

the press conference with STELLA RIMINGTON

I've always fancied interrogating a spy, and who better to start with than Dame Stella Rimington, probably our most famous ex-spook.

Rimington became the first female director general of MI5 in 1992 and the first DG to be named publicly. It caused a publicity maelstrom that changed her life forever and, indeed, her branch of the Secret Service as she embarked on a strategy of openness with the media.

She quit MI5 in 1996 after 27 years service and since then has served on the boards of various major companies, including M&S, and she sparked widespread controversy with her autobiography in 2001. More recently she has become a thriller writer. Her first novel was *At Risk* and the next instalment in the series, which follows — you guessed it — a British female spy, is out soon. Rimington also works the speech circuit and is a burgeoning high-end mentor to rising corporate executives.

She has two daughters in their 30s and two grand children, aged seven and nine months. Although not divorced, she separated from her husband of 20 years in the 1980s.

We talk in her editor's office at Random House, a short surveillance operation away from her old Thames House HQ in central London. On sight, Rimington is a typically demure granny, in a neat cream jacket with a sparkly brooch, black trousers and a pretty, pale green Italian Renaissance print top. But she is as cool and switched on as any 71-year-old you are ever likely to meet.

Rimington talks crisply, with precision, while maintaining an assured stillness in her body language. She exhibits no tells and, as you would expect, deftly neuters awkward questions, but she can chuckle warmly at her blatant can-niness. Well, at least the best anti-interrogation training money can buy was not wasted.

The villain in your new novel is motivated because his father was a journalist who was ruined after being deliberately misled on stories by the security services. So, do the secret services misinform the press to their own ends?

Of course it doesn't, no. People might expect that, but they would be wrong. It is quite an easy assumption that what I am writing about must be specific incidents that I have experienced. Well, that is not the case. What I am writing plainly

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comes from the generality of my experience, but not from specific incidents.

When I became director general, we decided to be more open with the press and we actually sat down and thought very carefully about how we were going to do it. One of the things we said to ourselves was that if we are going to engage at all with the media, we must make sure they understand that we are not going to mislead them. Basically, there will be a lot of things we won't say, but if we do say anything, what we are going to say is going to be the facts. We are not going to get involved in misleading them. It's obvious to anybody with half a wit that that is not the way.

All these years on, would you say your strategy has worked out well?

I think it has panned out reasonably well. The headlines are not as they used to be. They may be on occasion bad because intelligence and Security Services can never be 100 per cent right — but I think that on the whole the media is better informed.

Portrait
Phil Adams

We used to say to ourselves that some newspapers have a headline ready made up and it was either "MI5 Blunders" or James Bond-type stories. We did not engage with the press at all, so that was the nature of the relationship. Part of our thinking behind the move to openness was, Let's try and get rid of the MI5 blunders thing and James Bond, and let people see what kind of service this is and what job it has to do in a democracy.

Can you talk me through what it was like being thrust into the media spotlight.

My experience of the media was actually quite traumatic. I moved from being completely unknown, working in a secret organisation, living in an ordinary London street where nobody knew what I did, to being the only face that anybody knew of British Intelligence. It was an enormous shock to me and to my family, particularly, who were totally unprepared. And it was a shock for the Service as well, who were also totally unprepared. We had to run quite





by Rob McGibbon

STELLA'S NEWS SCHEDULE



Newspapers

I read *The Guardian* every day. The news coverage is good, the international news is particularly good and it has wonderful picture coverage. I have always liked Simon Jenkins and I enjoy him more since he has transferred from *The Times* because he is freer in the way he expresses

himself. I like doing the simple crossword puzzle over lunch and some days I can do it within half an hour, although I admit that some days I can't finish it.

I get the *Sunday Times*, but I do find it very annoying. It was their Insight team which did a number on me when I first became a public figure. It is very interested in security topics and very frequently its reports have been what I would regard as exaggerated and usually I think, Urgh, I don't credit that very much. They have good sources, but not necessarily always reliable sources. I like *The Observer* and I might start taking it regularly now I think about it.

Magazines

I used to read *The Spectator* regularly but I found the tone of its journalism was becoming frivolous so I gave it up. I can't think of a single magazine that is floating around in my house.



Television

I am a bit of a news junkie still and during the day I will have News 24 on in the background. I watch *Channel 4 News* because it is arguably the best news coverage. Jon Snow is a very good anchorman and a very good reporter. I always watch *Newsnight* for its analysis.

Radio

I usually wake up at 6.30am and listen to the *Today* programme through until about 8am. I will probably listen to the 1pm news as well. Often, I listen to *Woman's Hour* and, if I am driving, I listen to plays. Radio 4 has an excellent, balanced output — you learn the most enormous amount while getting entertainment.

Web

When I left the Service I was only just learning how to use a computer. Now, I have mine on all the time for writing, and the internet is an absolutely essential tool for everything, from research for my books to booking train tickets.



No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull The Blatant Plug...

Stella Rimington's new novel, *Secret Asset*, is published by Hutchinson in hardback on 3 August, priced £12.99.

Shame, I think a lot of journalists reckon they have the perfect cover and abilities to be a spy.

Well, journalism and espionage, you could say, work in the same field, in the sense of trying to find out information. The journalist profession is an area that the intelligence services are often quite careful about getting involved in for obvious reasons. A journalist needs to be free of covert ties in order to do his job and that is something that is understood by both sides.

I wondered if you are walking around with a stack of secrets in your head?

No, not now. What one must remember is that intelligence goes out of date. Intelligence has a currency for the moment, but then it passes. So, operations that I might have known about are now past and I don't know anything about what is going on now. So, no, I am not conscious of walking about with my head full of secrets at all. I am aware of techniques and such like that I would not talk about, but not of secrets.

