

MI6, why would minorities spy for a society they don't feel part of?

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Making the secret service more multicultural is laudable, aiding the national interest. But it's weighed with historical baggage and burdened by context

In 1914, Lord Kitchener famously extended his index finger for the memorable first world war recruitment poster. Your Country Needs You, it said. Alex Younger, the boss of MI6 chose a Guardian interview to alert fellow compatriots, and particularly minorities, to the current and pressing needs of the deficient security services. There are too few minorities joining to meet the requirements of an age menaced by myriad threats, including jihadi terrorism. Quite the activist boss, Younger intends to go out and find them.

But it won't be easy. He'll need to think about his offer. Few recruits can expect the life of James Bond. Within MI6, there are desk jobs, analyst posts; not everyone gets to drive the underwater car or wield the exploding pen.

Even so, there is a step change between joining the civil service and becoming part of the security services. One can work for the Home Office or the Department for Work and Pensions without feeling that doing so involves adoption of a value system. But it seems difficult, if not impossible, to be part of the security services without absorption into a clearly defined world with distinct values. The very nature of the work, with its disciplines and secrecy, requires a level of emotional investment that would not be necessary on joining the police or the army.

MI6 officers do not swear allegiance to the Queen but, as one would expect, they sign the Official Secrets Act and they know the job is to protect the contemporary state.

All of which is sensible and laudable. But doesn't it also assume a cohesion and inclusivity that Britain doesn't have? The recruits Younger seeks "come from many different backgrounds." But it is unsurprising

that many minorities feel less than enthusiastic about making the requisite investment on behalf of a state that has failed and continues to fail to make the required investment in them and theirs.

Consider the continually sorry story of interactions between minorities and the state. Unemployment rates significantly higher, more likely to live in poverty, three times more likely to be murder victims, four times more likely to be behind bars, with the number of Muslim prisoners having doubled in a decade, more likely to live in poor housing or homeless. Even as graduates, more than twice as likely to emerge jobless and more likely, when in work, to be underpaid.

This is not to belittle the improvements in minority life. A 24% increase in employment over the period 2010 to 2016; more minorities going to university. But Younger must ask whether minority ethnic people feel part of our society to the point that they would complicate their lives and take the risks it might entail to protect it. What will he say about the fact that elements of UK foreign policy have led to further emotional estrangement between some minority groups and the state?

He might say that ultimately, the way to close the employment gap is for minorities to seize opportunities like this. He might say that with more minorities who grasp the subtleties and nuance of a multicultural world, MI6 will better serve the nation and everyone in it.

There's logic in both of those arguments. And I hope, in the national interest, that he finds his recruits. But his mission does not exist in isolation. It's weighed with historical baggage, burdened by context. Another way in which a discriminatory society harms itself.