



An alliance of people spied on by Britain's political secret police

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Spycops Should Have Been Disbanded 50 years ago, says Public Inquiry

29th June 2023

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Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance press release on the publication of the Tranche 1 Interim Report by the Undercover Policing Inquiry, 29 June 2023

UNDERCOVER POLICING INQUIRY

The Metropolitan Police's political 'spycops' unit should have been disbanded 50 years ago, its activity was a waste of time and its intrusiveness would have caused outrage if revealed, a public inquiry has found.

Victims of the police spying operations today welcomed the findings of the [Undercover Policing Inquiry Interim Report](#) that the notorious undercover policing unit, the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), should have been disbanded in the 1970s.

The report covered the first part of the Inquiry's work, from the [formation of the Squad in 1968](#) to 1982.

The Metropolitan Police's secret spying operations targeted around 1,000 campaigning and left wing groups,

was sanctioned at the highest level of the police and successive governments, and continued operating until at least 2010.

The Inquiry Chair, Sir John Mitting, found that, in his view, only three groups were ever 'a legitimate target' for undercover policing of any kind.

In his report, Sir John wrote that these issues 'should have been addressed at the highest level within the



MPS and within the Home Office.'

He concluded:

"The question is whether or not the end justified the means [...]. I have come to the firm conclusion that, for a unit of a police force, it did not; and that had the use of these means been publicly known at the time, the SDS would have been brought to a rapid end."

The report does not assign blame, but finds that there were four crucial issues which should have alerted the Metropolitan Police and the Home Office to serious problems:

- long-term intrusive relationships by undercover officers
- the legality of entering private homes without a warrant or just cause
- the theft of dead children's identities by officers
- undercovers taking on positions of responsibility in the groups they were targeting and using that to report on personal details of people engaged in legitimate activities

Public inquiry core participant Zoe Young, who was spied on for her environmental activism, said:

"The police have tried to justify their actions by saying they were targeting subversives and protecting public order. Their own evidence showed this was not the case.

They ignored violent groups such as the National Front in favour of reporting on cake sales and campaigns for free nurseries. While we were on the street calling for an end to racist murders, we now know police were spying on us. They treated as criminal anyone who wanted to change the world for the better.

If there is a subversive organisation in all this, it is the institutionally anti-democratic Metropolitan Police through their systematic attacks on basic human rights."

Among the most shocking evidence released by the Inquiry are reports showing the Met explicitly targeted police accountability groups in the 1980s.

Over three sets of hearings the Inquiry heard from many former undercover officers, their managers and victims of the spying. Evidence showed a lack of training and direction to the operations, with officers mostly "self tasking".

Managers admitted they did not try to change things but simply followed what their predecessors did. What emerged was a picture of a political policing organisation that had no meaningful oversight or clear requirements.

A number of reports demonstrated that teenagers were regularly reported on, alongside details of the children of activists. Numerous reports used derogatory and bigoted terms.

'Lindsey', a core participant who has been given anonymity, added:



“No doubt many undercovers and managers will be relieved they did not receive stronger criticism, the evidence of their reports speaks for itself. We see racist, sexist and offensive language regularly being signed off. Their reports show the contempt with which they held people trying to make the world a better place.

They had no guard rails, whether reporting on children or making salacious comments on people’s sexual activities. All this was filed away by Special Branch and MI5.”

While Donal O’Driscoll, another victim of spycops, echoed criticisms from many core participants:

“The Inquiry isn’t over and when it looks at later spying it will find these same patterns of abuse went on for decades and got worse, with the founding of a second unit in 1999.

We are outraged by the intrusive tactics used against us and the lack of oversight, but it only demonstrates what we already knew, that the Metropolitan Police is out of control, both then and now.

*They remain a deeply sexist, racist and homophobic institution, despite being put in special measures last year. The Inquiry shows these problems have been deeply rooted for decades. We now know that some of the undercovers who abused people, such as **Vincent Harvey**, went on to hold high-ranking positions in the police.”*

This report is just the beginning. As the Inquiry progresses, victims expect more shocking revelations, and call for the issues not dealt with in the Interim Report – such as the central role of MI5, government involvement, targeting of family justice campaigns, blacklisting of trades unionists, and reporting on children – to be properly addressed.

To this end, they continue to press long standing demands. These include the release of all personal files, the names of all the spycops, and a full list of the over 1,000 groups they targeted. They argue that only when this has happened can there be a full and proper debate about the nature of political policing in the UK.

—ends—

Notes:

- The Interim Report can be found on the **Undercover Policing Inquiry website**. A summary of the report which has been prepared by Police Spies Out Of Lives can be found at <https://policespiesoutoflives.org.uk/summary-of-ucpi-interim-report-june-2023/>
- The Inquiry has cost £64m to date. It has completed one of four tranches of investigations and hearings since it was established in 2015, and is expected to conclude in 2026. Further statistics can be found at <https://www.ucpi.org.uk/about-the-inquiry/#costs>
- There are over 200 non-state core participants including many women who were deceived into sexual relationships by officers, families of murder victims such as Stephen Lawrence, Rolan Adams and Ricky

Reel, as well as the families whose dead children’s identities were stolen by the undercovers.

- The Metropolitan Police **conceded earlier this year** that, “By modern standards, the SDS’s deployments in this period are unjustifiable, because of the way they were structured – not least because there was a failure to consider intrusion, necessity, and proportionality.”

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