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Summary

1. This evidence is submitted as part of the review by the National Security Strategy (Joint Committee) into the national security machinery which started in January 2021. The evidence argues that national security decision making can be strengthened through greater diversity and inclusion in the National Security Secretariat (NSS) and associated bodies, reflecting the drive by the UK's intelligence agencies and Civil Service generally to include traditionally underrepresented groups such as women, ethnic minorities and other such groups in order to enable cross-government collaboration, diversity of thought and harness the talent that modern Britain has to offer.

Details

2. Diversity and inclusion are now significant priorities for the UK's intelligence machinery. The subject itself has been on the agenda for some time; in 2011-12, the Intelligence & Security Committee's (ISC) annual report noted that the UK's agencies were 'largely white, male-dominated organisations' with progress to greater diversity described as 'lacklustre'.[1] A report by the committee released in March 2015 noted that the UK's agencies were far behind the Civil Service on female representation. The foreword to the report made it clear that the moves to diversity were not just an 'ethical issue' but had operational and analytical benefits. 'Logically, if all intelligence professionals are cut from the same cloth, then they are likely to share "unacknowledged biases" that circumscribe both the definition of problems and the search for solutions', it argued, adding that 'Diversity … will result in a better response to the range of threats that we face to our national security'.[2]

3. The ISC's July 2018 report, *Diversity and Inclusion in the UK Intelligence Community*[3], found that declaration rates were particularly low in the JIO and NSS across all categories. Even acknowledging the relatively small numbers involved compared to the agencies, the ISC noted the data was 'not sufficiently robust'[4], even if there was cause for optimism in some areas. On gender, 42% of the NSS were female – of the agencies only MI5 was comparable at 42.2% (SIS 38.9%, GCHQ 35.2%). 30% of JIO were women.

[1] Cm. 8403, *Intelligence and Security Committee: Annual Report, 2011-2012*, July 2012, pp. 65-6 < https://fas.org/irp/world/uk/isc2011-12.pdf >
[2] HC. 970, *Women in the UK Intelligence Community: A report by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament*, 5 March 2015, p. 2 < https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20150305_ISC_Report_Women_in_the_UKIC.pdf >
[3] HC 1297, *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: Diversity and Inclusion in the UK Intelligence Community,* 18 July 2018 < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/740654/20180718_Report_Diversity_and_Inclusion.pdf >
[4] Ibid. p. 13.

Despite the positives there was a gap between female staff in Senior Civil Service (SCS) grades; just 19% of the NSS fell into this category, 17% in the JIO, whereas female SCS in the agencies stood at 24% in SIS, 31.3% in MI5 and 27% in GCHQ.[5] The number of staff from a BAME (Black, Asian and ethnic minority) background was representative in the NSS and JIO, yet there was a lamentable lack of representation at SCS with no BAME staff at this level. Non-declaration rates were also particularly high – the NSS at 39% and JIO 42%[6] – a trend replicated for data on LGBT and Disability groups. These figures fall behind the Civil Service generally; according to data in 2019, even the departments with the lowest percentage of women in SCS grades, including the Home Office (39%), Foreign & Commonwealth Office (33%) and Ministry of Defence (29%), were ahead of the JIO and NSS.[7] The lack of BAME representation in SCS was reflective of the intelligence community.[8]

4. In July 2017, a 'Security and Defence Diversity and Inclusion Network' sponsored report, *Mission Critical: Why inclusion is a national security issue and what you can do to help*, outlined five areas where diversity mattered: **performance**, **recruitment**, **innovation**, **understanding** and **public trust**. In the foreword to the study, then National Security Advisor Mark Sedwell noted that, to meet the multifaceted threats the UK faces, 'we need a national security workforce of different backgrounds, perspectives and ways of thinking. Diversity and inclusion are Mission Critical'.[9]

    Though trust and recruitment were generally important, the report itself – based on observations in the private sector – made the argument that diverse organisations performed better than non-inclusive ones. A January 2015 study by McKinsey, *Diversity Matters*, found that gender balanced organisations were 15% more likely to perform better than less representative rivals. The same study also found that ethnically diverse companies were 35% more likely to outperform rivals.[10] Additionally, for the NSS and JIO, diversity was critical to avoid the familiar pattern of 'groupthink' – the dominance of 'prevailing wisdom' – and improve decision making for national security.

