



# Public Convictions Private Lives

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### Lister Sinclair

I'm Lister Sinclair, and this is *Ideas* with a program about public matters and private lives and how the two intersect and influence one another.

What happens when the demands and duties of public life conflict with private inclinations and desires? Throughout history this conflict has resulted in high drama. In the case of Cleopatra, it brought tragedy; for the Duke of Windsor, bittersweet romance and personal loss; and for Catherine the Great, enduring notoriety. But for lesser mortals the conflict is more likely to fuel doubt and anxiety.

Tonight we're going to look at the life of one Canadian public servant who had to struggle with the very serious conflict between his public convictions and his private life.

John Watkins enjoyed a distinguished career in the Department of External Affairs until ill health forced him to retire. A short time later he became the subject of an investigation by the RCMP—and died during their interrogation of him. In 1955 Watkins was the Canadian ambassador to the Soviet Union when Martin Hunter joined the Department of External Affairs.

### Martin Hunter

When I was growing up during the Second World War my friends and I spent a lot of time playing war games. My chosen role was almost always that of a spy. Perhaps it's not surprising that when I graduated from university I joined the Department of External Affairs. Back then, being a diplomat was as close as a Canadian could get to being a secret agent.

I soon learned that a diplomat's most valued asset was not the ability to keep a secret but rather a talent for expressing ideas. The most respected members of the department were those who could write: Charles Ritchie, Douglas Lapan, Escott Reid, and above all, John Watkins, our ambassador in Moscow. We waited for Watkins's dispatches with the same anticipation shown by nineteenth-century tabloid readers waiting for the next instalment of Dickens's *Little Dorrit* or *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Like Dickens, Watkins was a humorist working in a world of shadows. His accounts were full of improbable

encounters and sharply etched portraits, all lightly brushed with irony, like his description of the first public appearance of party boss Gyorgy Malenkov, who functioned briefly as prime minister after the death of Stalin.

### Reader

Mr. Malenkov wore his new suit to the concert—it may well be the only one he has. None of us have ever seen him before in anything but his dark party tunic, looking both unkempt and glum; and the combination of the light suit, shirt, tie, haircomb, and smile seems to mark the beginning of a new era. It is probably correct to conclude that the Russian revolution has now reached a point of respectability at which the party tunic can be abandoned to the Chinese in favour of an approximation of ordinary Western attire.

### Max Yalden

He had a talented pen, like his colleague Charles Ritchie. He not only had sense and sensibility, but he could put it down on paper.

### Martin Hunter

Maxwell Yalden joined External Affairs about the same time I did. He served in Moscow as a young foreign-service officer, who later became a close friend of John Watkins. Today he is Canada's commissioner for human rights.

### Max Yalden

Much of the dispatches, as we know them, as the ones that are being published, are social history. Some of them are drafted with a fine sense of irony, as he describes Stalin at the meeting of the Supreme Soviet or on the mausoleum at the Seventh of November celebrations. Some of them are simple, almost literary descriptions of a placid square somewhere in Uzbekistan or a chance meeting somewhere in a street in Moscow.

### Reader

I took a taxi to the park and walked up the long avenue to where the festivities were going on. The centre of the park was like a fair, with booths selling ice cream and soft drinks, grapes and melons. Several hundred older Uzbeks were seated under the trees in front of a small platform on which some Uzbek musicians were playing on their weird old instruments to accompany the singers and dancers. I

joined some younger people standing around the edge, who noticed that I was foreign and did their best to explain the subject of the songs. The most popular artist was a plump young lady who sang both love songs and comic numbers in a deep, throaty voice and was made to give many encores.

#### **Martin Hunter**

For many Canadians Russia was a darkly mysterious entity brooding somewhat menacingly on the other side of the North Pole. But Russia had also been our ally in the Second World War. In 1944 we signed a military pact of mutual support against our common enemies, and sent Dana Wilgress to Moscow as our ambassador. We sent no Canadian soldiers to fight on the eastern front, but we did ship plenty of tanks, planes, lumber, and food.

This friendly state of affairs ended in September of 1945, when we discovered a Russian spy operating in the very heart of our nation. Igor Gouzenko, a cipher clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa, defected and revealed the activities of a Russian spy ring in Canada. Though most of his information had to do only with Canada, the Americans made it clear they wanted a chance to interrogate him too. Lester Pearson was wary about giving them access to Gouzenko.

#### **Lester Pearson** [archival tape]

Last week we received a second note, to which we have replied today, from the State Department of the United States, renewing a request that the Canadian government make Mr. Igor Gouzenko available for questioning by a sub-committee of the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate. Naturally the Canadian government has given careful consideration to this second request, as it did with the first one, having regard to the responsibility that has been assumed and the special arrangements that have been carefully built up over the past several years for the safety of Mr. Gouzenko, through the development of a new identity.

