Transcript of today's speech by Sir John Sawer - Chief of MI6 - to the Society of Editors, London

The Times published a reader's letter earlier this year. It read: "Sir – is it not bizarre that MI5 and MI6, otherwise known as the secret services, currently stand accused of being – er – secretive?"

I may be biased. But I think that reader was on to something rather important and most government work these days is done by conventional and transparent processes. But not all.

Britain's foreign intelligence effort was first organised in 1909, when the Secret Intelligence Service was formed.

We have just published an official history of our first 40 years. I'm sure you will all have read all 800 pages of it.

The first chief, Mansfield Cumming, used to pay the salaries of SIS officials out of his private income, dispensed in cash from a desk drawer. I'm glad to say that, even after the chancellor's statement last week, I'm not in the same position.

SIS's existence was admitted only in 1994. We British move slowly on such things.

And this, I believe, is the first public speech given by a serving chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service.

"Why now?" might you ask. Well, intelligence features prominently in the National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review, published last week.

We often appear in the news. Our popular name – MI6 – is an irresistible draw. We have a website, and we've got versions in Arabic and Russian. We recruit our staff openly, with adverts in the national press.

But debate on SIS's role is not well informed, in part because we have been so determined to protect our secrets.

In today's open society, no government institution is given the benefit of the doubt all the time. There are new expectations of public – and legal – accountability that have developed. In short, in 2010 the context for the UK's secret intelligence work is very different from 1994.I am not going to use today to tantalise you with hints of sensitive operations or intelligence successes.

Instead, I want to answer two important questions: what value do we get from a secret overseas intelligence effort in the modern era? How can the public have confidence that work done in secret is lawful, ethical, and in their interests?

First, how do we all fit in? The Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, operates abroad, dealing with threats overseas and gathering intelligence mainly from human sources. The security service, MI5, works here in the UK, protecting the homeland from terrorist attack and other threats.

GCHQ produces intelligence from communications, and takes the lead in the cyber world.

These three specialised services form the UK intelligence community, and we operate in what the foreign secretary has called a networked world. Technology plays an ever growing part in our work, for SIS as well as GCHQ, and the boundary line between home and abroad is increasingly blurred.

So the three agencies work increasingly closely together, and the next five years will see us intensifying our collaboration to improve our operational impact and to save money. Yes, even the intelligence services have to make savings.

Secret intelligence is important information that others wish you not to know; it's information that deepens our understanding of a foreign country or grouping, or reveals their true intentions. It's information that gives us new opportunities for action.

We at SIS obtain our intelligence from secret agents. These are people are nearly all foreign nationals, who have access to secret information and who choose to work with us.

Our agents are the true heroes of our work. They have their own motivations and hopes. Many of them show extraordinary courage and idealism, striving in their own countries for the freedoms that we in Britain take for granted.

Our agents are working today in some of the most dangerous and exposed places, bravely and to hugely valuable effect, and we owe a debt to countless more whose service is over.

Agents take serious risks and make sacrifices to help our country. In return, we give them a solemn pledge: that we shall keep their role secret.

The information we get from agents is put into an intelligence report. The source is described in general terms. It is just that – a report. It tells us something new or corroborates what we suspect.

A report's value can be overplayed if it tells us what we want to hear, or it can be underplayed if it contains unwelcome news or runs against received wisdom.

It is a part of the picture, and may not be even wholly accurate, even if the trusted agent who gave it to us is sure that it is.

So sources of intelligence have to be rigorously evaluated, and their reports have to be honestly

weighed alongside all other information. Those who produce it, and those who want to use it, have to put intelligence in a wider context. The Joint Intelligence Committee plays a crucial role.

The Butler Review following Iraq was a clear reminder, to both the agencies and the centre of government, politicians and officials alike, of how intelligence needs to be handled. The SIS board recently reviewed our implementation of Lord Butler's recommendations, to make sure we've implemented them fully, in spirit as well as in substance.

I am confident that they have been. And we will look at the wider issues again once the Chilcott Inquiry reports.

So why do we need secret intelligence? Well, let's start with the terrorist problem.

Most people go about their daily work not worrying about the risk of a terrorist attack. That a bomb may have been planted on their route, or hostages might be seized. I'm glad they don't worry about those sorts of things: part of our job is to make people feel safe.

But those threats exist, as we're recalling now with the 7/7 inquest. That said, on any given day the chances that a terrorist attack will happen on our streets, even in central London, feel small enough to be safely ignored by the public.

