

Documents show how Special Branch infiltrated Anti-Apartheid Movement

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The extent of Special Branch surveillance of the Anti-Apartheid Movement is revealed today in newly released documents. They show how Special Branch penetrated the movement from top to bottom, infiltrating meetings, recruiting informers and obtaining documents.

Officers snooped on leaders including MPs, two of whom are now Labour ministers. Police spies slipped into meetings of local groups which were attended by as few as five genuine campaigners.

Even the most innocuous activity was investigated and assessed. At one point, officers sent a report to the Security Service, MI5, about a supermarket worker who had been handing out leaflets to colleagues. At another, the branch investigated a suburban shed which contained a suspicious number of "political posters with a leftwing bias".

The reports of the espionage against anti-apartheid campaigners in the 1980s have been released to the BBC under the Freedom of Information Act for a Radio Four programme to be broadcast tonight. Special Branch acted as MI5's "eyes and ears", gathering information which was analysed by the Security Service. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was one of a number of political organisations monitored. Special Branch and MI5 argued that the surveillance was justified because such organisations contained dangerous Trotskyists and communists.

A report from November 1980 describes the minutes of the movement's recent executive committee meeting, which led Special Branch officers to note: "The movement is concerned at the falling interest shown by members and, due to their general lack of success, a number of people appear to be either disinterested or pay lip-service only to the ideals of the movement. An example of this is Peter Hain [now Welsh and Northern Ireland secretary], who has resigned as the chairman of Stop all Racist Tours, an offshoot of the AAM."

The other member of the current government named in the documents is the sports minister, Richard Caborn. In a detailed report on the

organisation's annual conference in 1983, Mr Caborn, along with former Labour minister Frank Dobson, is listed as having been elected to the national committee.

Special Branch checked each member of the committee and concluded that "13 of the new 30-member executive therefore belong to either the South African Communist party or the Communist Party of Great Britain".

A report from June 1982 records "information from a delicate source" that activists were going to demonstrate outside the employers' organisation the CBI on the following day. A sergeant in Special Branch reported that "a total of seven people attended the meeting" of the group in Croydon, south London, on May 27 1982. A month later, a "secret and reliable source" gave an account of the monthly meeting in Highgate, north London.

· The Right to Know is broadcast on Radio Four at 8pm tonight and 5pm on Sunday