#### **Martin Hunter**

The Canadian government protected Gouzenko's identity carefully, if crudely at times, right from the beginning of the affair. The image of a large, dark-suited man wearing a paper bag over his head quickly became synonymous with Soviet treachery.

Peter Roberts was our ambassador in Moscow in the early eighties, but in 1955 he was just another new recruit to External Affairs.

#### **Peter Roberts**

After the Gouzenko affair we pulled our ambassador out—it was Dana Wilgress—and we reduced the level of representation as a way of telling the Russians we didn't like having spies in Canada. We sent in John Holmes, a very junior officer, as chargé d'affaires. John Holmes produced that wonderful line in his memoirs. He writes: "I was sent to Moscow as an insult—not to deliver an insult, but to *be* an insult," because he was so junior; we were saying to the Russians, we consider our relations with you to be nothing.

Holmes was there for a short time; then Watkins was there for a short time, as chargé d'affaires. That's when he learned Russian. Then Robert Ford, who was subsequently to be our long-time ambassador, was there for a short time as chargé d'affaires.

Then Stalin died in '53. The new team came in—Khrushchev, Bulganin, and the others—and the government, which in those days didn't pay much attention to the Soviet Union or to Russia, said, well, Stalin's dead; there's a new team there; they look a little better. Let's send in an ambassador. Pearson himself said, the right man for the job is John Watkins.

#### **Martin Hunter**

In many ways John Watkins was the obvious choice. He spoke Russian well and had a curiosity about Russia not shared by many of his colleagues at External. Throughout his career he maintained an abiding interest in all things northern.

#### **Peter Roberts**

He was a world authority on Scandinavian languages and literatures, and on the north, and on the literature of the north, and on the traditions of the north; translator of the Icelandic sagas—a major figure in that field—so that the northern connection was something that naturally attracted him.

He was a bachelor; he couldn't cook, so he came often to dinner. He was very grand and senior and we were the newest people but we had the Russian interest in

common; we had music in common; and we had books in common. Everyone liked to invite him in Ottawa. He was a humane, intelligent, sensitive, highly educated, artistic person; he played the piano well and sang, and he accompanied himself—he had a lovely tenor voice. He just liked people and liked being liked.

#### **Martin Hunter**

John Watkins was a genial, entertaining figure, but he was also a shrewd observer and a subtle and penetrating analyst of the Russian state. This made him a trusted and influential adviser to his minister in Ottawa, Lester B. Pearson.

#### **Max Yalden**

I think that John did certainly have Pearson's ear. They were similar people: they were about the same age; they had similar kinds of education in southern Ontario, and went to the U. of T., if I recall correctly. In many respects they must have had, the two men, a kind of empathy that would have led Pearson to have confidence in Watkins's judgement and his dispatches. He was a man conveying to you a real look of that peculiar country we knew then as the Soviet Union.

I think you had the feeling that this gentleman really understood the country he was situated in and therefore that when the time came for it and you were sitting down with him, perhaps preparatory to seeing Bulganin or Khrushchev or whoever, you could get advice from this man that would be genuinely valuable and not about on the par of what you'd get out of the *International Herald Tribune*.

#### **Martin Hunter**

Pearson trusted Watkins's analysis not only because he knew what he was writing about, but because the two men shared a common set of values. Most of the men of the upper echelons of External at this time shared a sense of moral purpose in the conduct of world affairs. They were humanitarians who believed in tolerance, equality of opportunity, and social justice. For some these convictions were rooted in their experience of the Great Depression; for others they sprang from a rigorous religious upbringing. Like many intellectuals of their time they had come to see an affinity between the teachings of Marx and the teachings of Christ.

#### **Peter Roberts**

Watkins was politically on the left; he was a socialist of some kind or other. He was in some ways sympathetic to the politics of the Soviet Union, even of that time, and especially sympathetic after the death of Stalin. The Khrushchev era was fairly awful in its own way, but Khrushchev did let political prisoners in their hundreds of thousands out of the Gulag and let them go back to normal life, insofar as life was normal there at that time. Watkins saw all this happening and thought, this country isn't a basketcase and it's worth pursuing our relationship with it and worth doing something.

So his inclinations were in that direction. He was by instinct and habit a socialist, and he found himself also sympathetic to this country of 200 million people, at that time beginning to move out of the dark and into the light. It was something that moved him and impressed him.

#### **Reader**

The Soviet people in all parts of the country want peace. They suffered horribly in the last war, and in the devastated regions are still suffering from its effects. Their losses were enormous, and almost everybody one meets has lost one or more close relatives. In a defensive war they would undoubtedly fight and fight well, but unlike the Germans, they are not a bellicose people. As Toynbee points out, they have been more aggressed against than aggressing in their history.

If their rulers wanted war, of course all the vast propaganda machine would be brought into operation to convince them that their country was not the aggressor and that their cause was just. But they are not stupid or uncritical, and the government would have to choose its ground very carefully.