You, and millions of people like you, go about your business in our cities and towns free of fear because the British government works tirelessly, out of the public eye, to stop terrorists and would-be terrorists in their tracks.

The most draining aspect of my job is reading, every day, intelligence reports describing the plotting of terrorists who are bent on maiming and murdering people in this country.

It's an enormous tribute to the men and women of our intelligence and security agencies, and to our cooperation with partner services around the world, that so few of these appalling plots develop into real terrorist attacks.

Some of these terrorists are British citizens, trained in how to use weapons, how to make bombs. Others are foreign nationals who want to attack us to undermine our support for forces of moderation around the world.

Many of the reports I read describe the workings of the al-Qaida network, rooted in a nihilistic version of Islam.

Al-Qaida have ambitious goals. Weakening the power of the west. Toppling moderate Islamic regimes. Seizing the holy places of Islam to give them moral authority. Taking control of the Arab world's oil reserves. They're unlikely to achieve these goals, but they remain set on trying, and are ready to use extreme violence.

Jonathan Evans, the head of MI5, recently described how the threat is intensifying. Precisely because we are having some success in closing down the space for terrorist recruitment and

planning in the UK, the extremists are increasingly preparing their attacks against British targets from abroad.

It's not just the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa pose real threats to the UK.

From his remote base in Yemen, Al-Qaida leader and US national Anwar al-Awlaki broadcasts propaganda and terrorist instruction in fluent English over the internet.

Our intelligence effort needs to go where the threat is. One of the advantages of the way we in SIS work is that we are highly adaptable and flexible. We don't get pinned in one place.

There is no one reason for the terrorist phenomenon. Some blame political issues like Palestine or Kashmir or Iraq. Others cite economic disadvantage. Distortions of the Islamic faith. Male supremacy. The lack of the normal checks and balances in some countries. There are many theories.

I've worked a lot in the Islamic world. I agree with those who say we need to be steady and stand by our friends.

Over time, moving to a more open system of government in these countries, one more responsive to people's grievances, will help. But if we demand an abrupt move to the pluralism that we in the west enjoy, we may undermine the controls that are now in place and terrorists would end up with new opportunities.

Whatever the cause or causes of so-called Islamic terrorism, there is little prospect of it fading away soon.

SIS deals with the realities, the threats as they are. We work to minimise the risks. Our closest partners include many in the Muslim world who are concerned at the threat Al-Qaida and their like poses to Islam itself.

In the UK, the security service, MI5, leads our counter-terrorism effort. They do a superb job and SIS's work starts with the priorities that the security service sets.

It's not enough to intercept terrorists here, at the very last minute. They need to be identified and stopped well before then, which means action far beyond our own borders.

This is where SIS comes in. Over one-third of SIS resources are directed against international terrorism. It's the largest single area of SIS's work.

We get inside terrorist organisations to see where the next threats are coming from. We work to disrupt terrorist plots aimed against the UK, and against our friends and allies. What we do is not seen. Few know about the terrorist attacks we help stop.

It scarcely needs saying, but I'll say it anyway: working to tackle terrorism overseas is complex

and often dangerous. Our agents, and sometimes our staff, risk their lives.

Much intelligence is partial, fragmentary. We have to build up a picture. It's like a jigsaw, but with key sections missing, and pieces from other jigsaws mixed in.

SIS officers round the world make judgements at short notice with potentially life or death consequences.

Say an agent warns us of a planned attack. We may need to meet that agent fast and securely, to understand his intelligence more fully. To work with GCHQ who look for other signs. To work with MI5 and the police to act on that intelligence here in the UK.

Ministers and lawyers need to be briefed and consulted on next steps. We need partner agencies abroad to pool information, to monitor individuals or to detain them where there are clear, specific concerns.

Disrupting the terrorists is a painstaking process with much careful preparation, and then sudden rapid activity. Details have to be got right. It all has to be tackled fast and securely. There is little margin for error.

All this goes on 24 hours a day, every day of the year. And it keeps us far safer than we would be without it.

Proliferation terrorism is difficult enough and, despite our collective efforts, an attack may well get through. The human cost would be huge. But our country, our democratic system, will not be brought down by a typical terrorist attack.

The dangers of proliferation of nuclear weapons – and chemical and biological weapons – are more far-reaching. It can alter the whole balance of power in a region.

States seeking to build nuclear weapons against their international legal obligations are obsessively secretive about it. SIS's role is to find out what these states are doing and planning, and identify ways to slow down their access to vital materials and technology.

