

## Security snoopers set up computer network

A NATIONAL network of computers and access terminals has been set up in secret by MI5, the security service. The creation of a national political intelligence network suggests either that MI5 is setting up a system of regional surveillance offices or that Special Branch teams in each police force will carry out his task for them using the terminals and small computers.

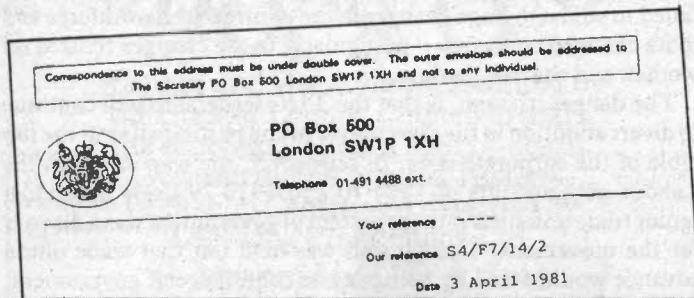
The new network involves at least 200 access terminals and many smaller 'mini' computers each linked to MI5's central installation in Mayfair. According to a computer staff agency used by MI5 the network already includes 'piles of minis' and a 'nationwide' distribution of access terminals. The minicomputers could also be connected to larger 'host' government computers enabling the central MI5 computer to tap into personal records held by other departments. Regulation of the MI5 computer is specifically excluded from the Data Protection Bill now going through Parliament.

The government has consistently refused to give Parliament any information about the huge MI5 computer installed in Mayfair since its existence was first revealed by the *New Statesman* two years ago (*NS* 5 March 1982). However, details of the network which MI5 has been planning since at least 1977 have emerged from a series of advertisements which MI5 have been placing for computer staff. Over 60 have appeared in the last seven years and have been monitored in a joint

investigation by *New Scientist* and *New Statesman*.

The advertisements, which have been placed by two staff recruiting agencies used by MI5, specify that the computer concerned is a 'large ICL 2980 configuration' in the Mayfair London W1 area. There is only one such computer installation, and it is in the MI5 headquarters in Curzon Street and Mount Row, Mayfair. The computer is the most powerful type made by ICL. Prospective applicants who then phone EDP Systems Ltd, one of the two recruitment agencies, are told that the jobs advertised are with the 'Ministry of Defence'. Both EDP Systems and James Baker Associates, the second agency, pass suitable applicants on to MI5 administrative staff for interview. Two senior members of the employment agencies have also confirmed privately that the advertisements were placed on behalf of MI5.

The current series of adverts began in April 1977, shortly before MI5 took delivery of its large new (dual) 2980 computer. The unidentified employer, said the ads, was then 'developing large-scale, sophisticated information systems using major ICL 1900 and 2900 computers'. In December 1977, computer programmers who came to work for MI5 were promised 'sound prospects in a growth situation' and also 'creative analysis work at one of the most advanced installations in London... our clients have a considerable volume of new projects on hand'.



**ICL 2980 London W.1.**  
Our clients are implementing database (DBMS) and transaction processing systems on a large ICL 2980 configuration. Training in modern techniques will be given where required. This is a well-paid government, working to high standards on large scale systems. The following Career Opportunities are now open.

**TECHNICAL CHALLENGE Central**

**PROGRAMMERS UPGRADE YOUR EXPERIENCE! £7,000-£9,000 Central**

Inside box: advertisements for MI5's Mayfair computer centre; below: the MI5 HQ at Curzon Street Mayfair and how the Security Service writes to successful applicants for its computer centre, disguising itself as 'Box 500, London SW1'.

The advertisements suggest that MI5 has recruited between 60 and 100 computer professionals to develop the computer centre and related network. The most recent advert, which appeared three weeks ago in *Computing*, offered computer systems analysts salaries of up to £11,000.

When we enquired at the offices of EDP Systems Ltd last week, a woman employee at first told us that the job advertised three weeks ago was with the Ministry of Defence and that many people might be unwilling to take a job at 'this kind of site.' (Absolute, compartmentalised secrecy is demanded of employees.) Anyone being considered for a job had to wait a minimum of three months while they were 'positively vetted'. We then disclosed we were journalists and asked if she admitted that the company was recruiting staff for the MI5 computer. 'I haven't got a clue. I'm not denying anything', she said.

EDP's advertisements also make repeated references to the 'on-line mini-computer systems' network linked to the main MI5 computer. These references appear to confirm previously published information from ICL sources that MI5 wants to develop a national communications network linking several large government computers.

In February 1978 one advert specified that mini-computer specialists would have to give 'presentations to user departments'. During 1979 a special programming group was set up in MI5's administrative offices at Great Marlborough Street (now vacated). At least one of the mini-computer sites connected to MI5 can be identified from EDP's

advertisements. It is located near Waterloo station, presumably at the offices there of the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS.

Apart from giving technical details, the advertisements also confirm MI5's independence from normal civil service scrutiny. Nonnally the recruitment of government computer staff is controlled by the Civil Service Commission. Not only are MI5's staff recruited directly, but the suspicions of one applicant were raised when he was told that although working for the civil service he could get higher pay than standard rates.

Labour front bench spokesman Michael Meacher has this week tabled three questions for the Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Heseltine, asking him — as the MI5 computer is being passed off as belonging to the MoD — to explain the purpose of the national computer network which has been linked to the Mayfair computer centre. Apart from exempting MI5 from proposed legal safeguards, the Protection Bill also includes a clause giving MI5 the right to tap any other personal computer bank. Ministers can certify that the personal information is being transferred to the secret MI5 computer in order to 'safeguard national security'. This decision cannot be challenged — nor will anyone have the right to know if such a transaction has taken place. All this dovetails with the plan, revealed earlier this year, to issue everyone with a 'Numbercard' containing every person's National Insurance number. MI5 has long used the NI number to identify persons.

**Duncan Campbell with Steve Connor**

Steve Connor works for *New Scientist*.