#### **Max Yalden**

There was a great deal of sympathy for the Soviet people, and there was even a certain desire to build bridges and to have a sense of understanding for their problems that one might not normally have had. If one could imagine what happened to that country in the years between 1940 and 1945—with the loss of 20, perhaps 30 million people; with cities under siege for two and three years at a time; with battles like that of Stalingrad, which must be as close to hellfire as a human being can imagine; and so on, over a sustained period of four or five years—it wasn't hard to



have deep sympathy for these people and to say, well, all right, they are clearly paranoid about us in the West because we're not—we Canadians, even we North Americans, even our more belligerent great neighbour to the south—we're not going to go to war against these people.

I think that John was the kind of person who would have wished to try to build, and did try to build, and perhaps had some small success in building, bridges between those—to steal a metaphor from our own country—those two solitudes.

#### **Martin Hunter**

Watkins's sympathy with the ideas that inspired communism shaped his understanding of Soviet society. His easy affability helped break down barriers between him and the country's citizens. He went shopping, visited libraries and universities, attended the theatre and the opera. Everywhere he went he gathered comments and opinions, observed attitudes and conditions, as he talked with chauffeurs and professors, journalists and students, and artists.

#### **Reader**

Mr. Markov, the Intourist guide, asked me if I would like to have a local guide to take me around the city. He was a little surprised when the guide turned out to be a well-known Uzbek folk poet, Nazir Akamich Akhundi. The poet had not been too pleased, he confided later, when he'd been asked to leave his work to show some foreign diplomat around the city. But when he found out I was interested in literature it had become a pleasure.

He was well-built and dark-complexioned with even features, dark wavy hair, fine eyes, and a pleasant smile—except for half a dozen gold teeth, which may well have been an additional attraction to the Uzbek ladies.

I had noticed that the famous Uzbek singer Tamara Khanum was giving a concert that evening and I said I would like to go. Akhundi said she was an old friend and he would accompany me. I had the feeling that Mr. Markov thought that Akhundi and I were getting on too well together. We planned to have something to eat that evening but could not shake off the Intourist guide, so we sat and talked in my room a while.

#### **Martin Hunter**

Watkins's travels in the Soviet Union were mostly informal. Being a bachelor, he was unencumbered by a wife and family, and he chose not to surround himself with a protective entourage, so it was easy for him to meet and talk with people wherever he went. His dispatches are full of these casual encounters. But though Watkins was gregarious, he was not naive. He must have known that any prolonged relationship would not go unnoticed by the KGB.

#### **Max Yalden**

We were in the middle of the Cold War. One could meet people on the street; one could meet people in the Soviet equivalent of a pub, in a casual meeting; but if one consistently met people, they either were allowed to meet you or they were turned on, and I think Watkins knew that. So there were limits to the extent to which any foreigner could get behind the veil of Soviet propaganda. Probably John, because he liked to travel by himself, didn't put on airs but was happy enough to go about with a guide or maybe even without a guide if they would let him, because John also had the very great advantage of being something of a polyglot. As a result I think he had an insight into what was going on in the Soviet Union during his time there that may not have been any more profound in respect of the intricacies of the politburo and the ins and outs of Soviet politics at the top, but which gave him a sense of the "Russian soul," as the Russians used to like to say, the "*Russki dusha*," that perhaps was not shared by others.

#### **Martin Hunter**

Watkins's sympathy for Russia and his persona of the detached and amused observer made him especially good at defining the Russian character and catching the nuances of Soviet social life. But these same qualities put him out of sync with the times.

The suspicion and hostility of the Cold War were at their height, and Watkins's turn in Moscow coincided with the heyday of Senator McCarthy's Un-American Activities Committee and its ferocious persecution of suspected communist sympathizers.

One of Watkins's colleagues became a target. Herbert Norman had been a member of the Communist party when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge in the

thirties. He went on to become a world-renowned expert on Japan. After World War Two he served in Tokyo, where he was a trusted adviser to General McArthur, who was busy restructuring the Japanese government.

But even the good opinion of this respected American war hero did not protect Norman from Senator McCarthy's committee. He was denounced as a card-carrying communist, brought back to Canada, and interrogated by the RCMP.

The fact that American suspicions could disrupt the career of a senior and trusted Canadian public servant like Herbert Norman was very disturbing to Canadian diplomats—especially men like Watkins, who saw the Cold War not as a confrontation between black and white, good against evil, communism versus democracy, but rather as a complex mosaic worked out in shades of grey.

#### Reader

The Russian people are satisfied with so little in the way of material goods that it is hard for us to imagine it. On the political side their demands are still more modest. They've never known political freedom as we understand it, and except for a few intellectuals they have no idea what it means. Their elections and their Supreme Soviet, which seemed to us merely an elaborate farce, they take very seriously. Somehow or other the government has managed to persuade the average citizen that his vote is extremely important. From talking to ordinary people in different parts of the country I feel sure that it is this conviction, more than pressure from party officials, which accounts for the large vote, even in the far northern regions, where it is not easy to get to the polling station.