The revelations around Iran's secret enrichment site at Qom were an intelligence success. They led to diplomatic pressure on Iran intensifying, with tougher UN and EU sanctions which are beginning to bite. The Iranian regime must think hard about where its best interests lie.

The risks of failure in this area are grim. Stopping nuclear proliferation cannot be addressed purely by conventional diplomacy. We need intelligence-led operations to make it more difficult for countries like Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

The longer international efforts delay Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons technology, the more time we create for a political solution to be found.

Long-range strategic intelligence: the National Security Strategy which the prime minister

published last week sets out the strategic direction for foreign, defence and security policy for the years ahead. Intelligence is at the heart of that strategy.

SIS has the responsibility to gather long-range strategic intelligence, to track military and economic power in other countries, and find out what they going to do with it. We try to see inside the minds of potential policy adversaries and predict their behaviour.

We have expertise on states that operate opaquely and without public accountability. We provide early warning of new weapons systems, or of major changes in policy.

Machiavelli said that "surprise is the essential factor in victory". A lot of SIS work is about making sure that the British government does not face unwelcome surprises. And that some of our adversaries do.

Cyber: My colleague Iain Lobban at GCHQ recently described the cyber threats we face in the modern world.

Attacks on government information and commercial secrets of our companies are happening all the time. Electricity grids, our banking system, anything controlled by computers, could possibly be vulnerable. For some, cyber is becoming an instrument of policy as much as diplomacy or military force.

As Iain is the first to recognise, there isn't a purely technological solution. We need to invest in technology to defend ourselves, and the government has allocated funds for that purpose in the Spending Round.

Even high technology threats have that crucial human dimension, and SIS will be gathering intelligence on individuals and states launching cyber attacks against us, to find out how they organise themselves and to develop ways to counter them.

We have already set to work. It's a big task of the future.

Supporting the military, and building security where the military are involved in a conflict, you will find SIS and GCHQ alongside them.

In Afghanistan, our people provide tactical intelligence that guides military operations and saves our soldiers' lives. Our strategic intelligence helps map the political way forward.

We are building up the Afghan security service, already probably the most capable of the Afghan security institutions, to help the Afghans take responsibility for their own security.

Capacity building is not limited to Afghanistan. We offer training and support to partner services around the world. It wins their cooperation, it improves the quality of their work, and it builds respect for human rights.

Our government expects SIS to maintain a global reach, collecting intelligence in all areas of

major British interest to reduce the risk of unpleasant surprises.

And we have our network of partners which provides us a discreet channel of communication to other governments on the most sensitive issues.

So we are a very special part of government. SIS exists to give the UK advantage. We are a sovereign national asset. We are the secret frontline of our national security.

How can the public have confidence that work done by us in secret is lawful, ethical and in their interests?

Let me explain how it all works in practice.

SIS does not choose what it does. The 1994 Intelligence Services Act sets the legal framework for what we do. Ministers tell us what they want to know, what they want us to achieve. We take our direction from the National Security Council.

As chief of SIS, I am responsible for SIS operations. I answer directly to the foreign secretary.

When our operations require legal authorisation or entail political risk, I seek the foreign secretary's approval in advance. If a case is particularly complex, he can consult the attorney general. In the end, the foreign secretary decides what we do.

Submissions for operations go to the foreign secretary all the time. He approves most, but not all, and those operations he does not approve do not happen. It's as simple as that.

There is oversight and scrutiny by parliamentarians and by judges.

The Intelligence and Security committee is chaired by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, and includes other senior politicians, many of them former ministers. They hold us to account and can investigate areas of our activity.

And two former judges have full access to our files, as intelligence commissioner and interception commissioner. They make sure our procedures are proper and lawful.

These processes of control and accountability are as robust as you will find anywhere. SIS fully supports them. We want to enjoy public confidence.

We don't operate on our own. Intelligence is a team game. If we need to track a British terrorist in another country, or stop a shipment of components for a secret nuclear programme, we need to work with services abroad.

We work with over 200 partner services around the world, with hugely constructive results. And our intelligence partnership with the United States is an especially powerful contributor to UK security.

No intelligence service risks compromising its sources. So we have a rule called the control principle – the service who first obtains the intelligence has the right to control how it is used, who else it can be shared with, and what action can be taken on it.

It's rule number one of intelligence sharing. We insist on it with our partners, and they insist on it with us. Because whenever intelligence is revealed, others try to hunt down the source. Agents can get identified, arrested, tortured and killed by the very organisations who are working against us.