5. The dangers of 'groupthink' are well known. Lord Butler's 2004 review of Iraqi WMD and UK intelligence noted that where the number of experts were 'dangerously small … idiosyncratic, views may pass unchallenged'[11], later suggesting there was a need to

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[5] Ibid., p. 14. The government response to the ISC's report noted there had been an increase in the number of women in SCS grades in MI5 (from 31.3% to 35%), GCHQ (35%) and SIS (27%) though no figures were provided for JIO/NSS (see Cm. 9696, *Government response to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Report on Diversity and Inclusion in the Intelligence Community*, September 2018, p. 1).
[6] Ibid., p. 14.
[7] 'Gender Balance in the Civil Service', 25 April 2019 < https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/gender-balance-civil-service >
[8] Read Dan Lomas, 'Diversity in the UK's intelligence agencies', *RUSI Commentary*, 5 March 2021 < https://rusi.org/commentary/diversity-uks-intelligence-agencies >
[9] *Mission Critical: Why inclusion is a National Security Issue and what you can do to help*, July 2017.
[10] Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton and Sara Prince, *Diversity Matters*, 2 February 2015, p. 1 < https://www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/~/media/2497d4ae4b534ee89d929cc6e3aea485.ashx >
[11] HC. 898, *Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors* (London: The Stationary Office, 2004), p. 16.

question the analytical process and search for alternative hypothesis – an observation also reflected in the findings of the Iraq Inquiry (or Chilcot Report) in 2016, concluding that the 'ingrained belief' across policy and intelligence circles that the Iraq retained a WMD threat stymied alternatives.[12] The findings of the Butler report in particular led to the establishment of the post of Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment and improved professional support for analysts.[13] Considering the implications of the Chilcot report, then National Security Advisor Sir Mark Lyall Grant reported to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in January 2017 he was thinking of using 'the new national security community diversity and inclusion network to generate ideas for how to foster more diversity of thought, including within the NSC(O)'.[14] Sir Stephen Lovegrove, then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence – and the new National Security Advisor, added: 'Chilcot made clear that one of the reasons poor decisions were made in the past was that there was not sufficient diversity of thought across the Security and Defence Departments, particularly at a senior level', echoing earlier comments from SIS's then Chief Alex Younger.[15] As Younger told the ISC in November 2016, 'if you look at Chilcot and the Iraq problems, and what went wrong, there was a load of technical stuff but in large part this was about groupthink and groupthink if manifestly more likely to happen when you have the same sorts of people round the table'.[16]

6. Naturally, efforts to improve the analytical process for decision making are complicated. In his evidence to this committee in February, Prof. Sir David Omand notes that the analytical expertise necessary to question existing assumptions and understand the multiplicity of threats needs to be 'maintained, and where necessary built up, including the language skills, and background knowledge of the history, culture, geography, anthropology relevant to the classes of risk being examined and the motivations of those involved'.[17] This will undoubtedly take time.

7. The committee notes that 'red-teaming' (or 'alternative analysis'[18]) – defined as the 'independent application of a range of structured, creative and critical thinking techniques to assist the end user make a better informed decision or produce a more robust product'[19]

[12] HC 265-IV, *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Vol. 4*, 6 July 2016, p. 8.
[13] 'Joint Intelligence Organisation' < https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-intelligence-organisation >

See also NSM0002, 'Written evidence submitted by Professor Sir David Omand', 9 February 2021, p. 3 < file:///E:/Evidence%20--%20National%20Security%20Secretariat/download-12.pdf >

[14] Annex: Learning the Lessons from the Iraq Inquiry: The National Security Advisor's Report, 1 January 2017 < https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubadm/708/70803.htm >
[15] Quoted in *Mission Critical: Why inclusion is a National Security Issue and what you can do to help*, July 2017.
[16] HC 1297, p. 10.
[17] See NSM0002, p. 4.
[18] *A Guide to Read Teaming, DCDC Guidance Note*, February 2010 < https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2011/cde/rr_ukdcdc.pdf >
[19] *Red Teaming Guide, Second Edition*, January 2013, p. 1-2 < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142533/20130

– could be better integrated into national security decision making even if such techniques have been used for some time across government.[20] But it should be noted that alternative methods of testing assessments rigorously can only be as good as those taking part in the process, with a wider pool of talent opening up a range of views that would be beneficial.