#### Martin Hunter

Watkins's ironic perspective tempered his understanding of the Machiavellian character of Soviet politics. He refused to accept the notion that East and West were irreconcilable enemies and worked to bring about a better understanding between Russia and Canada. His master stroke was to engineer a visit by Lester Pearson to the Soviet Union in 1955.

#### Peter Roberts

Khrushchev by this time had established his power. He didn't look all that good but he looked a whole lot better than his predecessor, Stalin. Pearson, for all his charm,

was an ambitious man. No foreign minister of a NATO country had been to the Soviet Union ever, since the foundation of NATO, and I think it interested Pearson to be the first one to do it. Watkins would have worked on that. Any ambassador tries to get his foreign minister to come to visit: it enhances relations; it enhances the ambassador's reputation; it does all sorts of good things.

#### Reader

Mr. Khrushchev said we would ignore protocol and just sit anywhere, but placed Mr. Pearson on his left. Mr. Khrushchev immediately took the offensive by asking Mr. Pearson why we did not get out of NATO. This led to a brief exchange of diametrically opposed views, laced with some barbed persiflage on both sides. Mr. Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev were both particular to emphasize what old and close friends they are. It has been speculated in the Western press that there might be increasingly acute rivalry between Khrushchev as head of the Communist party and Bulganin as head of the government. But if the evidence of genuine regard and affection for each other manifested at the dinner was simulated, they must both be consummate actors.

Toasts were proposed in rapid succession. Both Mr. Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev were watchful that none of us should get away with pouring our drinks on the floor. I explained to Mr. Bulganin that I would definitely prefer that Mr. Pearson did not see me slide under the table, and he released me from further obligation, saying "*Nye nado*." I should have stopped earlier however, for I soon had to retire to one of the many bathrooms.

#### Martin Hunter

In spite of the somewhat farcical proceedings at this farewell banquet, Pearson was so impressed with Watkins's handling of the Russian visit that he recalled him to Ottawa and appointed him assistant undersecretary in charge of European affairs, a highly influential position. Junior officers like Peter Roberts and myself remember him as one of the most accessible of the mandarins in the department.

This was a challenging time for us in External Affairs. Just when it seemed that the Cold War was starting to thaw we were confronted by the Suez crisis. In 1956 Egypt seized control of the Suez Canal, an essential route for oil shipments. Britain and France joined forces with

Israel and attacked Egypt in retaliation. Peter Roberts remembers John Watkins's reaction.

**Peter Roberts**

I suppose the strongest memory I have of him was meeting him in the Chateau Laurier cafeteria in Ottawa, just at the time of the Suez Crisis. He was in a rage—and I never saw him in a rage, either before or after. Usually he was not placid but calm and unruffled about things, but on this occasion, the Suez Crisis, which is what got his friend Lester Pearson the Nobel Peace Prize, he was in a state of rage. I think he probably had quite a lot to do with Pearson's (he was then the secretary of state for External Affairs) performance at the United Nations and in the world at that time.

**Martin Hunter**

While Watkins was in Ottawa advising Lester Pearson on the stand he would take at the United Nations, Herbert Norman was in Cairo as Canadian ambassador. He had survived investigation by the RCMP and been cleared of charges of communist affiliations. Norman proved crucial to Pearson's diplomatic negotiations. He persuaded President Nasser to accept U.N. mediation and the presence of U.N. troops—including Russians—on Egyptian soil.

This, of course, inspired the American press to launch another attack on Norman. The old allegations of communist sympathies were trotted out once again. Deeply depressed and convinced he would never escape persecution for his youthful idealism, Norman jumped to his death from the roof of his office in Cairo.

The public attack on Norman and its tragic consequences outraged Pearson and the Canadian press, but it did not fundamentally disrupt Canadian-American relations. Pearson was an idealist, but he was also a realist. He understood that Canada was inextricably tied to the United States geographically, militarily, and above all, economically.

John Watkins, like his colleagues in external affairs, accepted these realities. But Watkins must have been particularly shaken by Norman's fate. For Watkins too had been harassed and persecuted, not by Senator McCarthy's American witch hunters but by the KGB. Although most people who knew him were apparently

unaware of it, John Watkins was a bachelor because he was a homosexual, a fact he kept a closely guarded secret. Even other homosexuals in the department were unaware. He himself considered his sexuality a sickness, an abnormality of which he was deeply ashamed. But those were very different times.

**Peter Roberts**

Being a homosexual wasn't a crime, but homosexual acts were criminal acts with severe penalties attached. So if you are an employer, a government employer, can you employ people who you know are breaking the law systematically? Now, that's a question. The law has been changed—Trudeau changed it—but then it was what it was.

