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Making an impact on security and intelligence

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Intelligence studies remains a small and discreet discipline that locates itself near to other disciplines such as: international studies, history and area studies, public administration, British politics, and security studies in different mixes and borrowing and utilising different insights along the way. As a discipline it has been characterised and constituted by the significant failures of the activities it seeks to analyse: that of secrecy, empiricism and government security. This short essay takes a snapshot of the developing relationship between scholars and security and intelligence officials through a series of selected issues that have appeared on the horizon of the last ten years. In doing so, it argues that a good percentage of intelligence studies scholars have responded to the opportunities presented to them to impact on the policy world, and that there are further areas in which the scholarly community can add valuable insights.

The so-called ‘global war on terror’, or ‘long war’ (depending on which term you prefer) brought security and intelligence scholars closer to the policy and security communities than they had been since the Atlantic. This was partly due to timing: the 2004 Butler Report had suggested that a much closer relationship between the two communities would help reduce the chances of intelligence failures in the future. The initiatives that were initially taken by the intelligence community happened to coincide with the terrorist attacks on London in July 2005 and so the first post-Butler contacts focused on what the research community could offer intelligence officers by way of advanced understanding of the issues around Jihadist terrorism (although all forms of radicalisation can be DNI). The absence of a formalised system of contact – be it through the professional association or research councils – left it to be the seeds that you plant’ wrote Robert Dover (2020) in The Edinburgh Conversations, led by Professor Charlie Jeffery and published in 2021.

The positive development from REF culture is the need to generate research impact which has encouraged intelligence scholars to move beyond relatively narrow dissemination routes: from an intelligence and security perspective, it would be helpful if this emphasis was rethought, particularly if our work is to continue making an impact. There would seem to be a great deal of value in exploiting the work of scholars in informing current security and intelligence policy and work. Whilst the issues are so sensitive that the implications it has for the field.

The debates around academic engagement with the security community are yet to be resolved. Whilst the current government yearns for scholars who are ‘more useful’ in ‘the real world’ there are undeniable tensions between the dissemination of academic knowledge into academic outlets and engagement with policy communities. There is also a large vocal community of colleagues who suggest that there should be little place for this work in an academic’s professional life. Amongst the unresolved questions are those which verge on ethical considerations, much as there were for anthropologists and the so-called Human Terrain System, and whether the creation of ‘pure knowledge’ is more valuable than knowledge shaped for a policy audience. The debates within the intelligence studies community are, of course, a microcosm of those that exist within the wider International Relations and Studies community, and until a coherent position is reached on the subject, individuals and groups will continue to pragmatically choose where and how to engage with the stakeholder communities they value.

The big security questions lend themselves to different access points for scholars.

50th Anniversary of Politics & IR at the University of Edinburgh

'Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant’ wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, one of Edinburgh’s most famous graduates. Though he pre-dated the Politics Department by many decades, his saying is as true today as it was then. The seed that was planted in 1963 with the creation of the Politics Department has matured into a superb department of some 30 colleagues, now preparing for a year of celebrations to mark the coming Golden Anniversary. We kick off with a gala alumni reunion weekend from 24 to 25 June, beginning with a roundtable discussion on the question ‘What Future for Scotland?’ It features some of our best-known graduates, including Malcolm Rifkind, Mark Macqueen, Susan Deacon, Alice Brown, John Swinney, and Allan Little. In recognition of the anniversary we are publishing this history by Professor Charles Raab, now retired but present at the creation of the department.

We’re proud to look back on our achievements. One of our first Professors, James Comford, went on to advise successive UK governments on Freedom of Information legislation and contentious issues. He was also a broker of the Labour–Liberal pact. In the 1980s, the Department’s famous ‘Edinburgh Conversations’, led by Professor John Ercan, were a beacon of the Western and Soviet foreign policy and military officials and helped to build bridges and ensure that lines of communication remained open between the two blocs. PIR also played an important role in the historic creation of the Scottish Parliament, when Professor Alice Brown became its first Speaker in 1999. Professor Charlie Jeffery was appointed to the influential McKay Commission to consider the consequences of devolution for the House of Commons. Today, PIR is a leading centre for the study of Scotland, Europe and the world. Our academics have won research grants totalling several million pounds in the last five years for projects on Islamic radicalisation in Russia, constitutional change in Scotland, gender inequality, the performance of financial markets, the foreign policy of the EU, Scottish energy governance, the politics of island regions, the profile of European Commission officials, and European labour migration. We’ve received awards for teaching excellence, including the Edinburgh University Student Awards for Innovative Teaching Methods and for Overall High Performer as well as the Political Studies Association ‘Sir Bernard Crick Award’ for politics teaching twice.

Our outreach activities have been recognised too, notably when Charlie Jeffery received the Political Studies Association award for Political Science Communication in 2006. Within the University, PIR colleagues work in close collaboration with The Academy of Government (the UK’s first postgraduate institute of public policy), the Europa Institute, the Princess Diana Centre (advancing understanding of Russia), and the Abadele Centre (promoting understanding of Islam). Our graduates have gone on to shape the age in which we live through their work in governments, think-tanks, international organisations, voluntary groups, and universities, as well as industry and commerce. The 50th anniversary provides an opportunity both to recognize their achievements and to respond to the needs of new students. So we are launching a new ‘Next Generation Fund’ to support the brightest and best students in politics at all levels. New seeds need to be planted, and as we celebrate the work of colleagues, past and present, we aim to invest in a new generation of leaders and thinkers.