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2-3-84

MR DE DENEY

107

[redacted]

Mr. Wilkie
Re X. I gather that coroner's
officers are not regarded as
being on central services and
are therefore still serving police
duties whilst engaged on these
duties. Is this right?
(S) 7/3/84

[Handwritten signature]

SKINNER INQUEST

... I attach a copy of a note I have sent [redacted]. The letter attached to it indicates, amongst other things, that the Lord Chancellor and the Treasury Solicitor have both, of their own motion, considered whether action should be initiated for the removal of the coroner. They have decided against this for fear of giving credence to allegations of an attempted cover-up. The letter does, however, disclose a pretty disturbing state of affairs. The coroner's officer apparently called on [redacted]

[redacted] No doubt the officer's defence would be that he was acting on behalf - and perhaps on the instruction of - the coroner. Whatever the facts, clearly nothing can be done until the inquest has been concluded. I continue, however, to find the role being played by this officer, extremely disturbing. I do not myself believe that he is acting merely on the instructions of the coroner. He appears to be pursuing some obscure purpose of his own. At all events, he appears to be thoroughly unsuited to such an appointment. On the other hand, isolated as he is, it may well be that his senior officers are unaware of his activities. I should be grateful, therefore, if consideration could be given now to what action might need to be set in hand, after the inquest has concluded, to call on this officer to account for his activities. It may be the material exists for bringing disciplinary proceedings against him; at the very least, I would have thought that consideration should be given to returning him to uniform duties.

[Handwritten signature]

(G I de Deney)
2 March 1984

General Department

[REDACTED]

SKINNER INQUEST

I have now received from FCO the letter about this inquest which I mentioned to you on the telephone.

2. Mr Skinner was a banker stationed in Moscow. His wife is Russian living in this country. Mr Skinner died as a result of a fall from a window in Moscow. Before his death he had been showing signs of disturbance. He failed to attend an event held at our Embassy, passing a letter of excuse to another guest in which he indicated that he was being pursued by the Russian authorities and alleged that there was a Russian spy in the Embassy - this being his reason for not turning up himself.

3. Mr Skinner's body was brought back to this country and, as a result of the ruling in the Helen Smith case, must now be the subject of an inquest. The coroner concerned is Dr Mary McHugh, who has been known for some time to be somewhat eccentric, and to be impervious to guidance from any source.

4. Dr McHugh opened the inquest in public. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] At all events, to everyone's surprise, the coroner announced that she would hold the resumed inquest in camera. FCO have maintained throughout that they are not aware of any considerations affecting the death which might require such a course on grounds of national security. Full information about the earlier stages of the episode is on [REDACTED] papers.

5. The more recent history is set out in [REDACTED] attached letter. As you will see, a combination of approaches by

...
CONFIDENTIAL

covering

the Attorney General and the Observer appears to have forced the coroner to agree to hold the inquest in public. At the same time, she and her officer appear to have been taking some pretty unusual steps to try to justify her original decision to hold the inquest in camera. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Having established this fact, the coroner appears to be trying to find some link between that and Mr Skinner's death. If she were to try to summon the officer who conducted the interview, this would have to be refused. I understand that the Security Service would resist even an officer's name being disclosed in open court.

6. FCO's concern is what line to take should this situation arise. Should the interview have taken place in this country, it would not appear to be a matter for them, hence the reason for [REDACTED] letter to me. You will no doubt wish to discuss this with the Security Services.

7. In view of its classification, I do not want to take unnecessary copies of the attached letter. I should be grateful, therefore, if when you have finished with it, you would pass it on in the original to Mr Johnson.

(G I de Deney)
2 March 1984

General Department

cc [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Mr de Denev

SKINNER INQUEST

Thank you for your minute of 2 March covering a letter from [REDACTED] the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, about the inquest into the death of Mr Dennis Skinner.

2. We have discussed the matter with the Security Service, but this has not added much to what you and we already know about the case. The Security Service are following the progress of the legal proceedings, and are in direct touch with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about the handling of any security issues that may arise from the conduct of the inquest. They have confirmed that the coroner's suspicions about the involvement of the security and intelligence services in the case are entirely fanciful.

3. It is difficult to predict how events will unfold from now on, given the coroner's unpredictable behaviour, but we have asked the Security Service to keep us informed and to be ready to respond at short notice if the case blows up in a way that might involve Home Office Ministers. If of course any significant information affecting Police Department interests comes in on your net, I should be grateful if you could let us know. [REDACTED] will be keeping a watchful brief on our interests.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
POLICE DEPARTMENT

21 March 1984

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Mr. M. Skinner

[REDACTED]

cc [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I have been no mention p.p. in this

?!
[REDACTED]
L6/3

Mr de Doney

SKINNER INQUEST

Thank you for your minute of 2 March covering a letter from [REDACTED] at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, about the inquest into the death of Mr Dennis Skinner.

2. We have discussed the matter with the Security Service, but this has not added much to what you and we already know about the case. The Security Service are following the progress of the legal proceedings, and are in direct touch with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about the handling of any security issues that may arise from the conduct of the inquest. They have confirmed that the coroner's suspicions about the involvement of the security and intelligence services in the case are entirely fanciful.