**Martin Hunter**

Open admission of homosexuality would have been both painful and dangerous for someone like John Watkins. He confined himself to anonymous encounters, keeping this part of his private life very private indeed. When he went to Russia as our ambassador Watkins must have realized that cruising for homosexual partners was out of the question. However, on his travels in more remote parts of the Soviet Union he was either less cautious or more severely tempted. In Stalinabad he struck up a friendship with Khalek, an eighteen-year-old student he met in an amusement park.

**Khalek**

So, you are ambassador.

**Watkins**

Mm-mm.

**Khalek**

That is most interesting. I want very much to enter diplomatic service. I wish to go directly to diplomatic training school in Moscow, if only I can be accepted—the competition is most keen.

**Watkins**

Well, you are still very young.

**Khalek**

I'm eighteen. Tell me, your students in Canada may read the works of Marx and Lenin?



**Watkins**

Yes. You could hardly give a course in nineteenth-century political and economic thought without Marx!

**Khalek**

But I cannot understand this, how you can let the students read Marx if you fear communism so much.

**Watkins**

It's part of our liberal tradition. We believe people should read what they like and make up their own mind.

**Khalek**

What philosophy do you teach in your schools?

**Watkins**

We teach ethics—moral principles of right and wrong.

**Khalek**

You teach religion, but in religion there must be God. In Soviet Union we do not have any longer a god.

**Watkins**

But you have what you believe is the one and only truth, and that is your substitute for God.

**Khalek**

That is a very original idea.

**Watkins**

Mm-mm.

**Khalek**

You are a clever man. [John chuckles] But why do you not have body guard?

**Watkins**

Oh, I can't imagine anyone trying to murder me! I'm sorry if I've disillusioned you.

**Khalek**

How so?

**Watkins**

About the prestige attached to the diplomatic profession.

**Khalek**

No! Is very interesting to converse with you. But now I wonder what people will say when they see me talk so long with a foreigner. I am *komsomol*, a leader in my study group.

**Watkins**

Well, they don't have to worry. I'm not trying to convert you.

**Khalek**

That is true. Perhaps I walk with you a little while you will tell me about life in your country. Do you live in a very big city?

**Watkins**

Oh, not very big. When I was your age I lived on my family's farm. If we go back to my hotel, I can show you a picture of it.

**Khalek**

I shall like that very much.

**Martin Hunter**

Some time later Khalek wrote to tell Watkins he would be visiting Moscow. They met again, and Watkins showed the young man some of the sights of the capital. They had dinner and retired to Khalek's room. By the time Khalek left Moscow to go back home the KGB had all the photographs they needed.

Watkins was approached by a man called Gorbunov. He presented himself as an official in the Foreign Office but was actually number-two man in the KGB's Second Chief Directorate. Gorbunov informed Watkins that he had the pictures; he would try to discourage the KGB from divulging his secret as long as Watkins would co-operate. Gorbunov did not want Watkins to become an espionage agent but rather hoped to use him as an agent of influence, a man who could subtly shape Canadian policy to help further Soviet political goals.

All of a sudden the doors of bureaucratic Moscow swung open for John Watkins. He was received by top officials to whom other Western ambassadors did not have access; he was invited to exclusive social functions, where he might be the only Western diplomat present.



Ironically, Watkins's entrapment increased his effectiveness. He was undoubtedly aware of the reasons for his new-found popularity, but he didn't shy away from taking advantage of it. As his circle of acquaintances widened so did his understanding and analysis of the Russian psyche. But he must have known his position was precarious.

The RCMP, under pressure from the American CIA and Britain's MI-6, had begun investigating homosexuals as possible security risks. This activity was assigned to B Branch, which was in charge of all counter-espionage activities.

Peter Russell is a political scientist with a particular interest in the concept of justice and how it functions in our society. In the 1980s he served as secretary to the Macdonald Commission. It was set up by the federal government to investigate the security activities of the RCMP.

#### **Peter Russell**

The RCMP security service got involved in investigating homosexuals, right at the beginning of the Cold War. There was a great fear of "the Reds," and particularly after the Gouzenko trials, so the Canadian government developed criteria soon after World War Two to guide the RCMP on what kind of information it should keep on file, on tap, so that it could give advice on people in government as to whether they could be in positions of responsibility, where they would have access to secret documents.

I might read you just a tiny bit from the Cabinet Directive 35. This was like a marching order to the RCMP security service. "...A person who is unreliable, not because he is disloyal but because of features of his character which may lead to indiscretion or dishonesty, or make him vulnerable to blackmail to coercion. Such features may be greed, debt, illicit sexual behaviour"—here we are—"illicit sexual behaviour, drunkenness, drug addiction, mental imbalance, or such other aspect of character which might seriously affect his reliability."

