

How the hairies spied on the lefties

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The police special branch set up an elite unit to infiltrate leftwing groups, including opponents of apartheid and the Vietnam war, in the 1960s and 1970s, it is revealed today.

Members of the unit, the special demonstration squad, were known as "hairies" because of the way they looked and lived. Among their targets were the Stop the 70 Tour campaign - led by Peter Hain, now minister for Europe - against the visit of the South African rugby team, Tariq Ali, the Troops Out movement, the Anti-Nazi League, organisers of industrial disputes and assorted Trotskyist groups.

The activities of the squad, which worked closely with MI5, are disclosed in a forthcoming BBC2 series, True Spies. The Metropolitan Police set up the unit after the demonstration outside the US embassy in London's Grosvenor Square in 1968.

"Hairies" invented personas to disguise their true identities. One special branch officer, known as Tony, infiltrated the Peace in Vietnam Committee on Merseyside and the strike committee at Pilkingtons glass works, where he was rumbled.

During the Stop the 70 Tour campaign a "hairy" called Mike is described as being Mr Hain's virtual second in command. Another special branch officer had a file on Ricky Tomlinson, star of television's The Royle Family and former union activist. Tomlinson tells the programme: "I'm totally gobsmacked. If they can do it to me, they can do it to anyone."

Officers also say they planted a spy among Newbury bypass protesters and turned their attention to animal rights activists.

The programmes add to disclosures made in the mid-1980s by the former MI5 officer Cathy Massiter, who revealed how MI5 and the police special branch targeted civil rights campaigners, including Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt, now respectively solicitor general and the trade and industry secretary.
