

Good evening.

Thank you to English Heritage for giving me this opportunity to speak tonight, and to all of you for coming.

I'm here as the sixteenth Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, to talk to you about the first Chief.

This is a bit of a risk, for a couple of reasons.

First, Cumming was a man who took the Service through WW1, while, incidentally, learning to fly a biplane. A man who, as service mythology would have it, cut off his own leg with a pen knife to escape from the wreckage of a car crash. That's a hard act to follow. How will I compare?

Second, more importantly, my job is to keep SIS in the premier league of intelligence services by developing our capabilities so that they are fully fit for the data age.

My plans are for the future, not the past.

So, why would I think it a good idea to hark back to a Victorian predecessor?

Because, although the Service I lead today is in the process of transformation, this cannot and will not be at the expense of our values and our essential character. These are the things that make SIS what it is today - one of the best human intelligence Services in the world.

And these things began with Cumming.

For this reason I want to start by telling you about the things that have endured.

Things that Cumming would recognise if he were to walk into our head office in Vauxhall Cross today.

Cumming's SIS was, as SIS is now, a small organisation that achieved big things.

Churchill put it well, when he wrote of the Secret Service after WW1:

"I believe it to be unquestionably true that the British Secret Service before and during the Great War was more skilfully organised, more daringly pursued and achieved more important results than any other country, friend or foe"...

Praise indeed.

This disproportion between what you put into SIS, and what you get out, is a key characteristic of our past and our present.

It is a frustration, of course, that our biggest successes remain secret, in stark contrast to our failures. But enough of our recent achievements have made it in to the public domain to give you confidence I hope, that the strategic nature of our contribution endures, for example: the disruption of numerous terrorist attacks overseas, and at home, working with MI5 and the police; our role in helping to protect the Olympics; putting AQ Khan, who ran the biggest nuclear proliferation network in history, out of business; taking apart the Libyan nuclear programme. I could go on...

Meanwhile, the fundamentals of how we conduct our work have not changed, in essence, since Cumming's time.

Agents lay at the heart of Cumming's world as they lie at the heart of ours.

An agent is someone who is prepared to work overseas in secret, often inside hostile

This spirit of dedication and determination endures in modern form. As I speak there are SIS officers serving in some of the most dangerous and forbidding places on the planet. I had the honour of leading some of them in Afghanistan. Others are operating under deep cover, unable to reveal the real nature of their work, or sometimes even their identity. This takes a particular type of bravery and resilience.

These are the enduring themes.

I want now to talk about the things that have changed.

What might surprise Cumming, today, if he were able to take over my job?

Naturally, he would be as taken aback as any of his contemporaries at the way in which Britain's role in the world has altered. It fell to him to protect Britain's interests as an imperial power and during a great war. My task is a bit more subtle, but no less taxing.

We exist now to protect this country from the threats that are the dark side of globalisation: those posed by terrorists, malicious actors in cyberspace, and criminals. And we work to give our country advantage overseas, not as the dominant power but in a multi polar world, confronting destabilising states and dealing with the consequences of state failure. This explains a trend I have observed during my career; even as our country's role has changed, we have become progressively more busy.

Then there is the technology. Cumming was a surprisingly modern man. He was not a bureaucrat, he was an innovator, fascinated by technology, and the development of new equipment ranging from cars and aeroplanes to secret inks and wireless sets.


But what would surprise him, as it has surprised all of us, is the way in which technology has developed to sharpen some very human characteristics of our work.

The internet and big data can combine to our advantage, allowing us to know more about the people we meet and the places we meet them. Using data appropriately and proportionately offers us a priceless opportunity to be even more deliberate and targeted in what we do, and so to be better at protecting our agents and this country. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the same technology in opposition hands, an opposition often unconstrained by consideration of ethics and law, allows them to see what we are doing and to put our people and agents at risk. So we find ourselves in a technology arms race. Contrary to myth, human intelligence operations are not an alternative to technical operations; the two are interdependent, and set to become more so. This puts a premium on new types of teamwork and new types of relationships.

Which brings me to another distinction with Cumming's time: partnership.

Cumming, as steward of a fledgling organisation, faced a number of attempts by other departments to close him down and lacked the support he needed from some quarters in Whitehall. Thankfully, in the end, the Foreign Office backed him and he was able



And I am glad to report that our relationship with defence has recovered handsomely, since the dog days after WW1. I am particularly proud of the way in which our work with the military developed in Iraq and then Afghanistan. Put bluntly, work done by SIS and GCHQ saved many British and coalition lives. When I reflect on the bravery and sacrifice shown by our armed forces, as I did at a recent very moving Service of Remembrance in St Paul's, it is a source of deep satisfaction to me that we were able to play this role.

As leaders, in intelligence and defence, our responsibility now, is to ensure that the links we forged in the heat of operations, endure into the new era.

And what of the culture of transparency and oversight that now defines our world? I am confident this would have been pretty novel to Cumming, as it was to me: the Service that I joined in 1991 did not officially exist.

