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Mark Kennedy and the impenetrable world of police moles

The case of undercover agent Mark Kennedy has raised vital questions about accountability



PC Mark Kennedy in his undercover role as an environmental activist.

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On a little-known police database there are 1,822 mugshots of individuals. The photographs are held by the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), and few outside the organisation know who these people are.

The unit is part of a nexus of policing organisations that last Monday came to attention when a trial of six environmental campaigners collapsed after an undercover police officer who had infiltrated the group offered to give evidence on its behalf.

PC **Mark Kennedy**, 41, worked for the NPOIU and for seven years led a double life as a spy within the green movement. For those who have studied the methods of his secretive unit, the case was perturbing on many levels, but not surprising. Protesters deemed to be "of interest" are photographed and the images are disseminated among forces, while Kennedy's emergence underlines its use of "covert human intelligence sources".

Although precise details of his brief are unknown, allegations that Kennedy served as an agent provocateur raise damaging questions over policing ethics and strategy, along with concerns over the safety of several previous convictions.

The unit was launched in 1998 to monitor animal rights extremists. Yet Kennedy's role - he infiltrated the green movement in 2000 - suggests that senior police officers quickly began to view eco-activists as elements threatening state security.

The NPOIU has access to various police databases, including that run by Scotland Yard's public order unit (CO11), which in turn oversees the forward intelligence teams that attend demonstrations to look out for known "faces" and "domestic extremists". Intelligence gathered by the unit is also passed to the National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit (NETCU), which admits looking after the interests of "industry, academia and other organisations" targeted by activists. Campaigners believe that it is more concerned with protecting corporate interests than civil rights.

Both units are linked to the National Domestic Extremism Team (NDET), which oversees investigations into alleged offences by political activists. In turn, the three teams are headed by the national co-ordinator for domestic extremism, Detective Chief Superintendent Adrian Tudway. The final element is the terrorism and allied matters (TAM) committee of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo), which includes counter-terrorism units, the security services and senior Home Office officials.

Secrecy abounds, and Kennedy had several sexual liaisons while working undercover. Crucially, it is not known whether these were sanctioned, disapproved of, or authorised. Some critics claim that Kennedy appeared to be operating out of control, liberated from the confines of public scrutiny. Yet senior Acpo sources insist the use of undercover officers is highly regulated, with all operations overseen by the surveillance commissioner.

The NPOIU is deemed so discreet that police will not even confirm the location of its base or the identity of its head, although sources say it can be found within Scotland Yard. Yet it is not part of the Met. In fact, Kennedy's handlers are wholly unaccountable. Acpo, the lead body on domestic extremism, is a private company, incorporated in 1997. It is subcontracted by Whitehall to operate the policing responsibilities of the government's "anti-extremism" strategy and can, for instance, ignore freedom of information requests.

Unaccountable it may be, but the cost to the taxpayer is significant. Running Kennedy - let alone his colleagues - cost the public purse £1.75m over seven years. The budget of the NPOIU has more than doubled to £5.7m in four years.

Kennedy's role already, say some, suggests the culture of paranoia within government is at a very high level. This is unlikely to change. The question

is, how many Kennedys are out there? And to what purpose? Activist groups everywhere are expecting key members to start disappearing in the months ahead.

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