

Opinion Police

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Stop police spying on protesters

Bradley Day

At the cuts protest, ordinary people were watched by undercover officers. Glamourising Mark Kennedy trivialises a serious issue

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In the Guardian Weekend magazine, among glossy perfume adverts and style advice, a newly groomed [Mark Kennedy made his return](#). The former police officer, who spent over seven years infiltrating protest groups, did not look out of place in the publication. His fresh-off-the-shelf designer jeans complimented his pseudo-scruffy hair. I found myself searching beneath PC Kennedy's photo for captions detailing the price and brand of the model's attire.

Yet Kennedy was the figure at the centre of a month-long international media frenzy following an exposure by a group of his former activist friends. He is now being led on a kiss-and-tell tour by PR guru Max Clifford.

Clifford's carefully constructed strategy saw Kennedy make a series of ridiculous claims within Saturday's article that, at times, bordered on the surreal.

Perhaps the most bizarre argument being that he was trying to aid the climate movement by weeding out the bad protesters from the good. The police, aided by the rightwing press, have long sought to present this false dichotomy of good protester and bad protester. Kennedy shows himself to

be no different. It is a complete nonsense, always used to separate a campaign issue, where there is often much public sympathy, from the actions campaigners feel compelled to take.

Take the climate movement: the climate camps (which Kennedy claims to be "horrified" won't be continuing) have always been explicit about the need for widespread direct action. There are not two sets of people, which Kennedy well knows from his years of infiltration. The person giving out the flyers in the town square one day is the person blockading the runway the next. It is this sort of rhetoric that justifies obscene police tactics, such as undercover officers, in the first place.

Kennedy also had the audacity to describe the climate movement as "useless" at the tasks they set themselves, implying that without his "unique" climbing and driving skills we'd never have got anything done. Ironic, perhaps, given that Kennedy's spying was the reason the attempt to safely shut down Ratcliffe power station in April 2009 failed. It was not due to a lack of skills. This was demonstrated when, less than six months later, the exact same action was successfully executed at [Didcot power station](#) without Kennedy's help.

Perhaps the reason why such little value can be drawn from what Kennedy has to say is he simply doesn't matter. His exposure might have been the catalyst, but he is nothing but a pawn. By focusing the attention on Kennedy's personal state of mind, relationships and world philosophies, we run the risk of trivialising something that actually raises enormous concerns about our civil liberties and fundamental right to protest.

As soon as the media frenzy around Kennedy took hold it became clear he was far from the only one. The National Public Order Intelligence Unit has been operating an extensive network of undercover police officers for many years. They've been doing so seemingly with no boundaries as to what protest groups they infiltrate, without any accountability and with little adherence to any guidelines as to undercover officers' conduct (if such guidelines exist at all).

Despite the media storm having calmed, the revelations keep emerging. Last week it was reported that a police officer posing as [Simon Wellings](#) went undercover with protest group Globalise Resistance between 2001 and 2005. He is known to have used his infiltration to feed information back to his handlers about protesters' sexualities, among other things.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan police commander responsible for policing last Saturday's anti-cuts demonstrations has failed to say whether or not undercover officers were being deployed. One can only deduce from this that there were, as we now know they have been in the past (only this time the police are not making the error of lying about it). The idea that the thousands of teachers, care workers, nurses and others, who were perhaps protesting for the first time in their lives, opened themselves up to police spying, perhaps best exemplifies why the whole issue just so disturbing.

The right to protest is a precious one, and one that all politicians will be quick to defend with rhetoric. Yet on this issue of undercover policing, why has there been no word from the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, or the home secretary? Why does the current protection of freedoms bill, being hailed as the new Magna Carta, not seek to reform the deployment of undercover police officers in any way?

I believe that true reform will only come once there has been genuine scrutiny of what has happened so far. This does not just mean reviewing the behaviour of officers on the ground, but also investigating the roles played by the senior officers and commanders.

No Police Spies is campaigning for a genuinely independent, judge-led inquiry. Such an inquiry would be able to examine the issues free from interference from those senior officers whose actions need to be held to account, and should have the ability to put recommendations for concrete reform.

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