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# 'UK plc can afford more than 20 quid,' the officer said

Tape recordings reveal how undercover police tried to recruit environmental activist to network of 'hundreds' of paid informants they have among protest groups



📷 Environmentalists Dan Glass, Tilly Gifford and Juliana Napier Photograph: Murdo Macleod/Murdo Macleod

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**Paul Lewis and Marc Vallée**

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Matilda Gifford said she was in Partick police station in Glasgow last month when she plucked up the courage to switch on the recording device in her pocket. Sitting with her were two men in casual clothes who had said they were from Strathclyde police. She had gone to the station to collect her house keys, which had been confiscated when she was arrested days earlier.

But the men appeared to have something else on their mind as she was ushered into a back room for an informal chat.

"I'm pretty nervous about being alone," Gifford, a 24-year-old activist, told them.

"You're nervous about being on your own with police officers?" said one of the men. "Why - what do you think we're going to do?"

Gifford was nervous because she believed the officers might try to get information from her about the activities of Plane Stupid, a direct action group behind demonstrations against expansion of Britain's airports.

For months she and other members of the organisation had suspected that the police were attempting to infiltrate their network and had placed members under surveillance. Here, perhaps, was the proof.

In this meeting and another five weeks later, Gifford used her mobile phone to record conversations that revealed how one of the UK's largest police forces was trying to infiltrate a protest organisation, to dissuade its members from taking part in demonstrations and to offer potentially substantial cash rewards for intelligence about its leaders and methods.

In all, she recorded almost three hours worth of talks with the two men, which have been heard by the Guardian.

The men became explicit about what they wanted from Gifford, what they were prepared to give her in return, and what might become of her if she went to jail. They also claimed they had "thousands" of informers feeding them detailed information about protest groups across the political spectrum.

### **Charm offensive**

The first meeting, in a small windowless interview room at 10.30am on 25 March, was not Gifford's first encounter with police. Known as Tilly, she has taken part in high-profile campaigns against airport expansion in Scotland over the last 18 months. She was charged with vandalism and breach of the peace, and released on bail the following day, after an incident at Aberdeen airport on 3 March when seven protesters barricaded themselves on to a taxiway dressed as Donald Trump.

Two weeks later, on Sunday 22 March, Gifford was arrested again, this time outside a derelict building that she and her friends intended to use as an exhibition space. She was charged with being in a place with the intention to commit theft.

It was after this second brush with police that Gifford, who does not have a criminal record, became a target for covert intelligence-gathering officers.

In a move that her lawyer, Patrick Campbell, described as "extremely unusual", she was released from custody without being processed through court, and without the return of all her confiscated possessions - including the keys to her house. Instead, she was told she should pick up her property from Partick police station on 25 March. She describes being introduced when to two middle-aged men when she arrived, who said they were a detective constable and his assistant.

After handing over her possessions, the men reassured her that she was not being investigated, but asked if she could spare a "quick 20 minutes" to talk about Plane Stupid.

"Now, are you prepared to talk to me about that for 20 minutes?" said the detective constable. "Because, I mean, I told you yesterday we'd try and get your stuff to you, so I've done that. So the least thing you can do is at least give me a short period of your time."

Gifford agreed, and the two men started with a charm offensive.

"There's no one on this earth, and there's no one certainly in this room," said the DC, "who is going to condemn you for your - if you want, your ideologies, for what Plane Stupid are trying to achieve." However, they pointed out that Gifford's involvement with the protest at Aberdeen airport could leave her with a criminal record, something that could jeopardise her chances of getting a job in the future. They also said that invading the taxiway of an airport could result in deaths, and that there were extremists in Plane Stupid.

And not just that: should Gifford go to jail, she'd be given a tough time inside.

The assistant warned her that there were "hard, evil" people in Scotland's women's prison, Cornton Vale. He added: "And they would make your life a misery."

After 20 minutes, the detective constable got to the point. "All we're here for today, Tilly, is simply to ask you: is there some way we can work together in this?" he said. "We have a responsibility to the people of the country to look at groups like Plane Stupid, like other groupings who appear out of nowhere."

The officers bombarded her with the sort of questions they wanted answers to.

"Who is the leader? Who is the head honcho?" asked the detective constable. "In a nutshell, Tilly, look: we basically have a responsibility to the people of Scotland - to their safety. How we go about that - there are ways and means. And as in any, shall we say, big groupings, there's always people within those groupings willing to speak to us. And talk to us, and tell us what's happening within the groups."

He added: "Feeding to us what's going on in the groupings - the actual dynamics of the groupings, who's saying what, who's doing what, who's running it, who's not running it."

Gifford expressed surprise. "Why would they do that?" she said.

"People would sell their soul to the devil," replied the assistant.

Gifford was still sceptical that protesters would relinquish information to the police, and asked what motives they might have for doing so.

"Moralistic," said the DC. "Financial gain. Cos they've been in bother with the police ..."

The assistant interrupted: "They don't want to get in further bother with the police."

The DC said he could understand why a protester like Gifford would initially find the idea abhorrent.

"Because you're caught up in the whole wishy-washy ideology of it - you don't see the bigger picture," he said.

He then suggested they might find "some way that we could work together - in a sort of a job".