So if the control principle is not respected, the intelligence dries up. That's why we have been so concerned about the possible release of intelligence material in recent court cases.

We can't do our job if we work only with friendly democracies. Dangerous threats usually come from dangerous people in dangerous places. We have to deal with the world as it is.

Suppose we receive credible intelligence that might save lives, here or abroad. We have a professional and moral duty to act on it. We will normally want to share it with those who can save those lives.

We also have a duty to do what we can to ensure that a partner service will respect human rights. That is not always straightforward.

Yet if we hold back, and don't pass that intelligence, out of concern that a suspect terrorist may be badly treated, innocent lives may be lost that we could have saved.

These are not abstract questions for philosophy courses or searching editorials. They are real, constant, operational dilemmas.

Sometimes there is no clear way forward. The more finely-balanced judgments have to be made by Ministers themselves. I welcome the publication of the consolidated guidance on detainee issues. It reflects the detailed guidance issued to SIS staff in the field and the training we give them.

Torture is illegal and abhorrent under any circumstances, and we have nothing whatsoever to do with it. If we know or believe action by us will lead to torture taking place, we're required by UK and international law to avoid that action. And we do, even though that allows the terrorist activity to go ahead.

Some may question this, but we are clear that it's the right thing to do. It makes us strive all the harder to find different ways, consistent with human rights, to get the outcome we want.

Other countries respect our approach on these issues. Even where we find deep differences of culture and tradition, we can make progress, slowly but surely, by seeking careful assurances and providing skilled training.

I also welcome the prime minister's initiative in setting up the Gibson Inquiry into the detainee

issue. If there are more lessons to be learned, we want to learn them.

And, after 9/11, the terrorist threat was immediate and paramount. We are accused by some people not of committing torture ourselves but of being too close to it in our efforts to keep Britain safe.

Let me say this: SIS is a Service that reflects our country. Integrity is the first of the service's values.

I am confident that, in their efforts to keep Britain safe, all SIS staff acted with the utmost integrity, and with a close eye on basic decency and moral principles.

So, back to that reader's letter in The Times.

The recent debate about secrecy reflects two concerns. First, national security, and the need for the intelligence and security agencies to work in secret to protect British interests and our way of life from those who threaten it.

And second, the need for justice – the rights of citizens to raise complaint against the government and get a fair hearing.

As a public servant, and as a citizen, I devoutly want both objectives upheld, and not to have one undermine the other.

The judges have to determine what constitutes a fair trial.

We in the intelligence and security agencies have to make sure that our secrets don't become available to those who are threatening our country. And we have to protect our partners secrets.

As the prime minister said in parliament, at present we're unable to use secret material in court with confidence that the material will be protected.

The government has promised a green paper to set out some better options for dealing with national security issues in the courts, and I look forward to that.

Part of sustaining public confidence in the intelligence services is debate about the principles and value of intelligence work.

And the purpose of today is to explain what we in SIS do and why we do it. Why our work is important, and why we can't work in the open. A lot is at stake.

Secret organisations need to stay secret, even if we present an occasional public face, as I am doing today. If our operations and methods become public, they won't work.

Agents take risks. They will not work with SIS, will not pass us the secrets they hold, unless they can trust us not to expose them.

Foreign partners need to have certainty that what they tell us will remain secret – not just most of the time, but always.

Without the trust of agents, the anonymity of our staff, the confidence of partners, we would not get the intelligence. The lives of everyone living here would be less safe. The United Kingdom would be more vulnerable to the unexpected, the vicious and the extreme.

Secrecy is not a dirty word. Secrecy is not there as a cover up. Secrecy plays a crucial part in keeping Britain safe and secure.

And without secrecy, there would be no intelligence services, or indeed other national assets like our Special Forces. Our nation would be more exposed as a result.

Without secrecy, we can't tackle threats at source. We would be forced to defend ourselves on the goal-line, on our borders. And it's more than obvious that the dangers of terrorism, nuclear proliferation and cyber attack are not much impressed by international borders.

Ladies and gentlemen, the remarkable men and women who make up the staff of SIS are among the most loyal, dedicated and innovative in the entire public service.

We ask more of them than we do of any other public servants not in uniform. Exceptional people, doing extraordinary things for their country.

Our people can't and don't talk about what they do. They receive recognition for their achievements only within the confines of the service.

You don't know them, but I do. It is an honour to lead them.