#### **Martin Hunter**

In December 1961 a Russian agent named Anatoli Golitsin defected to the CIA. He identified a number of KGB operatives in Britain, France, and Germany. This led

to the uncovering of several homosexual "moles," or undercover agents, including the notorious Kim Philby. Golitsin also revealed that a Canadian ambassador to Moscow had been compromised in a homosexual liaison and blackmailed by the KGB. He did not know the name or exact dates but provided several bits of tantalizing information.

The RCMP's B branch combed through the Department of External Affairs's files and dispatches but it was hard to make the clues fit. B branch set up a special investigation under the name "Operation Rock Bottom," to identify the compromised ambassador. It was conducted under the direction of James Bennett, an experienced, British-trained counter-intelligence specialist. He and his colleagues interviewed hundreds of homosexuals in the government service. Most of the men interviewed confessed, usually revealing the names of their lovers. All of them resigned without protest.

As the search grew wider the staff of B branch soon had thousands of files on Canadian citizens who were homosexual or who associated with homosexuals.

#### **Peter Russell**

These files with these odd little bits, scraps, of information in them would be there and called upon when people were being considered for jobs, either for keeping the job they had or, equally important, for being moved or advanced into a more senior position. And the very existence of a security-service file could hurt your chances because if you were in a competition with other candidates who had no file, you had at least one big strike against you, even if the information in that file was absolutely innocuous.

But even those who were homosexuals might often have been in positions that really weren't very vulnerable at all because the scale at which they applied this program was too vast. Any job that had any potential for looking at top-secret documents—and the classification of documents was done in the most liberal way: all kinds of things, office memos and so on would get "top secret"—so there were vast echelons of the federal public service that came under this program. There'd be many Canadians whose careers were very unjustly, unfairly impeded, if not ruined—gross injustice inflicted on this group of Canadians.

**Peter Roberts**

I was abroad at the time when the worst of this happened, and I just kept hearing about people who were resigning, retiring. Of course the heat was put on them to get out, and it really didn't occur to me till later, till somebody mentioned it to me that this was the reason, that there was a witch hunt going on, a purge—a Soviet-style purge. People got caught up in the hunt and they were like kids on the prairie hunting gophers with a .22—let's get another one over there!—without considering what the loss to the state had been.

**Martin Hunter**

The files piled up, but Operation Rock Bottom got no closer to identifying the compromised Canadian ambassador. Then in 1964 another Russian defected. Yuri Nosenko positively identified John Watkins. Bennett and his staff began pouring over Watkins's hundreds of dispatches, trying to find evidence of disloyalty and treason. They found nothing conclusive and decided they must interrogate him in person.

By this time Watkins had retired from External Affairs and gone to live in Paris. In September 1964 Bennett and his assistant, Harry Brandes, flew to France and presented themselves and their suspicions to Canadian ambassador Jules Léger. Léger was a close personal friend of Watkins and tried to dissuade them from disturbing his retirement. They had no hard evidence and Watkins was just recovering from a heart attack suffered three months earlier. But they insisted. By coincidence Watkins was coming that evening to dine at the embassy. Léger led him upstairs and introduced him to Bennett, saying he had a matter of international importance to discuss with him. Watkins immediately understood what was afoot.

**Watkins**

I'll tell you as much as I can remember. What do you want to know?

**Bennett**

You engaged in homosexual practices while you were Canadian ambassador in the Soviet Union?

**Watkins**

Yes.

**Brandes**

How many times?

**Watkins**

Well, I'm—I'm not sure. I—

**Brandes**

You had a lot of different partners?

**Watkins**

No.

**Bennett**

But one of them was a member of the KGB.

**Watkins**

Um ... There was a young student. He told me he wanted to be a diplomat. I met him in Stalinabad. Then he visited me in Moscow some months later.

**Bennett**

He stayed at the embassy?

**Watkins**

Oh no, he stayed in a hotel.

**Bennett**

You went to his room.

**Watkins**

We had dinner together. I walked him back to his hotel. He talked about Paul Robson. I'd heard Robson sing many times and seen him play Othello.

**Bennett**

You went to this boy's room and had sex with him?

**Brandes**

What did you do, you and this kid?

**Watkins**

We kissed.

**Brandes**

Then what? Fellatio? Buggery?

**Watkins**

He was very young.

**Bennett**

You don't think he'd done this before?

**Watkins**

Oh yes, I think so. But he ... seemed fond of me, and I liked him very much.

**Bennett**

They got pictures, mm?

**Watkins**

Yes, they're very clever.

**Brandes**

Don't you think you were kind of stupid?

**Watkins**

No doubt. I wanted to believe he liked me.

**Brandes**

An eighteen-year-old kid who suddenly turns up in Moscow? Who did you think was paying for that?

**Watkins**

Well, I thought he might be on a youth conference or something like that. He told me he was a *komsomol*.

**Brandes**

And that didn't tip you off?

**Watkins**

I suppose I was naive.

