

# Rein in undercover police units, says former DPP

Fears that apparatus set up to tackle animal rights extremists in the 1990s now holds too much control over its own agenda



Protests outside a UK vivisection farm in 1998 after campaigner Barry Horne was jailed for arson - he went on hunger strikes in prison and died in 2001 of liver failure. Police units that infiltrated the animal rights movement in the 1990s evolved into the apparatus that positioned undercover officer Mark Kennedy at the heart of the UK's environmental protest movement. Photograph: Tim Ockenden/PA

**Rob Evans, Matthew Taylor, Afua Hirsch and Paul Lewis**

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Police chiefs are being called on to review the way long-term undercover operations are handled amid growing concerns about the secretive unit at the heart of their spying operation.

The lawyer and former director of public prosecutions Lord Macdonald said the handling of undercover officers appeared to be "alarming" and "opaque" after Mark Kennedy was unmasked as an undercover police officer spying on the environmental movement.

"There should be published guidelines," said Macdonald. "It is particularly important that the public understands what the principles and what the rules are. The fact this operation is so opaque, nobody knows how it was run, what the objectives were, why it ran for so long, I think that's quite alarming."

Claims made against police include that during his seven years as a spy Kennedy acted as an agent provocateur and had a string of sexual relationships with fellow activists.

But the case has also highlighted the role of the secretive police intelligence units overseen by the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) to which both Kennedy and a second undercover officer known as Officer A had been seconded.

"There is this whole issue of what Acpo is," said Macdonald. "It's a limited company. It's an odd sort of organisation. There should be published guidelines, there should be a debate about it. The police should invite comment and discussion ... The whole purpose is to maintain public confidence."

The furtive apparatus that oversees the police fight against "domestic extremists" dates back to the late 1990s animal rights militants were its focus. Many were prepared to resort to violence, intimidating scientists, sending letter bombs and, most notoriously, digging up a grandmother's grave.

The police took an aggressive stance that led to the jailing of many of key animal rights figures. But according to critics, once this threat had subsided

the officers who had built up the infiltration units sought new targets to justify their budgets and existence.

Environmentalists say the burgeoning green movement fitted the bill. They say police were given licence to carry out widespread and intrusive surveillance of entire legitimate organisations. In the late 1990s the remit was extended to "include all forms of domestic extremism, criminality and public disorder associated with cause-led groups".

Police dismiss the claims, insisting they only monitor the minority on the far left and right who might commit crimes such as damaging property or trespass to promote their political aims.

There are three little-known "domestic extremism" units working under the direction of Detective Chief Superintendent Adrian Tudway.

Concerns have been growing about their accountability and subject to agreement they will be taken over by the Met under a "lead force" agreement - the same way the Met has overall command of national counter-terrorism operations.

Tudway, the "national co-ordinator for domestic extremism", commands about 100 staff and has a budget of about £9m a year.

By far the biggest segment of this "domestic extremism" apparatus is the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), which has been compiling a database of protesters and campaign groups across the country since 1999.

It is believed several undercover police officers - including Kennedy and Officer A - had been living long-term in the environmental movement, feeding intelligence back to NPOIU. With around 60 to 70 staff, NPOIU costs £5m a year to run, according to the latest official figures. Its budget has doubled in the last five years.

Housed at a secret location in London, its official remit is "to gather, assess, analyse and disseminate intelligence and information relating to criminal activities in the United Kingdom where there is a threat of crime or to public order which arises from domestic extremism or protest activity".

Essentially it is pooling intelligence from special branch officers, uniformed surveillance teams and undercover officers that can be shared with police forces around the country.

Sensitive information from undercover officers, other informants in protest groups and covert intercepts are handled by a section of the NPOIU called the Confidential Intelligence Unit. The database contains descriptions of people, their nicknames or pseudonyms, reports of their activities and photographs of them.

The only activists so far confirmed to be on the database are 85-year-old John Catt and his daughter Linda, two peaceful campaigners from Brighton. John Catt often goes to demonstrations, where he likes to take out his sketch pad and draw the scene.

Police files revealed how the NPOIU had logged their presence at more than 80 lawful demonstrations over four years, recording details such as their appearance and slogans on their T-shirts.

The files recorded, for instance, how on the morning of 25 September 2005 John Catt was "clean shaven" when he attended a demonstration by Sussex Action for Peace. Another read: "John Catt sat on a folding chair [at the demonstration] and appeared to be sketching."

Catt and his daughter deny any involvement in criminal activity and neither of them have criminal records. Anton Setchell, the police chief who was previously in charge of "domestic extremism", told the *Guardian* in 2009 that it was possible that protesters with no criminal record were on the database but police would have to justify their inclusion.

"Just because you have no criminal record does not mean that you are not of interest to the police," he said. "Everyone who has got a criminal record did not have one once."

The second organisation is known as the National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit (Netcu). It gives out advice to police forces, companies, universities and other organisations to cope with protests that it believes will be unlawful.

The Cambridgeshire-based unit, set up in 2004, liaises with thousands of companies in aviation, energy, research, farming and retail.

The third unit, the National Domestic Extremism Team, was set up in 2005 and consists of detectives who assist police forces around the UK.

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