



Liam O Hare on the deep connections between Cambridge Analytica's parent company Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL Group) and the Conservative Party and military establishment, 'Board members include an array of Lords, Tory donors, ex-British army officers and defense contractors. This is scandal that cuts to the heart of the British establishment.'

The scandal around mass data harvesting by Cambridge Analytica took a new twist on Monday.

A Channel 4 news undercover investigation revealed that the company's Eton-educated CEO Alexander Nix offered to use dirty tricks – including the use of bribery and sex workers – to entrap politicians and subvert elections.

Much of the media spotlight is now on Cambridge Analytica and their shadowy antics in elections worldwide, including that of Donald Trump.

However, Cambridge Analytica is a mere offshoot of Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL Group) – an organisation with its roots deeply embedded within the British political, military and royal establishment. Indeed, as the Observer article which broke the scandal said "For all intents and purposes, SCL/Cambridge Analytica are one and the same." Like Cambridge Analytica, SCL group is a behavioural research and strategic communication company.

In 2005, SCL went public with a glitzy exhibit at the DSEI conference, the UK's largest showcase for military technology.

It's 'hard sell' was a demonstration of how the UK government could use a sophisticated media campaign of mass deception to fool the British people into the thinking an accident at a chemical plant had occurred and threatened central London. Genuinely.

Board members include an array of Lords, Tory donors, ex-British army officers and defence contractors. This is scandal that cuts to the heart of the British establishment. SCL Group says on its website that it provides “data, analytics and strategy to governments and military organizations worldwide.”

The organisation boasts that it has conducted “behavioral change programs” in over 60 countries and its clients have included the British Ministry of Defence, the US State Department and NATO.

A freedom of information request from August 2016, shows that the MOD has twice bought services from Strategic Communication Laboratories in recent years.

In 2010/11, the MOD paid £40,000 to SCL for the “provision of external training”. Meanwhile, in 2014/2015, it paid SCL £150,000 for the “procurement of target audience analysis”.

In addition, SCL also carries a secret clearance as a ‘list X’ contractor for the MOD. A List X site is a commercial site on British soil that is approved to hold UK government information marked as ‘confidential’ and above. Essentially, SCL got the green light to hold British government secrets on its premises.

Meanwhile, the US State Department has a contract for \$500,000 with SCL. According to an [official](#), this was to provide “research and analytical support in connection with our mission to counter terrorist propaganda and disinformation overseas.” This was not the only work that SCL has been contracted for with the US government, the source added.

In May 2015, SCL Defense, another subsidiary of the umbrella organisation, received \$1 million (CAD) to support NATO operations in Eastern Europe targeting Russia. The company delivered a three-month course in Riga which taught “advanced counter-propaganda techniques designed to help member states assess and counter Russia’s propaganda in Eastern Europe”.

The NATO website said the “revolutionary” training would “help Ukrainians better defend themselves against the Russian threat”.

What is clear is that all of SCL’s activities were inextricably linked to its Cambridge Analytica arm.

As recently as July 2017, the [website](#) for Cambridge Analytica said its methods has been approved by the “UK Ministry of Defence, the US State Department, Sandia and NATO” and carried their logos on its website. Mark Turnbull, who joined Alexander Nix at the secretly filmed meetings, heads up SCL Elections as well as Cambridge Analytica Political Global.

His [profile](#) at the University of Exeter Strategy and Security Institute boasts of his record in achieving “campaign success via measurable behavioural change” in “over 100 campaigns in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean”.

Turnbull previously spent 18 years at Bell Pottinger, heading up the Pentagon funded PR drive in occupied Iraq which included the [production](#) of fake al-Qaeda videos. Turnbull's involvement is just one sign of the sweeping links the company has with powerful Anglo-American political and military interests.

The firm is headed up by Nigel Oakes, another old Etonian, who, according to the website [PowerBase](#) has links to the British royals and was once rumoured to be an Mi5 spy.

In 1992, Oakes described his [work](#) in a trade journal as using the "same techniques as Aristotle and Hitler. ... We appeal to people on an emotional level to get them to agree on a functional level."

The President of SCL is Sir Geoffrey Pattie, a former Conservative MP and the Defence Minister in Margaret Thatcher's government. Pattie also co-founded Terrington Management which lists BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin among its clients.