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
POLICE DEPARTMENT

21 March 1984

FROM: - [REDACTED] u. [REDACTED] Mr. Sutton

Mr Sutton
CROYDON CORONER AND THE SKINNER CASE

[REDACTED] (No action for us, apparently in this curious business, but there was some question of complaint about the over zealous police officers who acting as coroner's officer. Perhaps F2 could be the repository of such papers as we.)

Mr. Wille
We should still
up the mess so
we can deal w
[REDACTED]

AP 30

The background to this case is that Dennis Skinner, an employee of the Midland Bank in Moscow, contacted the British Embassy in Moscow several times on 15/16 June 1983 and made clear his fears of being arrested by the KGB for currency offences and possessing pornography. On 17 June he telephoned the British Minister in Moscow very early to say that he believed the Russians would bring an espionage charge against him. He was invited to go to the Embassy to discuss it. A few hours later he apparently fell from the window of his flat and was killed. As far as is known his fears were groundless and suggest a mental breakdown.

His body was brought back to England and an inquest was opened by the Croydon coroner, Dr Mary McHugh, on 6 July 1983. [REDACTED] was asked a number of questions by the coroner and said that [REDACTED] was frightened that he might be accused of being a British spy and that he was being harrassed by the KGB. The inquest, as is usual, was adjourned to await the formal report from the Soviet authorities. Although the coroner was assured by FCO that they knew of no grounds of national security which might require the inquest, or any part of it, to be held in camera under the proviso to Rule 14 of the Coroners Rules 1953, the coroner announced at the end of September that the whole inquest would be held in camera. In response to enquiries from the Press the Home Office stated that they knew of no grounds of national security to require the inquest to be held in camera. Despite a meeting with FCO in which it was made abundantly clear to Dr McHugh that national security was in no way involved, and a subsequent meeting with the Attorney General who also made the position clear, Dr McHugh insisted that she would hold the inquest in camera. She sent no substantive reply to an enquiry from Treasury Solicitor as to whether she had evidence concerning Mr Skinner's death of which FCO were unaware. On 25 November the Observer newspaper challenged that decision in the High Court and obtained an interim

injunction. On 6 December the coroner called on the Solicitor-General to discuss the High Court proceedings, and on 11 December it was reported in the Observer that the coroner had decided to hold the inquest in public. However, she would not agree to the Observer's demand that the inquest should be held wholly in public (in this she seems to have been right, since as coroner she retains discretion to hold any part of the inquest in camera should the need arise), nor would she agree to pay the newspaper's costs. The High Court action was therefore not withdrawn and was eventually heard on 22 March. In the meantime the coroner seems to have attempted to obtain evidence to justify her initial decision to hold the inquest in camera by having

[REDACTED]

The judge, (Lord Justice Watkins), at the High Court hearing, at which the coroner did not appear and was not represented, although she submitted an affidavit, criticised the coroner for her stubbornness in delaying the inquest. According to the Daily Telegraph the judge said Dr McHugh has failed without reason to hold the inquest in public; had stubbornly refused to recognise the fact that she should have held it in public; had ignored Home Office and Foreign Office advice (not strictly true - the Home Office had not given the coroner any advice in the matter as she had not asked for any, and the constitutional position does not entitle the Secretary of State to intervene in the way in which a coroner carries out his or her statutory duties); and had forced a case to come before the High Court which should not have been necessary. He ordered the coroner to pay the Observer's costs, which he said would never have been incurred but for her actions.

It is understood that the inquest is now likely to be resumed on 14 or 15 May, depending on the availability of witnesses from abroad.

Dr McHugh's attitude all along, if her utterances to the Press may be believed, has been that she has been made a 'scapegoat' - it is not clear in what connection, since she has brought her troubles on herself.

It is understood that the Lord Chancellor at an earlier stage of the proceedings considered of his own motion whether he should exercise his power to remove the coroner from office, but concluded that this avenue should not be pursued for the time being since it would be presented as interference in the conduct of the inquest designed to re-inforce the alleged official cover-up. Under section 8(1) of the Coroners Act 1887 the Lord Chancellor may, if he thinks fit, remove any coroner from his office for inability or misbehaviour in the discharge of his duty.

The comments of Lord Justice Watkins would seem to imply a prima facie case of misbehaviour in the discharge of her duty, and once the inquest is over it may be right to re-open the question of removal, which, if Ministers agree to this course, we will in the meantime explore with the Lord Chancellor's Department.



E.R.

RESTRICTED

C.C.

Mr. Mitchell
Mr. Wilkie
→

cc. [redacted]

4/2/84

[redacted]

[redacted]

CROYDON CORONER AND THE SKINNER CASE

This is merely to confirm that the Home Secretary, having seen your minute of 30 March to Mr Sutton, endorses your proposal that you should explore further the question of removal of Dr McHugh from office.

N A PANTLING
Private Secretary

Private Office
4.4.84.