Today we live to different standards. We are regulated by an act of Parliament, overseen by two independent commissioners, former high court judges, who have access to our building, people and systems, and of course we are scrutinised in great detail by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, including at public hearings.

To be quite clear, far from being a hindrance, I believe that these arrangements confer both a moral and practical advantage. We have excellent people, skills and technology. But what really distinguishes us from our opponents is that we live by the values of this country and are regulated by its laws, even as we work in secret. This is our vital advantage. Our staff are asked to make complex decisions in a difficult ethical and legal space. They do so with remarkable assurance. If we make mistakes, we face up to them and learn from them.

The guiding principle is clear: we cannot protect the values this country represents if we undermine them in the process. And we cannot hope to hold the public's trust unless they know that this principle is effectively overseen.

This increased transparency has affected me personally. Cumming would have been surprised to read about himself in newspapers. I spent the frantic hours between my appointment and its announcement pondering the one way door I, and those close to me, were about to go through. After a life time cultivation of the lowest profile in the room, I invite you to imagine how daunting it is to see your name rolling across the 24 hour news tickertape. It is difficult to shake off the idea that you have done something wrong.

The final distinction I want to highlight between Cumming's time and now is type and range of people you will find in contemporary SIS. Cumming's organisation reflected British Society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Men held the senior posts (and many of the menial ones as well). And, while Cumming was ahead of his time in employing women – paying decent salaries and giving the opportunity to serve overseas – he still lived in an age when he had to give women working for him permission to marry.

I wonder what he would think if he walked onto one of our Counter Terrorism floors today? He would meet the best of modern Britain. People who think what they want. Wear what they want. Do what they think is right. Young and old (mostly young to me!). Men and women from a range of different backgrounds, working alongside officers from MI5 and GCHQ to the single task of disrupting terrorist activity overseas and threats to the UK from abroad. They are determined, focussed and highly effective. But beyond that, just by virtue of their character, along with teams across the Service, they are the best riposte to the joyless narrative of violent extremism that I can think of.

We have made enormous progress in attracting a wider range of people into the Service. But, as the ISC point out in their recent diversity report, there is still more to do. I urge anyone who wants to make a difference and thinks they might have the skills to work in SIS, not to rule themselves out. There is just no such thing as a standard SIS officer. Quite apart from the need to make sure we physically represent the country we serve, Britain's diversity offers us a massive operational opportunity, one that I am determined to take advantage of.

Cumming, as it happens, made his own contribution to this agenda. The staff group formed to represent those within the service with disabilities is called Scooter, a reference to the mode of transport Cumming used to get around the building after he had lost his foot.

I want to stay with this subject, that of our people, as I finish tonight.

Cumming is, as it were, our common ancestor.

Perhaps because of this legacy, SIS feels a surprisingly Chief centred organisation. I am known as C. Our reports are CX (exclusive for C). I am the only person in the Service allowed to write or type in green, which reflects Cummings naval origins. This is all fun stuff. But it sometimes makes me a bit uneasy, because it belies the fact that it is all of our people: our dedicated staff and our network of agents, that make SIS the outstanding organisation it is today.



- Agents who work for you all in constant fear of discovery, but who keep delivering the information we need to keep this country safe.
- Officers who serve overseas under cover and can never fully relax as you and I can.
- Our staff in the UK, who, as data and globalisation blur the distinction between home and abroad, are on the front line as well.
- And, of course, our families and those close to us, from whom we draw our strength, who did not choose this life as we did, but nonetheless bear the cost.

We are small. We don't have spare capacity. There is no-one, literally no-one, in SIS who is not directly or indirectly contributing to the impact that we have on world events. None of them joined for the public recognition, but I am not going to pass up the opportunity to thank all of them for what they do on behalf of this country.

And, Mansfield Cumming?

Despite the severe countenance, I sense that he would share the delight I experience when I watch a small group of people, embodying the best of modern Britain, penetrate our enemies and disrupt their plans. And doing this not by force of arms but by guile, creativity and that thing that he would most certainly recognise: the sheer satisfaction of putting one over on those who mean us harm.

- Agents who work for you all in constant fear of discovery, but who keep demanding the information we need to keep the country safe.

- Officers who serve overseas under cover and can never fully relax as you and I can.

- Our staff in the UK, wary of data and globalisation like the distinction between home and abroad, are on the front line as well.

- And, of course, our families and those close to us, from whom we draw our strength, who did not choose this life as we did, but nonetheless bear the cost.

We are small. We don't have spare capacity. There is no-one, literally no-one, in 212 who is not directly or indirectly contributing to the impact that we have on world events. Think of them just as for the public recognition, but I am not going to pass up the opportunity to thank all of them for what they do on behalf of this country.

And, Minister's Comments?

Despite the severe constraints, I sense that he would share the delight I experience when I watch a small group of people, embodying the best of modern Britain, generate our courses and deliver their plans. And doing this not by force of arms but by guile, creativity and that thing that he would undoubtedly recognise as the sheer satisfaction of getting one over on those who mean us harm.