One of the company's directors' is wine millionaire and former British special forces officer in Borneo and Kenya, Roger Gabb, who in 2006 donated £500,000 to the Conservative party.

Gabb was also [fined](#) by the Electoral Commission for failing to include his name on an advert in a number of local newspapers arguing for a Leave vote in the Brexit referendum.



SCL's links to the Conservative party continues through the company's chairman and venture capitalist Julian Wheatland. He also happens to be chairman of Oxfordshire Conservatives Association.

The organisation has also been funded by Jonathan Marland who is the former Conservative Party Treasurer, a trade envoy under David Cameron, and a close friend of Tory election strategist Lynton Crosby.

Property tycoon and Conservative party donor Vincent Tchenguiz was also the single largest SCL shareholder for a decade.

Meanwhile, another director is Gavin McNicoll, founder of counter-terrorism Eden Intelligence firm who ran a G8 Plus meeting on Financial Intelligence Cooperation at the behest of the British government.

Previous board members include Sir James Allen Mitchell, the former Prime Minister of the previous British colony St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Mitchell has been a privy counselor on the Queen's advisory board since 1985.

The British military and royal establishment links to SCL are further highlighted through another director Rear Admiral John Tolhurst, a former assistant director of naval warfare in the Ministry of Defence and *aide de camp* to the Queen.

The Queen's third cousin, Lord Ivar Mountbatten, was also sitting on SCL's advisory board but it's unclear if he still holds that role.

The above examples barely scrape the surface of just how deep the ties go between the UK defence establishment and Strategic Communication Laboratories.

Indeed, it seems evident that the organisation is a product of murky alliances formed between venture capitalists and former British military and intelligence officers. Unsurprisingly, they also happen to be closely tied to the higher echelons of the Conservative party.

International deception and meddling is the name of the game for SCL. We finally have the most concrete evidence yet of shadowy actors using dirty tricks in order to rig elections. But these characters aren't operating from Moscow intelligence bunkers.

Instead, they are British, Eton educated, headquartered in the city of London and have close ties to Her Majesty's government.

You Can't Handle the Truth

Psy-ops propaganda goes mainstream.

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/dispatches/2005/09/you_cant_handle_the_truth.html

By *Sharon Weinberger*

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A live "ops center" in a country SCL won't identify

LONDON—Over the past 24 hours, seven people have checked into hospitals here with telltale symptoms. Rashes, vomiting, high temperature, and cramps: the classic signs of **smallpox**. Once thought wiped out, the disease is back and threatening a pandemic of epic proportions.

The government faces a dilemma: It needs people to stay home, but if the news breaks, mass panic might ensue as people flee the city, carrying the virus with them.

A shadowy media firm steps in to help orchestrate a sophisticated campaign of mass deception. Rather than alert the public to the smallpox threat, the company sets up a high-tech "ops center" to convince the public that an accident at a chemical plant threatens London. As the fictitious toxic cloud approaches the city, TV news outlets are provided graphic visuals charting the path of the invisible toxins. Londoners stay indoors, glued to the telly, convinced that even a short walk into the streets could be fatal.

This scenario may sound like a rejected plot twist from a mediocre **Bond flick**, but one company is dead set on making this fantasy come to life.

Strategic Communication Laboratories, a small U.K. firm specializing in "influence operations" made a very public debut this week with a glitzy exhibit occupying prime real estate at **Defense Systems & Equipment International**, or DSEi, the United Kingdom's largest showcase for military technology. The main attraction was a full-scale mock-up of its ops center, running simulations ranging from natural disasters to political coups.

Just to the right of the ops center, a dark-suited man with a wireless microphone paces like a carnival barker, narrating the scenarios. Above him a screen flashes among scenes of disaster, while to his right, behind thick glass, workers sit attentively before banks of computer screens, busily scrolling through data. The play actors pause only to look up at a big board that flashes ominously between "hot spots" like North Korea and Congo.

While Londoners fret over fictitious toxins, the government works to contain the smallpox outbreak. The final result, according to SCL's calculations, is that only thousands perish, rather than the 10 million originally projected. Another success.

Of course, the idea of deluding an entire city seems, well, a bit like propaganda.