**Martin Hunter**

Bennett and Brandes persuaded Watkins to return to Canada. The interrogation resumed at the Holiday Inn Chateaubriand on the outskirts of Montreal. The pattern of the first encounter, with Bennett playing the role of Watkins's friend and Brandes playing the heavy, continued.

**Bennett**

It never occurred to you to tell your superiors what had happened? You could have gone directly to Mr. Pearson.

**Watkins**

Oh no! He would have been terribly upset.

**Bennett**

He never suspected?

**Watkins**

I don't think so.

**Brandes**

And you didn't think it was your duty to tell him?

**Watkins**

If I'd revealed the KGB tried to blackmail me, it would have disrupted Soviet-Canadian relations at a most delicate time, just when Mr. Pearson was preparing to visit. That would have been most unfortunate; and soon after, I came home.

**Bennett**

Where you had an even more responsible position, undersecretary. Didn't the Soviets try to put the squeeze on you?

**Watkins**

I never saw them once I came back to Ottawa. I never went to their receptions. I never even received them in my office.

**Brandes**

They could have spilled the beans any time.

**Watkins**

But they didn't.

**Brandes**

They must have made overtures, tried to get concessions.

**Watkins**

They wanted us to eliminate visa processing for Soviet diplomats so they could travel more easily. We refused.

They applied for permission to open a consulate in Toronto. I turned down their request.

**Brandes**

So you didn't play ball. That must have pissed them off.



**Watkins**

I dare say.

**Martin Hunter**

Bennett and Brandes eventually concluded that Watkins had not betrayed his country in any way and decided to wind down their interrogation. They checked with the CIA in Washington to make sure the Americans were satisfied with their report and had no further questions. They spent the next day talking with Watkins one last time. Then went to dinner. Watkins had a fillet mignon and several glasses of burgundy. They retired to his private sitting room. Watkins grimaced as he settled into his chair.

**Watkins**

[groans]

**Bennett**

Hey, are you all right, John?

**Watkins**

Oh, just a twinge. I get these slight pains in my chest if I overindulge. I probably shouldn't have had that last glass of Nuit Saint-Georges.

**Bennett**

Didn't your doctor tell you to go easy? Stop smoking!

**Watkins**

Oh yes! I told him I don't care about living on to a ripe old age if I can't smoke or drink.

**Bennett**

Mm. Maybe you should take one of your tablets. You don't seem to be taking as many as you did.

**Watkins**

Well, I've been taking the ones that matter.

**Bennett**

I guess you know best. Anyway, Harry and I figure we're pretty well finished up. You'll be on your way back to Paris in a day or two.

**Brandes**

Are you sure there's nothing you haven't told us?

**Watkins**

Well, you may remember we spent some little time on the dispatches I wrote about the poet, Akhundi. God, he was a charming man! Beautiful man, really! I was very attracted to him. But, well, Akhundi and I were never alone. An Intourist agent was always with us—until the night before I left Tashkent. Akhundi told him to get lost.

We had a very good meal and a lot of wine, and afterwards Akhundi got a bottle of vodka. It was his favourite drink. We went up to my room and, of course, the inevitable happened.

**Brandes**

So next time you met he was working for the KGB.

**Watkins**

I never saw him again. Can I have a cigarette?

**Brandes**

You're sure about that?

**Watkins**

Oh, Akhundi would never have worked for the KGB! He was a very proud and independent man.

**Bennett**

Here, let me give you a light. What else can you tell us about this man Akhundi?

**Watkins**

He was a wonderful lover!

**Bennett**

Mm-mm. John, are you sure you didn't—

**Watkins**

[groans]

**Bennett**

John, what is it? John! What the hell!

**Brandes**

What's going on?

**Bennett**

He's dead!

**Brandes**

Shit! What do we do now?

**Martin Hunter**

The thing that Bennett and Brandes feared most had happened. But they had got his story, or at least they were pretty sure they had. They convinced the Montreal police to hush up the incident on the grounds that national security was involved. There was no autopsy. The coroner's report listed Brandes as the only witness. He was described as a friend of Watkins. The real friends of Watkins had no idea what had happened.

Neither did Lester Pearson. By this time the Liberals had been defeated and he was no longer minister of External Affairs but merely a member of the opposition. There's no reason to suppose Pearson was sympathetic to homosexuals, but when the Liberals were returned to power and Pearson became prime minister, his justice minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, introduced legislation legalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults in private.

**News announcer** [archival tape]

Wide-ranging and dramatic amendments to the Criminal Code have been put forward by the federal government.

The House of Commons gave first reading today to the government's so-called Omnibus Criminal Code Bill, which would change the following sections: Homosexual acts between consenting adults would no longer be illegal; federal or provincial lotteries would be permitted; abortions would be legalized in certain cases; and breath-analysis tests would be required for persons—

**Pierre Elliot Trudeau** [archival tape]

It's bringing the laws of the land up to contemporary society, I think. Take this thing on homosexuality. I think the view we take here is that there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation, and I think that—

**Martin Hunter**

It seems possible the memory of John Watkins's final ordeal lingered in Pearson's memory and helped to motivate his support of Trudeau's bill to remove the state from the bedrooms of the nation. It's ironic that the change came only a few years after Watkins's death.

