



Opinion Environmental activism

This article is more than 14 years old

The state's pedlars of fear must be brought to account

Simon Jenkins



Why have a private firm run police to spy on a few greens? The Ratcliffe Six case is a warning story of securocrats out of control

Tue 11 Jan 2011 20:07 GMT



The six activists outside Nottingham crown court. Photograph: David Jones/PA

So "Mark Stone" was not acting alone. The most extraordinary feature of the police penetration of the green movement was the [alleged presence of a woman constable](#), "and others ... lots of others." I looked again at the [picture](#) of the Ratcliffe Six, who appeared to be "greens" from central casting. It recalled Chesterton's satire on the early Met police special branch, [The Man Who Was Thursday](#), in which all the members of the "supreme anarchist council" turned out to be policemen. So, are the greens all policemen, and if so what is their game?

Mark Stone, aka Kennedy, clearly had a good job. He could climb trees, buy drinks, sleep with girls, shout at the fuzz and chain himself to nuclear power stations, all on the taxpayer. The only thing that went wrong was a bad attack of Stockholm syndrome. Kennedy fell in love with the enemy. He started worrying about global warming, which was not in the script.

Kennedy moved from undercover agent to agent provocateur to plain provocateur. Matters got out of hand. He was cruising round Europe co-ordinating a veritable Baedeker of protest, from Gleneagles to Spain, Iceland to BP, G20, Didcot, Hartlepool, Drax and Ratcliffe-on-Soar. When he and his gang were finally arrested, the game was up. His presence was so prejudicial

to the case against the Ratcliffe Six that this week they had to be let off scot free.

Running Kennedy - let alone his colleagues - cost the taxpayer £250,000 a year, or £1.75m over seven years. Whether tree-hugging and the occasional trespass constituted threats to national security is moot. A gilded sledgehammer was clearly being deployed to crack a few nuts. They were not a serious terrorist threat. The denouement was a costly fiasco. This is what happens when authority has too much money and no one in charge to impose a sense of proportion.

It is significant that Kennedy did not work for any police force. He worked for a murky organisation called the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU). With a budget of £5m this operates as a branch of the National Domestic Extremism Unit (NDEU) which, in turn, works alongside the National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit (NETCU). Ask where this stands, and you will be told it reports to the Association of Chief [Police Officers' Terrorism and Allied Matters Committee](#), codenamed Acpo(TAM).

Only those who have tarried in the foggy corridors of the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Metropolitan police can have any notion of the Orwellian extravagance of these places. Agencies, units and groups cruise shark-like round the feet of terrified Home Office ministers. Their staffs, expenses, overtime and accommodation are crammed into London's Scotland Yard and Tintagel House. If challenged, they incant their motto: "We keep you safe."

Kennedy's bosses in the NPOIU work for Acpo, but this is not what it seems. It is not, as its name suggests, the police officers' staff club, nor is it a public body of any sort. It is a private company, incorporated in 1997. It is sub-contracted by Whitehall to operate the police end of the government's counterterrorism and "anti-extremism" strategies. It is thus alongside MI5, but even less accountable.

Acpo was once a liaison group. But, like all bureaucracies, it has grown. It now runs its own police forces under a police chief boss, Sir Hugh Orde, like a British FBI. It trades on its own account, generating revenue by selling data from the police national computer for £70 an item (cost of retrieval, 60p). It owns an estate of 80 flats in central London. While the generous logistical support it offered the greens was doubtless gratis, we do not know if E.ON UK, the operator of Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, paid for security intelligence from Kennedy.

As a private company, Acpo need not accede to Freedom of Information requests and presumably could distribute its profit to its own board. The whole operation is reminiscent of the deals set up by the Pentagon with private firms to run the Iraq and Afghan wars, free of publicity or accountability. There is no more vivid testament to the illiberalism of the Blair regime than these eccentric arrangements. They were all approved by the likes of David Blunkett, Charles Clarke, John Reid and Jacqui Smith.

It would be overly cynical to imagine that Acpo was actually sponsoring green activism, to remind ministers of the importance of NPOIU and the terrible things that would happen to power stations if it was cut. But there can be no doubt of the insidious grip that the securocrats' "social terrorism" now has on the public's sense of safety.

A culture of perpetual fear has become so ingrained in government that nobody dares question any spending to which the word security can be attached. Last month these same agencies gave Britons their annual Christmas present, a day of planted headlines screaming, "al-Qaida threat to Christmas shopping". It capped a year of "cuts threat to child protection" and "cuts threat to Olympic safety". The only consequence of the Christmas stories would have been to scare people off going shopping. They must cost London shops millions in lost or deflected sales.

The desire of police lobbyists is to frighten politicians from cutting their budgets, and, in the case of green protesters, to exaggerate the threat they pose to social order. It seems that Acpo and its Whitehall sponsors are aspiring to the realm of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. They have a vested interest in fear. The spy and the rebel "come from the same basket ... Revolution and legality are counter-moves in the same game, forms of idleness at bottom identical." It is the story of PC Mark Kennedy.

The command and control of Britain's police are in chronic need of reform. To have private companies and opaque agencies running undercover operations cannot be right. To delegate responsibility to them for risk assessments, threat levels and safety regulations imposes a cost on society beyond quantification. These costs are beyond public audit.

Perhaps the government's proposed new police commissioners - with or without elected mayors - have the answer. For the moment, across the whole range of defence and security, accountability has collapsed. We fight wars for no sensible reason. We spy on greens for no sensible reason. We spend money for no sensible reason. Perhaps we should remember who was "Sunday", Mr Big, in Chesterton's novel, the architect of supreme anarchy. He turned out to be none other than the head of special branch himself.

More on this story



Revealed: Second undercover police officer who posed as activist

13 Jan 2011 | ...



Mark Kennedy knew of second undercover eco-activist

10 Jan 2011 | ...



Activists walk free as undercover officer prompts collapse of case

10 Jan 2011 | ...



Most viewed