"If your definition of propaganda is framing communications to do something that's going to save lives, that's fine," says Mark Broughton, SCL's public affairs director. "That's not a word I would use for that."

Then again, it's hard to know exactly what else to call it. (Company literature describes SCL's niche specialties as "psychological warfare," "public diplomacy," and "influence operations.") The smallpox scenario plays out in excruciating detail how reporters would be tapped to receive disinformation, with TV and radio stations dedicated to around-the-clock coverage. Even the eventual disclosure is carefully scripted.

In another doomsday scenario, the company assists a newly democratic country in South Asia as it struggles with corrupt politicians and a rising insurgency that threatens to bubble over into bloody revolution. SCL steps in to assist the benevolent king of "Manpurea" to temporarily seize power.

Oh, wait, that sounds a lot like Nepal, where the monarchy earlier this year ousted a corrupt government to stave off a rising Maoist movement. The problem is, the SCL scenario also sounds a lot like using a private company to help overthrow a democratically elected government. Another problem, at least in Nepal, is that the king now shows few signs of **returning to democracy**.

The company, which describes itself as the first private-sector provider of psychological operations, has been around since 1993. But its previous work was limited to civil operations, and it now wants to expand to military customers.

If SCL weren't so earnest, it might actually seem to be mocking itself, or perhaps George Orwell. As the end of the smallpox scenario, dramatic music fades out to a taped message urging people to "embrace" strategic communications, which it describes as "the most powerful weapon in the world." And the company **Web page** offers some decidedly creepy asides. "The [ops center] can override all national radio and TV broadcasts in time of crisis," it says, alluding to work the company has done in an unspecified Asian country.

The government's use of deception in the service of national security is not new. During World War II, for example, Allied forces conducted a massive misinformation campaign, called **Operation Fortitude**, designed to hide plans for the Normandy invasion. More recent efforts have met with controversy, however. In 2002, the Pentagon shuttered its brand new **Office of Strategic Influence** after public outcry over its purported plans to spread deceptive information to the foreign press.

Government deception may even be justified in some cases, according to Michael Schrage, a senior adviser to the security-studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "If you tell the population that there's been a bio-warfare attack, hospital emergency rooms will be overwhelmed with people who sincerely believe they have all the symptoms and require immediate attention," Schrage says.

The problem, he adds, is that in a democracy, a large-scale ruse would work just once.

The U.S. government has generally sought to limit disinformation; some agencies—such as the CIA—are explicitly prohibited by law from misleading domestic press. And while the CIA is fond of concealment, it takes pride in the belief that truth is necessary for an open government, a sentiment **chiseled into the agency's lobby**.



A successful outcome means thousands, not millions, will die in a catastrophe

What makes SCL's strategy so unusual is that it proposes to propagate its campaign domestically, at least some of the time, and rather than influence just opinion, it wants people to take a particular course of action. Is SCL simply hawking a flashier version of propaganda?

The spokesman's answer: "We save lives."

Yes, Broughton acknowledges, the ops center is not exactly giving the truth, but he adds, "Is it not worth giving an untruth for 48 hours to save x million people's lives? Sometimes the means to an end has to be recognized."

Who buys this stuff? Broughton declined to mention many specific clients, noting that disclosing SCL's involvement—particularly in countries with a free and open media—could make its campaigns less effective. However, he says that post-apartheid South Africa has employed SCL. So has the United Nations, he says.

The company's Web site is even vaguer, mentioning international organizations and foreign governments. A Google search produces only a handful of hits, mostly linked to the company's Web site. The company's work is based on something that even the spokesman admits you "won't find on the Web": the Behavioral Dynamics Institute, a virtual lab led by Professor [Phil Taylor](#) of Leeds University.

But the company, which is funded by private investors, is now taking on a higher profile, and visitors flocked to the flashy setup here at the show. "Basically, we're launching ourselves this week on the defense market and homeland security market at the same time," Broughton explained.

If SCL has its way, its vision of strategic communications—which involves complex psychological and scientific data—could be used to shape public response to tsunamis, epidemics, or even the next Hurricane Katrina.

Well aware that the company may face controversy, particularly with its push into the defense market, Broughton emphasizes the company's role in saving lives.

"It sounds altruistic," he said. "There is some altruism in it, but we also want to earn money."