As the conversation continued, the DC asked if Gifford was recording the discussion. "Quite possibly," she said.

Unperturbed, the men pressed on.

"Well let's just say if you were prepared to meet us, and talk to us, we may be in a position to help you out financially," said the assistant.

The DC continued: "Look at the big picture - we work with hundreds of people, believe me, ranging from terrorist organisations right through to whatever ... We have people who give us information on environmentalism, leftwing extremism, rightwing - you name it, we have the whole spectrum of reporting.

"The point we're making is: they come to us with the concerns, because within the organisations for which they have strong ideologies and beliefs they are happy to go along with that, but what they will not get involved in is maybe where it's gonna impact someone else. That's when they come to us and say 'by the way, so and so - in my opinion - is maybe getting a wee bit too hotheaded'."

Before ending the meeting, Gifford asked: "Are you Strathclyde police?" The DC paused, and replied: "We are."

Gifford emerged from that first meeting shocked but excited.

She saw the encounter as an opportunity to reveal the lengths police go to in order to disrupt legitimate protest. "It was about getting evidence of the intimidatory tactics of police, and the way they try to stop people taking action on climate change," she said last night.

The second time she met the officers was outside an internet cafe in the west end of Glasgow on Tuesday this week. Opposite the planned rendezvous, Plane Stupid activists had positioned a photographer who captured the moment Gifford was met by the assistant officer, who took her to the DC who was waiting in a nearby car.

Plane Stupid had set up an elaborate computer system connected via the online phone service Skype. As the meeting took place two fellow activists, Dan Glass, 25, a social worker, and Juliana Napier, 24, a musician, were

sitting in a nearby apartment receiving live feeds from recording devices sewn into Gifford's tweed waistcoat.

## **Business proposal**

During Tuesday's meeting she was taken to a Morrisons supermarket cafe in the suburb of Anniesland. However it was back in the car, during the return journey, that Gifford asked how much she might earn.

"Are you recording this bit as well?" asked the assistant. Gifford laughed. "Ha ha," she said. "Quite possibly."

The detective constable reiterated that the officers were not threatening or intimidating her.

"We don't want to stop you doing what you're doing. We're just asking you to consider a proposal. And if you look at it in the light of - I'm gonna use the adage, if you want - almost a business proposal ... It is effectively entering into a business contract. You would assist us. Let's not use the word work - you would assist us. But equally we would be ... assisting you - be it financially or whatever." He added that the contract would have implications if she were ever arrested.

Gifford said she would be unlikely to be interested if they were talking about "20 quid". The assistant replied: "UK plc can afford more than 20 quid."

She was given the impression that, if she agreed, she would become one of "thousands" of paid informants who work with the police, secretly relaying information about protest groups.

"They then go home to their families. They go home to husbands, wives, children. We are way, way down. That would be exactly the same with you. You would still have your life, Tilly," said the detective constable, adding that they would only have to meet "once a week maybe".

Gifford mentioned something about returning to university, and her loan.

"You see exactly what you've said there?" said the detective constable. "At least you're thinking logically. If you're going back to school you're going to have loans to pay off. So you're going to need money, you'll still be out probably working, doing bits, but wouldn't it also be nice to have tax-free money you'd be getting? You wouldn't pay any tax on it. So you could do with it what you want."

## **Informants**

He added that not all informants gave information for personal gain. "So they give the money to, maybe Cancer Research, Save the Whale, whatever. Other people use it because, believe it or not, they actually need it."

Gifford was told the money would be paid cash in hand. "[We] don't pay it into a bank account Tilly, because that leaves an audit trail - and an audit

trail can compromise you," said the assistant. She asked what sums they were paying other informers.

"Oh you'd be surprised Tilly," said the detective constable. The assistant added: "Years gone by people have been paid tens of thousands of pounds."

Before Gifford left the car, the DC said there was nothing wrong with her frank questions about payment. "We don't feel any less, or think any less of you for asking that," he said. "Because if I'm doing a job of work, I expect to be paid. And likewise."

Gifford broke off her relationship with the police officers on Thursday morning. In a telephone call to the detective at 9.45am, she revealed that her lawyer had made inquiries at Strathclyde police headquarters about his identity. "They've come back and said that your name isn't on any, like, Strathclyde police data," she said. "And I'm really up for meeting up again, but I would really like to know who you are, as in who you work for."

Repeatedly, he said that he and his assistant were officers from Strathclyde police with warrant cards. He said they worked for the community intelligence section, but the names of people in his department were not available via the main switchboard.

Gifford pointed out she was being asked to spy on her protest group. "And I think if Plane Stupid don't do what they do we are committed to being locked into decades of carbon heavy industry."

She added: "OK, my feelings are really ... is that, you know how much I care about climate change. I think Plane Stupid's work is so important ..."

The detective constable interrupted. "Tilly - just pal, listen. What did you mean a lawyer?"

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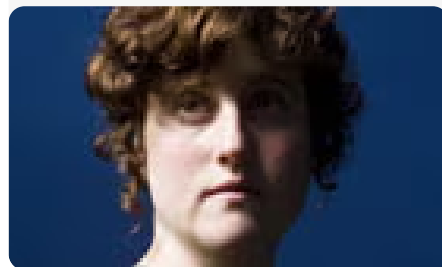
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