

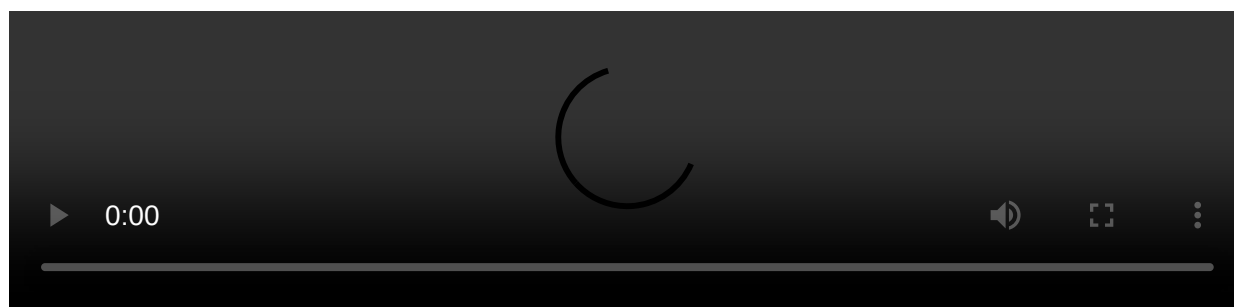
This article is more than 15 years old

Peace campaigner, 85, classified by police as 'domestic extremist'

John Catt and his daughter were placed under surveillance at more than 80 lawful protests

Paul Lewis and Rob Evans

Fri 25 Jun 2010 19.44 BST



John Catt and his daughter, Linda, talk about being classified as 'domestic extremists'
guardian.co.uk

For John Catt, protest has never been about chaining himself to a railing or blocking a road in an act of civil disobedience. The 85-year-old peace campaigner's far milder form of dissent typically involves turning up at a demonstration with his daughter, Linda, taking out his sketch pad and drawing the scene.

However this, it seems, has been enough for police to classify Catt and his 50-year-old daughter "domestic extremists", put their personal information on a clandestine national database and record their political activities in minute detail.

Secret files have revealed how police have systematically documented their political activities, undermining official claims that only hardcore activists were placed under surveillance.

The National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) recorded their presence at more than 80 lawful demonstrations over four years, logging details such as their appearance, and slogans on their T-shirts.

Catt and his daughter, from Brighton, were aware that surveillance teams were often in the vicinity during their protests, but they had no idea how closely they were being monitored until their files were released under the Data Protection Act

Police said they did not legally have to disclose them, but did so to show there was "nothing sinister in what we hold".

The Catts, who have no criminal records, said they were "shocked and terrified" when they read their files. "Our activities were totally legitimate - we were not interested in non-violent direct action," said Linda. "My dad likes to sketch and I will hold a banner and shout a few things. But I'm careful about what I say."

They said the most worrying aspect was the seemingly banal information the surveillance officers had been logging, from observations about their demeanour and car number plates, to notes about their conversations with local reporters.

Amid the pages of detailed logs was an entry that noted how on the morning of 25 September 2005, John Catt was "clean shaven" when he attended a demonstration by Sussex Action for Peace. The Catts have been part of a long running campaign against an arms factory in Brighton, run by the American-owned EDO MBM Technology, over sales to Israel.

Since 2004, campaigners have mounted more or less weekly demonstrations outside the factory, in particular protests at which the activists bang drums and other objects to produce a cacophony.

Catt's artistic endeavours received particular scrutiny. "John Catt sat on a folding chair by the southern most gate of EDO MBM and appeared to be sketching," states one of several logs. "He was using his drawing pad to sketch a picture of the protest and police presence," said another from 10 March 2006. A separate report, about his sketch of a Guantánamo Bay detainee, noted: "John Catt was very quiet and was holding a board with orange people on it."

Last year, anti-EDO campaigners held a series of a "anti-war creativity" workshops with music, poetry and artwork. These included an exhibition of art by Catt and others, a fact recorded on the NPOIU database as "including ... the classic drawings of John Catt, veteran anti-war activist".

When the Guardian first revealed details about a police monitoring system that keeps tabs on political activists last year, police gave assurances they were not interested in everyday campaigners. They said surveillance was needed to monitor "domestic extremists" - a term that has no legal basis but is defined by police as activists who are determined to break the law to further their political aims.

Anton Setchell, who is national co-ordinator for domestic extremism for the Association of Chief Police Officers and is responsible for the NPOIU database, said most campaigners would never be considered domestic extremists.

However, information about the Catts has been transferred to the Police National Computer in Hendon and in July 2005, they were stopped by police under the Terrorism Act after driving into the east London to help a family member move house. They later discovered police had placed a marker against their car registration on the database, triggering an alert - "of interest

to public order unit, Sussex police" - each time they drove beneath an automatic number plate reading camera.

The Catts said they were particularly shocked to discover that they had been tracked for two days in Manchester in 2008, during the Labour party conference, while their involvement in events only fleetingly connected to protest activity was recorded. "At 1020 hours ... seen at Lobby point on Peter Street were two anti-war protesters from Brighton, John Catt and Linda Catt", reads the entry.

Three times police noted Linda Catt had sat in the public gallery of Brighton magistrates court, to witness the trial of fellow campaigners for alleged breaches of public order law or local bylaws arising out of the EDO MBM protests.

The final entry on John and Linda Catt's file was on 27 September last year, after the pair marched against New Labour. The record observed that the protest had been "organised by a number of trade unions", adding: "Seen as part of the protest was John Catt and Linda Catt".

When asked about the Catts today, Setchell said most of the protests against EDO had been "lawful ... but some have been violent and disorderly, leading to a large number of arrests".

Police had therefore monitored the demonstrations and "a small number" of lawful protesters, including the Catts, "will have their names recorded alongside others at protest events". He accepted the Catts had not been responsible for the violent disorder.

Last year Setchell had said: "If it is just a street type of protest, or sitting in a field or something, I will probably never ever speak to those forces about it whatsoever. I deal with the more serious stuff, that requires slightly more sophisticated analysis and co-ordination and investigation, which doesn't mean people sitting in roads or chaining themselves to a fence."

A sample entry from police log of the Catts' activity on the National Public Order Intelligence Unit database:

"At 16.24 hrs on Wednesday 24th of September 2008 a Silver Car was driven to Home Farm Road by Linda Catt," said one entry on the UK-wide system that stores information about campaigners. The Catts were among protesters campaigning to close down a local arms factory owned by EDO MBM, a US-owned firm, over sales to Israel.

"John Catt was in the front passenger seat. Upon arrival the vehicle parked close to the footpath entrance and both occupants got out of the vehicle. John Catt removed a frame piece of art work from the rear of the vehicle and put it on display. The artwork was a cartoon sketch of the EDO MBM site with the following text: 'EDO MBM Listed on the stock exchange'. During the

demonstration Linda Catt and an individual had a discussion together away from the main group."

Most viewed