But it would take a long time for public opinion to catch up with the law.

**Max Yalden**

Whatever the law said before and after the changes to the Criminal Code did not change the minds of the security people in External Affairs. What I'm saying is that even though it was no longer against the law to be a homosexual the security people would still count that as a strike against you, indeed probably a fatal strike against you, because although it wasn't against the law, it was still not the kind of thing your old granny would want to know about, and since it was very well known that the Soviet KGB played rough in this business and were not above, if you crossed them, sending compromising photographs to your old granny, because that kind of thing still went on and because that atmosphere still existed—I'm talking now about the sixties and seventies—it still was a "problem" to be a homosexual.

**Martin Hunter**

James Bennett and his colleagues continued to accumulate evidence of homosexual activities. Then, in 1972, Bennett himself came under suspicion as a possible Soviet mole within the RCMP. He was investigated and accused, among other things, of having withheld Watkins's heart medication so he died before he could make a full confession. Because there had been no autopsy after Watkins's death, this allegation could not be substantiated. The investigation failed to turn up any real evidence of Bennett's disloyalty, but his career was ruined and he retired to Australia, where he still lives.

Eventually the story of the investigation of Watkins came out. So did the government's purge of homosexuals.

Today the activities in entrapment and secret investigations as practised by the KGB and the CIA, MI-6, and the RCMP seem as ridiculous as a Royal Canadian Air Force sketch or "Spy Versus Spy" in *MAD* magazine.

**Max Yalden**

We've seen the inside of the inside of the mirror-lined wall, and to such an extent that we wonder what in the name of God was going on. And much of it of course was foolishness. What were all these secrets? We all know from our readings of Second World War history that when someone did score an intelligence coup, half the time the people for whom this material was intended

didn't pay any attention to it—starting with Stalin, who resolutely refused to believe the kind of intelligence he was getting out of Tokyo and out of some of his people in the West; and I have to assume the other way around, that sometimes Western intelligence people were not believed. We were part of another world of secrets and of black-and-white appreciations, of the anti-Christ across the way; a Manichaeian world that you either had to live in—or, I suppose, if it really troubled you that deeply, it would have been as well to get out of the Department of External Affairs and go and do something else.

#### **Martin Hunter**

Should John Watkins have done something else? He was a dedicated and ethical man, engaged in trying to increase understanding between peoples, but on an individual and a national level. He was betrayed by a system, but also by a prevailing mentality—a mentality he shared. He was detached not only from the society he observed but also from his own emotions. He was destroyed not just by the circumstances of time and place but by his own vision of the human condition. He bought into the idea that what he saw as the dark side of human nature is better suppressed, or at least covered up. Slowly that mentality appears to be changing.

#### **Max Yalden**

I think it's clear—although it's still a matter of great dispute among people, on ethical grounds, on moral grounds, on legal grounds, and on many other grounds—nevertheless I think an objective person would say that there is much less discrimination against gay and lesbian people than there was twenty, thirty, forty years ago, both open discrimination and more subtle discrimination.

We're still arguing about same-sex benefits; we're still arguing about the extent to which some of these relationships will be recognized by society and in law.

But the situation has vastly changed from the time that John Watkins was serving his country in the Soviet Union. It's changed particularly in respect of this type of behaviour no longer being a crime, for which Watkins could theoretically have been charged, one has to suppose, had it happened in his own country, and therefore which left him open to the very serious threat of blackmail from the Soviet espionage forces.

#### **Martin Hunter**

It is hard to imagine John Watkins marching at the head of a Gay Pride parade, yet he would surely welcome the advances made towards a more tolerant world in the thirty years since his death. The battle for trust and openness in public and private life continues. As the state retreats in some areas from regulating private behaviour, it lays down new rules in others. It is more than ever up to the individual to find a balance between duty and desire, to combat the fear that fuels human deviousness, to shine light into the hidden corners of human experience. As John Watkins did in his professional life, to try in our personal lives to build better bridges of understanding.

#### **Lister Sinclair**

On *Ideas* tonight you've heard a program called "Public Convictions/Private Lives." It was written and presented by Martin Hunter. Production by Alison Moss. Technical operation by Lorne Tulk, and production assistance by Liz Nagy and Gail Brownell.

John Watkins's dispatches were read by Michael Ball; they have been published in a book called *Moscow Dispatches*, edited by Dean Beebe and William Kaplan. Other material was adapted from John Sawatsky's book *For Services Rendered*, and read by Chris Wiggins and Franks Zotter. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht, and I'm Lister Sinclair. Transcription by Hedy Muiysson, Westport, Ontario.