.

He is the skilled, behind-the-scenes Mr Flixi and what he likes doing is winning votes for the Labour Party—at almost any cost. Once, years ago, there was a similar row when he sent several MPs through both division lobbies in an attempt to drum up a phony quorum for some bill. Inevitably he was caught out, then too.

DAVID LEIGH recounts the 30-year history of the Foreign Office's covert propaganda operation

Death of the department that never was

DETAILS ARE coming to light for the first time of the secret death, after a 30-year secret life, of a worldwide British propaganda network, operating against communism and mostly in the Third World. It was an operation which had failed to change with the times and within the last 18 months was purged largely on the orders of the then Foreign Secretary, Mr Tony Crosland. Among other things, Mr Crosland objected to its links with certain right-wing journalists.

The operation was radically reorganised into a smaller, still secret, Foreign Office department with a brief to support British interests in general. Indeed, it is reported from a number of well-placed Whitehall sources that the new Foreign Secretary, Dr David Owen, is considering making hitherto confidential material openly available.

This would be the logical culmination of moves to bring the organisation—the so-called "Information Research Department" of the Foreign Office—under firm political control, and abolish its furtive Cold War attitudes.

IRD, as it was known, also performed a legitimate task of research and information. Indeed it can be argued that a successful propaganda operation must for most of the time provide objective and useful information. Besides its activities abroad, IRD provided an often valued service to journalists and writers in this country. That is the view of Guardian journalists who have been on its mailing list.

Journalists are accustomed to supping with a long spoon from all kinds of sources, and it is no reflection on any of them that IRD approval of them and they included some of the best known writers on foreign affairs. There is evidence that IRD did its best to disguise its real role in distributing propaganda from some of its clients: the operation, carried out over the entire 30 years since the war, was on the secret vote, and has never been made known to Parliament or public.

Since the last war, Britain has paralleled some of the covert international propaganda activities of the CIA, which have been documented and agonised over so extensively in the US.

As a former senior CIA official, Robert Armory, said, rather enviously in an interview 10 years ago, complaining of disclosures that the CIA funded student bodies and other organisations: "In our free motherland of England... everybody shushes up in the interests of the common good. I wonder what they think is the interest of the free world civilisation."



The Millbank office of the department—some of its products

Christopher Mayhew, then a junior Labour F. Minister, invented IRD, writing a confidential paper to Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of 1947. He proposed a covert "propaganda counter-offensive" against the Russians by means of a new FO department. Atlee called him down to Chequers to discuss it and until Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, then deputy under-secretary at the FO and later chairman of IFA.

The Department was secret. Britain was the first country to go over to the counter-offensive, Mayhew recalls, although the CIA and the US information agency were being set up at about the same time. IRD distributed material worldwide through embassies.

"We certainly did absolutely nothing to distort or twist the British media," he says. "It was only black propaganda in the sense that our work was all undercover and the existence of the department was confidential."

The main victims of the secret seem to have been foreign newspaper readers—and the British public who were kept in the dark, while non-accountable cold warriors went to work nominally at least, on the behalf.

The Russians knew about it from the beginning because Com. Burgess, one of the three Communist defectors in the Philby affair, was posted to IRD in 1948. Mayhew wrote a memo sacking him after two months for being "a liar, drunk and idle."

IRD was staffed with many émigrés, from Iron Curtain countries, often journalists and writers especially recruited to this airless world. IRD officials themselves were screened from parts of what

went on and ordered not to tell even other FO staff where they worked. Their task was set out in a document former staff recall, speaking of "forces" at home and abroad to be fought. Reference books alluded only to IRD's "special tasks." In last year's diplomatic list the cover still kept up. IRD's job, it says, is merely "the compilation of information reports for HM missions abroad."

Modelled on wartime psychological warfare operations, IRD flourished in the 1950s. The staff of the Soviet section alone rose from 20 to more than 60. Embassies had resident IRD men under cover

IRD's main targets were in the Third World — hitting back at Russian propaganda as hard as we could

who planted material on local journalists and opinion formers. This was controlled first from offices in Carlton House Terrace, and then, as it expanded, from the 12-storey Riverwalk House, Millbank, in London.

