

• This article is more than 14 years old

Met counter-terrorism chief to take over protest spy unit

John Yates's appointment comes as senior officers apologise for misleading MPs over undercover policing at G20 protests



John Yates's appointment is likely to cause controversy among activists who say their peaceful movement is being equated to terrorism. Photograph: Lewis Whyld/PA

Rob Evans and Paul Lewis

Tue 25 Jan 2011 18.42 GMT

Britain's most senior police officer in charge of counter-terrorism will next week take over a secretive unit that deploys undercover police officers in the environmental protest movement.

John Yates, an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police, will take command of the operation to monitor climate change campaigners in a move that police chiefs hope will bring greater accountability.

However, the move, which was confirmed in parliament today, is likely to cause controversy among activists who complain that their peaceful movement is being equated to terrorism.

Tim Godwin, the acting head of the Met, and another senior Scotland Yard officer, Bob Broadhurst, were today brought before parliament to apologise

for misleading MPs over the presence of undercover police at the G20 protests two years ago.

Broadhurst, who was in charge of policing the G20 protests, had erroneously told the home affairs select committee in May 2009 that no plain-clothes officers were present at the demonstrations, saying it would have been too dangerous to have deployed them.

Today he apologised several times to the committee, saying that his denial was "true to the best of my knowledge at the time". He admitted that numerous City of London police officers had been present at the demonstration, along with more than one Met officer, including PC Mark Kennedy.

Broadhurst added that he ought to have known that undercover officers had been deployed at the protests, during which the newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson died. He said an internal inquiry has yet to establish why the most senior officer in charge of the operation was not informed.

He accepted that undercover officers were often deployed at large demonstrations and said their use at the G20 protests was "no exception".

"When I appeared before you on 19 May 2009, I gave you some information that now appears to be inaccurate," he said. "For that, I apologise, but at the time I made it it was true to the best of my knowledge, otherwise I certainly would not have said it at the time."

Asked by the committee chairman, Keith Vaz, if he should have known, Broadhurst said: "There is a review going on into that, sir. I would always have a specialist working with me on intelligence. Normally, they would tell me. It didn't happen on this occasion, hence I need to find out why that happened. It may well be, as you said, I didn't ask the right questions. Genuinely, I did not know."

The Met's counter-terrorism unit SO15, which Yates is in charge of, already lists "domestic extremism" under its responsibilities. It will now acquire the National Public Order Intelligence Unit, which has been at the centre of a growing controversy since the Guardian's revelations about one of its officers, Kennedy.

The unit will remain under the control of the Association of Chief Police Officers, a private company, until Friday, when senior officers are expected to sanction the move to the Met.

Godwin told MPs the swift transfer would be enacted over the weekend, with Yates taking control on Monday morning.

Kennedy's presence at the G20 was first disclosed by the Guardian, which has unmasked three more police officers who lived undercover among activists. Three of them are believed to have had sexual relations with women activists they were sent to spy on.

Godwin told the committee that he "fully understood the disquiet" among the public about revelations that undercover officers had slept with activists whom they were targeting. He said there were investigations into two Met officers accused of having had sex with their targets.

Vaz told Godwin and Broadhurst that misleading the House of Commons was a "very serious matter", but gave them credit for quickly informing MPs of their mistake. He commented that the undercover policing controversy was "more James Bond than the stuff of policing".

Godwin said: "When you actually run a huge operation on the scale Commander Broadhurst was running, you can't know everything all the time."

He added that intelligence was sometimes "sanitised" to protect the source, leaving commanders unaware of where it came from. "However, I think what this has done is given us a sharp lesson and we will look at that."

In a separate development, footage emerged today showing an undercover officer living in Leeds running around the city dressed as a clown during a good-natured protest. It shows undercover officer Lynn Watson wiggling her bottom at an MP's office, playing cricket with a feather duster and hanging off a tree while chanting "tickle the tree".

Most viewed