Obituary

Charles Elwell

An MI5 officer during the cold war, he went on to target domestic 'subversives'

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Charles Elwell, who has died aged 88, was one of MI5's more controversial - and colourful - officers of the cold war. He was given the responsibility for targeting domestic "subversives", a task for which his earlier spycatching days made him particularly unsuitable. His targets included Patricia Hewitt, who was to become a cabinet minister and privy counsellor under New Labour, and Harriet Harman, now deputy leader of the Labour party and Leader of the Commons, when they were, respectively, general secretary and legal officer of the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty) in the 1970s.

Earlier in his career, Elwell was a successful counter-espionage officer netting Soviet spies. However, in common with others in MI5, the FBI and the CIA during the cold war, he saw communist threats and conspiracies, notably among Harold Wilson's political colleagues and friends, where there were none. Even after he retired, he continued to smear Labour politicians, ignoring the advice of his embarrassed former employer.

Elwell was educated at Haileybury College, Hertfordshire, and St John's College, Oxford, where he read modern languages. He joined the navy in 1940 and became a lieutenant in the RNVR. He served in motor gun boats based on the south coast, landing agents in occupied Europe. In March 1942, after disembarking two Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents in the Netherlands, Elwell and his Dutch colleague were unable to launch their dinghy through the surf to return to their MGB and were captured. After an attempt to escape, Elwell was sent to Colditz, where he remained until the end of the war.

He was demobilised in 1945. Over the next four years he held a number of temporary appointments in the Foreign Office, including vice consul in Tangier, a useful "lookout" post for the security and intelligence agencies, and private secretary to the British ambassador in The Hague. According to his former colleagues, he made no secret that his first choice of a career would have been the FO. However, in 1949, he joined MI5. He was soon sent to Security Intelligence Far East, a joint MI5-MI6 organisation in Singapore. He returned to London in 1955 and was posted to MI5's counter-espionage

branch, where he stayed until 1974, apart from a three-year spell seconded to the Ministry of Defence as security adviser.

He was closely involved in the case of John Vassall, the Admiralty clerk blackmailed by the Russians to spy for them when he was stationed in the British embassy in Moscow. He also played a key role in the discovery and pursuit of the Portland spy ring run by Konon Molody, the Soviet agent who used the name Gordon Lonsdale, and Helen Kroger. In 1961 he was awarded an OBE for his counter-espionage work.

It was in this counter-espionage role that Elwell listened to Josef Frolik, a low-grade Czech intelligence officer who defected in 1969 armed with claims based on little more than gossip. The Guardian journalist David Leigh records in his book The Wilson Plot that among those Frolik denounced was John Stonehouse, postmaster general in Wilson's government. Wilson summoned Elwell to repeat the charge that Stonehouse was a Czech agent to the minister's face. Stonehouse vigorously denied the allegation. Wilson later asked MI5 if they had any evidence that his minister was lying. They had not.

Elwell spent his last five years in MI5 in charge of the agency's F branch, responsible for "domestic subversion". Among those he kept under surveillance were Hewitt and Harman. Elwell deemed that the NCCL was a subversive organisation partly because of links between its officers and communists, and its campaigns which included criticism of the police. In 1990 the Council of Europe ruled that MI5 had violated Article 8 and 13 of the European human rights convention, which guarantees the right to respect for private life.

Elwell also targeted Harman's husband, Jack Dromey. He opened a file on him during the late 1970s after the Grunwick dispute, in which Dromey, now Labour party treasurer, played a leading part. Other trade union leaders on whom Elwell and his MI5 team kept files included Jack Jones, the transport workers' leader, and Hugh (later Lord) Scanlon, president of the engineers' union, the AUEW. "Fact sheets" on the two trade union leaders were regularly distributed to 10 Downing Street and selected ministers. In 1977, Scanlon was prevented from becoming chairman of British Shipbuilding because MI5 advised that he should not see documents marked confidential or above.

Elwell's retirement in 1979 did not stop him from continuing his pursuit of so-called subversives. He joined the rightwing Institute for the Study of Conflict, in 1983 published Tracts Beyond the Times - a Brief Guide to the Communist and Revolutionary Marxist Press, and edited the clandestine newsletter British Briefing, which consisted of ill-founded claims about Labour and trade union activists, pressure groups, charities and writers. Among those it accused of helping the communist cause were Chris Mullin, Labour MP for Sunderland South. British Briefing's targets included the

housing charity Shelter, Lord Gifford QC, the leftwing barrister, and the playwright Howard Brenton.

Even his former colleagues distanced themselves from his exaggerated view of the threat from subversives. MI5 declined Elwell's suggestion that it should be the custodian of British Briefing's archive when it stopped in 1990.

In retirement Elwell also took up soft fruit farming. He had published The Iron Elwells, a history of his family, which had close connections with the Black Country. He was also president of the Black Country Society in 1993.

In 1950 he married Ann Glass, a colleague in MI5 who later worked for the FO's secret Information Research Department, which countered Soviet bloc propaganda. She died in 1996.

Elwell is survived by their two sons and two daughters.

· Charles John Lister Elwell, MI5 officer, born May 16 1919; died January 11 2008

· This article was amended on Monday January 28 2008. The statement in the above obituary of Charles Elwell that he was given the responsibility for targeting "domestic 'subversives', a task for which his earlier spycatcher days made him particularly suitable", should have concluded, "particularly unsuitable". This has been corrected.

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