

# Political activists call for inquiry after revelations about undercover police

Protest groups that were targeted by infiltrators plan legal action to obtain access to police files after disclosures by Officer A

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**The following correction was printed in the Observer's For the record column, Sunday March 27 2010**

This article said that newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson "died of a heart attack soon after being struck by a police baton" at the G20 protest in London last April. Although this was originally given as a cause of death, a second postmortem revealed internal bleeding as the cause. The results of a third postmortem conducted on behalf of the police officer involved have yet to be released.

Political activists have reacted with anger to [revelations in last week's Observer](#) that their organisations were infiltrated by an elite undercover unit of the Metropolitan police.

Members of one of the groups demanded a public inquiry after the *Observer* disclosed that a former member of Special Branch, known as Officer A, had infiltrated far-left organisations in the mid-1990s to gather intelligence about potentially violent demonstrators. He was regularly involved in brutal confrontations with uniformed police officers and activists from the extreme right. On numerous occasions he engaged in violent acts to maintain his cover.

Many activists suspected they were being infiltrated by the state at the time, but it is only now that their suspicions have been confirmed. One target of Officer A, a former student union leader who has asked not to be identified, told the *Observer*: "I suspected that my phone might have been tapped. I believed that there might have been some police spies at the demonstrations that I attended. But however paranoid I was, I never imagined they would go so far as to invest the level of resources needed to give someone a completely new identity for five years and have them spy on someone like me. It really is astonishing."

Officer A was part of a secret unit of the Met known as the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), which since 1968 had 10 full-time undercover

operatives inside so-called "subversive" organisations to disrupt their ability to create disorder on the streets of London.

While Officer A targeted the far left, other SDS members were simultaneously infiltrating the far right. By the end of his four-year deployment he had become a branch secretary of a leading anti-racist organisation, Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE). He used this position to assist in making contact with smaller groups that had a reputation for being involved in violence.

Hannah Sell, national secretary of the YRE at the time of Officer A's deployment, remembers him well but is furious at the implication that the group was involved in violence. "We organised mass peaceful protests against racism and the BNP. In doing so we often faced violence from the far right and the police."

The *Observer* understands that many of the tactics now used by police in public order situations were developed in response to SDS intelligence about the best way to control potential troublemakers. This includes the controversial tactic known as "kettling", in which protesters are hemmed in on all sides by police, a technique many believe only heightens tensions.

Lois Austin, YRE chair at the time of Officer A's infiltration, told the *Observer*: "We believe there should be a public inquiry into police tactics at demonstrations. It should be independent, not one where the police investigate themselves. We want to know about their use of spies and whether this unit is still operational."

The calls for an inquiry come amid fresh criticism of heavy-handed police tactics at the G20 protest in London last April, when newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson died of a heart attack soon after being struck by a police baton and pushed to the ground. It has emerged that plainclothes officers from City of London police mingled with the crowd to gather intelligence. Many former activists who believe they were SDS targets intend to take legal action in an attempt to obtain any police intelligence files about their activities.

- This is the archive of The Observer up until 21/04/2025. The Observer is now owned and operated by Tortoise Media.

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