A typical IRD operation in its heyday would have been, for example, to study Eastern block press reports of drunkenness and produce an article rubbing in just how rife alcoholism was under communism. Senior officials concede that past material was heavily "slanted."

The CIA, whose worldwide propaganda operations, radio stations and front news agencies have recently been extensively exposed, would call this

"grey" propaganda. It is basically factual material to which "spin" could be added at will.

The ethical objection which is raised by IRD's critics both inside and outside Whitehall is that the public does not know what it is getting and so cannot make allowances for the "spin." It differs thus from straightforward propaganda for the British point of view which is plainly no bad thing.

IRD also encouraged book production described in Whitehall as "cross fertilisation." Robert Conquest, the scholar and author, who has been frequently critical of the Soviet Union, was one of those who worked for IRD. He was in the FO until 1956.

After the left, he says, IRD suggested to him that he could combine some of the data he had gathered from Soviet publications into a book. He sold Bodley Head a ready-made series of eight called "Soviet studies." Bodley Head says it published as a normal commercial arrangement selling 1,500 copies, a third of the total to a US publisher Fred Praeger, Praeger, who had published a number of books previously at the request of the CIA, also says this was a normal commercial arrangement.

David Floyd, Communist affairs correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, also recalls writing a booklet on China at IRD's request. This was commissioned by IRD because they wanted to distribute it to diplomats, they told him.

IRD's main targets were in the Third World — "hitting back at Russian propaganda as hard as we could," as Mayhew puts it. It also set out to "be of use to" British media and opinion formers. As well as supplying material to

the BBC World Service, secret lists were compiled of approved journalists and trade unionists to whom material was offered if not always accepted. More often IRD simply offered quite straightforward research help. Recipients — often experts in their own fields — could and did judge its quality.

By the time IRD was finally purged, one of its list contained a cross section of the General Council of the TUC. The journalists list contained about 100 names.

Those we have traced include two Labour journalist MPs, Rudwick MacFarquhar and Colin Jackson. There were three writers connected

IRD was told to stop concentrating so heavily on communism and promote other British interests

with the Financial Times; five from the Times; two from the Observer; five from the Sunday Times; five from the Telegraph; six from the Economist; one from the Daily Mail; two from the Mirror; and one from the Express.

Guardian journalists on the lists included Hella Pick, Michael Simmons, Ian Wright and Victor Zorza.

alist recalls how he was taken to lunch at a London club by his retiring predecessor in the newspaper who passed him on to his IRD contact. All journalists were told as little as possible about the Department. Material was sent to their homes under plain cover. Correspondence marked "personal" carries no departmental identification or reference.

They were told documents were prepared in the FCO primarily for members of the diplomatic service, but were allowed to give them on a personal basis to a few people outside the service who might find them of interest. There are a number of statements of official policy which should not be attributed to IRD, nor should the titles themselves be quoted in discussion or in print. The papers should not be shown to anyone else and they should be destroyed when no longer needed.

Eventually IRD's star began to wane. It was cut down in 1964 and again in 1968, former employees say. In 1970 under the then PUS, Sir Denis Greenhill, it was "suspended" according to several government sources. Around this time IRD was told to stop concentrating so heavily on communism and promote other British interests. It set up a counter-subversion unit to deal with the IRA. It was also encouraged to moderate its briefing material.

It published a loose leaf manual, The IRA—Aims, Policy, Tactics, delivered among others to Ian Hamilton at the Institute for the Study of Conflict. It included intelligence material and descriptions of IRA front organisations in Ireland, the US and Britain. The aggressive stance, however, was still unpopular with the British public.

GUARDIAN DIARY

Martin Wainwright

LIFE for a South African housewife can be awfully boring these days, with all those useful black people to do the daily chores. So what better, after a bit of squash and a spell on the small arms range, than to tackle an Open University course?

