

Request about the level of security clearance for special advisers recruited to the Home Office in 1993

In 1993, depending on their role, Special Advisers working in the Home Office would have been subject to security clearance appropriate to the access they had to sensitive Government assets. The level of such clearance would therefore have varied according to individual requirements. The attached Prime Ministerial statement of 24 July 1990 refers to security clearance at the time and I hope this will offer a fuller explanation of the process as it was then.

24th July 1990

Security Vetting

Sir John Wheeler : To ask the Prime Minister whether she will make a statement about the procedures for security vetting within the Government.

The Prime Minister : The security vetting system continues to form a key part of the protective arrangements for safeguarding national security and countering terrorism. The system that has been used to investigate the reliability of those who are expected to have regular access to highly classified information is known as positive vetting (PV) ; it has now been in operation for nearly 40 years. A more rigorous form of PV--known as enhanced positive vetting (EPV)--has been applied to all employees of the security and intelligence agencies and to a small number of people on closely associated work in other Government Departments since the implementation of the

recommendations of the Security Commission in its report on the Prime case published in 1983--Cmnd. 8876. In addition, it has been the long-standing practice of successive Governments to carry out a more limited range of background checks, including criminal record checks, for access to less sensitive information and, increasingly, for the purposes of countering terrorism : this system has been known within the Government as normal vetting (NV).

As indicated in the Government's response, published today, to the Home Affairs Select Committee report on criminal records which commented on the use of criminal record checks for the purpose of security vetting, the Government have decided, following a comprehensive review, that the security vetting system should be restructured and operated on the basis of defined and published criteria. From 1 October 1990 all candidates for security vetting will be asked to complete a security questionnaire which will explain the purpose of the procedure and invite them to provide the personal details required for the necessary checks to be carried out. Vetting will then be carried out on the basis of the following revised statement of policy.

The aim is to ensure that checks are carried out only to the extent necessary to safeguard national security and for the purposes of countering terrorism in the light of the current assessment of the threats to security. The changes will not affect the position of any individuals who have been vetted under the current arrangements. When the reliability of a public servant is thought to be in doubt on security grounds, there is a right of appeal to the three advisers--

the tribunal appointed by the Government to advise Ministers in such cases-- where security considerations are involved and to the permanent head of the Department in cases involving aspects of conduct and character alone. These arrangements will remain in force. Copies of a statement of the existing procedure, which will be amended as necessary to reflect the following policy, and the current terms of reference of the three advisers are available in the Library of the House.

Statement of Vetting Policy : with effect from 1 October 1990.

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In the interests of national security and of safeguarding Parliamentary democracy, it is the policy of HMG that no one should be employed in connection with work the nature of which is vital to the security of the state who :

(a) is, or has been, involved in, or associated with any of the following activities threatening national security :

(i) espionage,

(ii) terrorism,

(iii) sabotage,

(iv) actions intended to overthrow or undermine Parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means ; or (

(b) is, or has recently been, a member of any organisation which has advocated such activities ; or

(c) is, or has recently been, associated with any such organisation, or any of its members, in such a way as to raise reasonable doubts about his or her reliability ; or

(d) is susceptible to pressure from any such organisation or from a foreign intelligence service or a hostile power ; or

(e) suffers from defects of character which may expose him or her to blackmail or other influence by any such organisation or by a foreign intelligence service or which may otherwise indicate unreliability.

2. In accordance with that policy Government Departments will in future submit all candidates for posts involving access to highly classified information to one of the following levels of vetting clearance, depending on the circumstances :

(a) PV(S) : this level of clearance is required before regular access to SECRET information can be authorised. In some circumstances, where it would not be possible for an individual to make reasonable progress in their career without clearance to SECRET level, it may be applied to candidates for employment whose duties may not, initially, involve regular access to SECRET information. A PV(S) clearance will normally consist of a full record check, that is a check against any relevant Departmental personnel records, a check against the National Collection of Criminal Records, and other necessary security checks, including a check against the records of the

Security Service and police forces. In some cases further enquiries, including an interview with the subject, may be carried out.

(b) PV(TS) : this level of clearance is required before regular and constant access to TOP SECRET information can be authorised and for certain other posts involving access to highly sensitive classified information or material. It may also be applied in the following circumstances :

(i) at the discretion of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office before employment overseas in posts connected with British diplomatic or consular missions :

(ii) at the discretion of Home Office, the Northern Ireland Office and the Scottish Office, in a post in the police service involving regular and constant access to SECRET information held or generated by a Special Branch which relates to espionage, sabotage or terrorism, or to actions intended to overthrow or undermine Parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means ;

(iii) at departmental discretion before employment in a departmental security post ;

(iv) at the discretion of the security and intelligence agencies to members of their ancillary staff.

A PV(TS) clearance will consist of a record check on similar lines to that carried out for PV(S) clearances, supplemented by a formal check on the credit worthiness of the individual and by interviews with the subject and persons familiar with their character in both the home and the work environment.

(c) EPV : this is the most rigorous form of PV clearance now applied to members of the security and intelligence agencies and to a small number of staff employed on closely associated work in

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Government Departments. It consists of the same sort of enquiries as those made for a PV(TS) background investigation, but to a greater depth.

3. In addition security checks may also be carried out in the following circumstances :

(a) for the protection of classified information. Basic security checks, known as Reliability Checks, may be carried out in the interestes of national security before :

(i) individuals are granted unescorted access to premises or areas where highly classified information or material is held and where there is a risk of accidental access to that information or material ; and

(ii) individuals are authorised to have access to certain categories of information classified CONFIDENTIAL, mostly in the fields of defence and foreign affairs.

The aim of such checks is primarily to ensure that the character of the individual concerned is such that they can be trusted in circumstances where they may gain access to information of importance to national security

(b) for the protection of public figures and military and civil establishments at particular risk of attack by terrorist organisations. Irrespective of the degree of access to classified information security checks, known as Counter Terrorist Checks, may be carried out in the interest of national security before : (

(i) individuals take up posts which involve proximity to public figures at particular risk of attack by terrorist organisations, or which give access to information or material assessed to be of value to terrorists ;

(ii) individuals are granted unescorted access to certain military and civil establishments assessed to be at particular risk of attack by terrorist organisations.

The aim of such checks is to prevent individuals who have connections with terrorist organisations, or who may be vulnerable to pressure from such organisations, from gaining access to certain posts and, in some circumstances, premises where there is a risk that they could exploit that position to further the aims of a terrorist organisation.

4. A check against the National Collection of Criminal Records is an invariable feature of a Reliability Check clearance ; and criminal record information may also be taken into account in a Counter Terrorist Check clearance. Other security checks may be carried out as necessary.