

National security and spy cameras

There have been two bad stories about national security over the last week. There was the surprise arrival of top secret papers at the BBC via bus stop, and there was the revelation that someone had been able to place a spy camera in a Ministerial office without the Minister knowing it was there.

I did not defend Mr Hancock's conduct and thought he had to resign because he had broken rules and guidance which he told the rest of us to obey. If the recordings of his meetings and activities in the office was confined to photos revealing his unwise decision to kiss an adviser then there has been no harm to national security. The spying could also have been used for other purposes, and could give people the idea that maybe they too could place a camera to learn more of government decision making and thinking. Ministerial offices should be secure enough so Ministers and senior officials can think the unthinkable aloud, discuss a range of options, ask themselves what a worse case looks like without every more extreme case appearing in the newspapers. They should also be secure in case matters of national security or commercial confidentiality come up in their talks. In return for having secure offices Secretaries of State should of course keep their romances for private rooms elsewhere, and conduct any family or private business to the extent allowed away from government buildings.

The dumping of important papers in Kent and the decision of the BBC to tell us much of their contents even though they were confidential and in one case had a special top secret designation is extremely worrying. Only a very limited number of Ministers and top officials would have access to such papers. They were very recent, as we are told one went into detail about the recent voyage of a naval vessel close to Crimea. There must be a successful investigation to find out who removed these papers from a secure location or who copied them. We should also expect a better statement from the BBC about why they did not simply return the papers to their rightful place in Whitehall. It can only damage the UK to put out some details about the sensible arguments in government about the conduct of defence and foreign relations. The correct democratic approach is for the government to explain its policy without offering up secrets or counter arguments to opponents, and for the Opposition when it judges it necessary to offer an alternative strategy or to criticise the policy and execution. An Opposition saying a foreign policy could go wrong or is not well done is democratic. A government expressing its own inner doubts about a policy it is still defending is unhelpful. A government with no doubts about its policy is arrogant or foolish.