You can't take a degree, of course, as that privilege is reserved for people living in Britain and a handful of students in the States. But you can struggle through all the units and modules and videotapes and what's more the OU makes it as easy as possible for you to do so.

Surprisingly, in view of the Labour luminaries involved in the institution (Sir Harold Wilson, founder; Lord Gardner, the current chancellor), the OU is proving boundlessly keen to sell its productions to the South Africans. Up to 25,000 course units are estimated to reach the Republic every year via the Open University's Educational Enterprises subsidiary at Milton Keynes. So lucrative is the trade that the OU is now risking industrial action and vast dismay among its staff by persisting in flooding the market. The Association of University Teachers, which embraces most of the OU academic staff, takes the line that its members should not teach in South Africa; and the OU units, which are mostly written by the body staff, are simply an extended form of teaching.

When the AUT raised the matter last summer, the university Senate voted 2-1 to do "everything in its power" to stop the trade. So astonishing was the vote when the Senate meeting, at the end of the year, heard that the Educational Enterprises board had not yet considered the matter. The teachers are now intending to take constitutional steps to reclaim the body or, failing that, to consider more drastic action. Paradoxically, meanwhile, their one ally has proved to

Going Dutch

IF AND when things get bad for Britain abroad, the country can count on one staunch Anglophile in Rotterdam, Holland. He is Mr Peter Alsem, whom you last read about in connection with a Post Office phone kiosk.

Mr Alsem took a shine to one of these while over in Norfolk buying Lotus cars, for which he holds the main Dutch concession. The box was shipped over with a batch of Lotuses and if you ring Mr Alsem at his Rotterdam home he answers you from inside the booth.

Not content with this, the Dutchman has now requested Lotus for some more wrought iron, in this case a Post Office letterbox. Obligingly, the company contacted the Norwich postmaster and a George VI mailbox, £45 compared with the £80 for the kiosk, will shortly be off to Holland and fitted up to take the Alsem mail.

Wildier still

THE WILD scenes in the Commons with MPs in opera hats and looting human barricades, were nearly made much wilder by Mr Sydney Bidwell. The burly MP for Southall, a former railway shunter, was a devastating weapon presented to him, after the campaign on turbans and crash helmets, by Britain's grateful Sikhs.

Enraged and bewelled, it's a ceremonial sword which the playfully Bidwell has a habit of hanging on the old sword horse, still maintained in the House though never used. Spotting the Sergeant-at-Arms moving in on the mob with his weedy rapier, Mr Bidwell let it go in action. "That thing," he cried, "is useful only for picking up litter in Paris. Why not, Mr Sergeant, let me offer you

Tip top

AS YOU know, Diaries pay enormous sums for interesting tips, but today we're in the unusual position of crediting our Chief Accountant, Eagle-eyed, he spotted some strange goings on in the index of Accountancy magazine.

This model journal, the paper of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, provides a comprehensive index to the year's reports with neat sub-headings such as Auditing, Interviews and Ethics. Unfortunately one of the most important ones, Government, was missed out in this year's production.

As a result the various entries, such as Denis Healey's Reflexionary Package and Healey's Selected Aid Scheme, appeared under a new heading. Along with Auditors Detect Expenses Irregularities and Rebuke for Another Big Firm, they're listed under... Frauds.

something better?" Fortunately for the Conservative Party, the meze at that point subsided, and the warlike Mr Bidwell's plan was shelved.

THE MOST successful busters of the pay guidelines so far are the members of the Ostrich, Fancy Feathers and Artificial Flower Wages Council. According to the Employment Department's monitoring services, their 20.4 per cent rise is the largest to be let through by the Whitehall scrutineers. Since the rise was £5.50, though and since it takes the industry's minimum weekly wage to £32.40, it may perhaps be allowed that it was their turn.

SOMETHING fishy going on? Well, I'm afraid it looks like it. A large school of the creatures (detail above) has been chosen by some subversive for the cover of the latest quarterly review from the Crown Agents.

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