What is the security position for you these days? Even though you are famous, do you give a cover story if you meet someone casually when they don't know who you are?

You wouldn't expect me to tell you if I did, would you! If I tell you that I still have certain security measures that is probably as much I'll tell you about that. The more you talk about what your security measures are the less effective they are. They will be a feature as long as my former colleagues judge that there is any sort of a risk.

What did you think of the media frenzy over your autobiography?

That whole furore was, in my opinion — and it is quite an informed opinion — stirred up by people in the Ministry of Defence who somehow saw my publishing an autobiography as equating to their attempts to stop SAS soldiers writing about operations and methods. It was they who put the manuscript of my autobiography, which I had submitted for clearance, in a brown envelope and sent it to *The Sun*. But the furore was based on a complete misconception that I was going to start revealing the nation's secrets. Having protected them for 27 years why was I going to do that? It was leapt on by the press as a great story and I understand that.

Do you think MI5 are doing a good job given the current terrorism situation?

Yeah, I think they are. The thing about working in MI5 is that their successes are never seen and their failures obviously are. And there will always be failures, but I am quite sure they are doing an excellent job in looking after us.

Do you hanker to be involved in that world again?

Not now, no. I have been there and done that. I wouldn't want to go back to either the pressure or to the restrictions on one's life.

I like to think that I am now regarded as something other than the former head of MI5. I mean, it is 10 years ago that I left and I have done lots of other things since then. My constant hope is that I am filling in, so that there is something else that I represent rather than just what I was.

A longer version of this interview can be read at www.robmcgibbon.com

fast to catch up and to work out what was happening and how you dealt with it, and capitalised on it.

It could have been handled better. I think it was a typical Whitehall thing. The decision was taken that my name was going to be announced before I knew anything about it. There wasn't any press plan, which was pretty astonishing, and tracking back it is difficult to know why that happened. The media suddenly had this announcement about this woman in a job that was — at least the tabloids thought — an archetypal male job. And they had no photograph. I knew that was a classic disaster situation, so obviously, they immediately tried to find out who I was. It was at a time when the IRA was very active on the streets of London, so that immediately posed a threat to us, which is why when one newspaper published a photo of our house we had to move very quickly and, ultimately, live covertly — which was a strange result of being more open.

What were the worst bits for you and which headlines would you erase from the cuttings?

One I didn't like was "Housewife Superspy". "Mother Of Two Gets Tough With Terrorists" was another. "MI5 Boss In Secret Love Split" — there is a whole collection of headlines. I think "Housewife Superspy" is the one I would wipe away. It was the whole instinct of the tabloid press, when they suddenly found a woman in a man's job, to get her back where they thought she belonged: in the kitchen. It seemed to typify a tabloid approach to a woman succeeding at work.

Also, just as I became director general, the Security Service took over intelligence gathering against the IRA and there was a whole series of articles about how I was a hard-faced negotiator who

had wrenched this responsibility out by immensely clever negotiation and ruthless what-not. They portrayed me as this Mack the Knife kind of person, or like Rosa Klebb [villain in James Bond's *From Russia With Love*] with knives in her boots. And there were various extremely fierce photographs of this terribly hard-faced woman. All that stuff was absolute rubbish and was so irritating and annoying.

But you must have been ruthless to head MI5. Surely, you are a tough cookie?

Well, it depends what you mean by a tough cookie. I don't think I am ruthless. [Pauses]. Well, I suppose, ultimately I am ruthless in a way because, if you are going to achieve anything, you have got to be ruthless on occasion. But I have always taken a view that it is easier to achieve your objective by charm, than overt ruthlessness, so I wouldn't characterise myself as being a tough cookie.

As part of the open media strategy, you invited various national newspaper editors to lunch. What was that like and who did you meet?

It was our first formal contact with journalists and I think they were as wary of us as we were of them. I can't remember who we invited quite frankly, but probably all the editors of the broadsheets and the main tabloids. As far as I can remember, *The Sun* was the only newspaper that turned down our invitation — Kelvin MacKenzie was the editor. We got the answer back, "He doesn't go out to lunch" and we sort of laughed and said to ourselves, He is afraid we are going to brainwash him or tell him more than he wants to know.

We were not disappointed by that. We were quite satisfied that we were getting through to the newspapers with whom we felt we could have a sensible conversation with. Our objective was not to seduce these guys, but to put more information into the public domain. We never thought we were going to get a good press, but what we wanted was a greater understanding of what the issues were, so that we could be judged in a more sensible context. I think it worked, but you are never going to be able to control the press, and that is not the objective at all.

Have you ever tried to recruit a journalist?

No. You mean as an agent? No. No, no, no. That would not be something I would immediately think was a sensible thing to do. The answer to that question is no — as you've asked it.

Well, can I ask it in a different way? Do you know of any journalist who was recruited, even if you didn't actually do it yourself?

No, I am not, no. And I have never recruited a journalist as a covert source. Sorry about that!

Stella Rimington's

FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

"Infinite Funds For The NHS". The NHS was a wonderful idea when it was founded, but deploying funds has become a continuously complex problem.

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

I would far rather not see a headline about myself — but maybe that is unwise because I am trying to sell a book! How about: "Superb Novel From Stella Rimington Is Worldwide No.1 Best-seller".

Who would you most like to interview? What question would you ask?

Kim Philby — but only if he was prepared

to talk quite frankly. I would ask him exactly why and how he got into being a spy. I would want to know the unadulterated story.

What question would you never answer?

I can't tell you the question because it would immediately tell you the answer! Ha ha ha! Basically, I would never answer questions about sources and agents — the kind of questions you have been trying to get me to answer.

What headline would you like on your obituary?

I think I would like it to say something like, "She Was More Than A Housewife Superspy!"