



The All Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition

**All-Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition
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Give Parliament's security watchdog teeth: reform of the ISC

In a major report on the parliamentary oversight of Britain's intelligence services, Andrew Tyrie, co-Chair and founder of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition has set out an agenda for reform and strengthening of the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC).

'Watching the Watchers: The Intelligence and Security Committee: From Form to Substance', published by the UCL Constitution Unit, sets out the unacceptable restrictions that successive governments have put on the ISC and the impact of this on the ISC's work – including how it has thwarted all efforts to get to the truth about Britain's facilitation of extraordinary rendition. The report makes detailed proposals to remedy this. It explains how this can and should be achieved by amending the Justice and Security Act 2013.

Andrew Tyrie said: 'The ISC has the form of parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services but not the substance. It lacks the teeth to do its job. Every bit as bad, for many years ISC Chairs have been warning that successive governments have undermined the oversight that Parliament intended. We now need a comprehensive programme of reform.'

Andrew Tyrie summarises his report in an article in the Constitution Unit blog:

<https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/2026/06/10/watching-the-watchers-the-intelligence-and-security-committee-from-form-to-substance/>

Notes to editors:

Established in 1994 to give parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services, the ISC saw its powers strengthened in the 2013 Justice and Security Act.

But the ISC remains trapped by its status. As a 'statutory committee of Parliament', it is limited in ways select committees and others are not. That is in spite of it operating in private, behind the wall of secrecy. This means that:

- It can be refused the witnesses it wants to call
- Government can delay its being set up after elections and can sit on its reports
- Its budget was cut heavily in 2019-20 and held for several years below the level it needs to do its job (though that is now improving)
- Government has refused to expand its remit even as bodies within different government departments have taken on intelligence and security functions, eroding scrutiny
- The ISC remains restricted to oversight of past operations and there is no clear whistleblowing channel to reach the committee

The effect of these constraints in hobbling the ISC can be seen in its inability to investigate Britain's facilitation of extraordinary rendition: the US-led programme of kidnap and torture of terrorist suspects. In its 2018 report, the ISC revealed a much greater scale of British complicity in rendition than previously realised. But it had to shut down its inquiry because it was denied access to key witnesses.

Other examples include the suppression for more than fifteen months of the ISC's report on Russia, cuts to its budget and efforts to erode its independence.

'Watching the Watchers' sets out a comprehensive programme of reform: strengthening the ISC's investigatory powers; enhancing and clarifying whistleblowing channels; clarifying its remit and pushing back against delays to its composition and to the publication of its reports. Far and away the best way to achieve this is by changing the law. Failing that, there is the useful but more limited option of changes to the Memorandum of Understanding between the ISC and the Prime Minister.

The ISC was recently called upon to adjudicate as to which papers related to Peter Mandelson's appointment as Ambassador to the US should be withheld on grounds of national security or international relations. The report argues that, if the committee is important and reliable enough to be the decision-maker on the Mandelson files, it should be empowered to do the much bigger job it was created for.