The evidence so far gathered from the ISC's accumulated data is that there has been much improvement in the recruitment and retention of women, ethnic minority groups and other underrepresented groups across the agencies, though there is still room for improvement. The July 2018 ISC report noted that the JIO and NSS recruited staff, often for short periods of time, and from higher generalist grades within the UK's agencies and, in many ways, traditionally suffered from the issues affecting diversity and inclusion across the intelligence agencies.[21] The latest available data from 2017 showed that 53% of NSS and 36% of JIO entrants/recruits (compared to 42% and 30% of established staff) were women. Numbers of BAME in the NSS and JIO were stable.[22] The report notes the need to continue to develop recruitment and talent management programmes in the agencies so that appointments to the JIO and NSS are representative.

8. The author welcomes the conclusion of the Integrated Review (IR) that there is 'much more to do to harness the diverse perspectives and experience that drive innovation and adaptation and to maintain the collaborative, agile and inclusive behaviours needed to enable integration'.[23] Additionally, echoing the commitments made in the 2015 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* to recruit a 'workforce, with varied backgrounds, perspectives and styles of thinking'[24], the IR promises 'a strategic approach to recruitment and development to increase the flow and diversity of people into, and out of, the community so that we have a robust pipeline of diverse future talent'. Considering his earlier comments on diversity, the appointment of Sir Stephen Lovegrove as National Security Advisor offers the potential to build on the progress already made and work towards solving outstanding issues.

There remains a need to widen the talent pool, especially considering the backgrounds of those entering the NSS and supporting bodies from the existing Civil Service routes under schemes such as the Civil Service Fast Stream. A 2016 report by the Bridge Group consultancy found the socio-economic background (SEB) of applicants to the Fast Stream

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[20] 'Call for Evidence: National Security Machinery' < https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/361/national-security-machinery/ >

[21] HC 1297, p. 22.

[22] Ibid., p. 25.

[23] CP 403, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, p. 98 < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf >

[24] Cm 9161, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, November 2015, p. 84 < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf >

was 'much closer to the profile of students from Oxbridge than that of the wider student population' – admittedly, a trend that had narrowed on previous years, suggesting that students from 'highly selective universities are much more likely to apply'. Moreover, the report found that applicants from lower SEB's found Fast Stream 'attractive and intimidating' with the process summed up by some as 'while, male and Oxbridge'.[25] Then Cabinet Secretary Sir Jeremy Haywood admitted in 2016 that Fast Track 'was still not fully representative of the population'.[26] In 2018 figures showed that 28.6% of successful applicants had attended independent schools, despite making up just under 19% of total applications.[27] Nevertheless, the 2017/2018 review of Fast Stream recruitment identified alternative ways of identifying new talent and nurturing diverse approaches to recruitment and retention.[28] The Civil Service has focused increasingly on increasing the number of applications from underrepresented groups – a step that is to be welcomed – and recognises the need to find 'high-quality diverse candidates for roles in the Senior Civil Service' generally[29]

Summary

9. Red-teaming, new digital tools and platforms, and alternative training methods are undoubtedly part of the solution to improving the NSS machinery to make better decisions in government. The submission by Prof. Rob Dover also makes the useful point that government needs to think more broadly about how it utilises external expertise.[30] Nonetheless, at the heart of the JIO/NSS lies the role of people. Though the abovementioned solutions can remedy aspects of the cognitive biases in the analytical process, there is – as the IR has identified – a need to make the NSS machinery increasingly representative and draw on a wider talent pool going forward. As has been suggested elsewhere, diversity is not just a PR exercise but a means of improving analysis by exploiting the diverse talent that modern Britain has to offer.

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[25] *Socio-Economic Diversity in the Fast Stream*, February 2016, pp. 1-2 < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/497341/BG_REPORT_FINAL_PUBLISH_TO_RM__1_.pdf >

For an analysis of the data, see Ollie Hirst, 'The civil service fast stream in six charts', 8 February 2016 < https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/civil-service-fast-stream-six-charts >

[26] *Fast Stream and Early Talent Annual Report 2016*, p. 1.
[27] Tasmin Rutter, 'Cabinet Office defends Fast Stream diversity after figures suggest it favours private school applicants', 14 March 2018 < https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/cabinet-office-defends-fast-stream-diversity-after-figures-suggest-it-favours-private-school-applicants >
[28] *Civil Service Fast Stream: Annual Report 2017 and 2018* < https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/767789/Civil_Service_Fast_Stream_Annual_Report_2017_-_2018.pdf >
[29] See HC 455, *Civil Service Commission: Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20*, July 2020, pp. 18-19 < https://civilservicecommission.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CSC-ARA-Repo-2019-20.pdf >. On strategy going forward see pp. 30-31.
[30] NSM0012, Written evidence submitted by Professor Rob Dover, 15 February 2021 < https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22696/pdf/ >

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