



Opinion Police

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# Police, counter-subversion and extremism

## Robert Lambert

We need partnership, not spies. The coalition forgets that alienating communities is counterproductive

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'To the dismay of many officers, the home secretary is stealthily re-introducing a policy of counter-subversion aimed at Muslims she wrongly assesses to be extremist.' Photograph: Dan Chung for the Guardian

All areas of covert policing, including undercover work, need to be well regulated and well supported. Strong leadership is vital and I am sure [Bernard Hogan-Howe](#), the new Metropolitan police commissioner, will provide it.

I cannot respond here to the Guardian's report this week on [my alleged undercover policing role for special branch](#). This isn't to deny the importance of its reporting following the revelations in the [Mark Kennedy case](#). The police should learn from mistakes as well as from successes. Such reports will no doubt play a part in that process.

Nor would I want to deny that the Met's special branch undercover policing existed, or that it played a key role in countering political violence over a long period. Some of the bravest police officers I ever had the privilege to work with were undercover. Their work helped mount successful criminal prosecutions against groups and individuals engaged in a range of violent and threatening activities. And it is worth noting that the serious threats of violence many covert police officers face do not end with their operational deployments.

The undercover aspect of special branch work has been well reported by [Peter Taylor](#) in his groundbreaking BBC documentaries. What strikes me is the extent to which they record a shift away from counter-subversion in the 1970s and towards countering political violence and intimidation.

In other words, the Met's special branch became less preoccupied with beliefs and focused instead on crime - albeit politically motivated crime. Only in exceptional circumstances does this narrow criminal focus allow for criminal prosecutions against the written or spoken word - as evidenced by successful prosecutions in respect of racist literature from far-right groups. Otherwise it remains focused on criminal violence.

This shift from counter-subversion was clearly a move in the right direction for police, but it is one that the coalition is now putting in jeopardy. To the dismay of many officers, the home secretary is stealthily re-introducing a policy of counter-subversion aimed at Muslims she wrongly assesses to be extremist. Not only is this wrong, it is also damaging the trust built up among Muslims working in successful partnerships with police. To explain what I mean I need to refer to my role as head of the special branch Muslim contact unit (MCU) from 2002 to 2007. This was a police role based on trust, transparency and partnership.

It is an unintended consequence of the Guardian's reporting that critics who object to the fact that I granted legitimacy and status to many politically active Muslim Londoners by working with them as partners should now claim I was spying on them - or, worse, that they were paid informants of mine. Let me be clear.

I dispute the [Policy Exchange argument](#) that my Muslim partners were extreme or subversive, and fit only for the role of paid informants or to be

secretly infiltrated. I did not recruit one Muslim Londoner as an informant nor did I spy on them. They were partners of police and many acted bravely in support of public safety.

The MCU was premised on the hard-won insight that covert counter-terrorism policing is often least suited to winning the community support needed to tackle terrorism and political violence. The MCU benefited from special branch experience of transparent partnerships with other community leaders when tackling terrorist threats prior to 9/11. Equally importantly, the MCU learned from mistakes made where aspects of covert counter-terrorism policing had alienated communities who might have worked in partnership.

In contrast, a counter-subversion strategy of the kind the coalition has begun in all but name against politically active Muslims allows resources to be deployed without regard to criminality.

Government policy risks taking us back to the days of cold war counter-subversion and away from a focus on terrorism and politically motivated crime of all kinds. Instead we should learn from past mistakes and foster where we can an alternative model of counter-terrorism partnership policing built on real trust; a trust that is sometimes necessarily undermined by recourse to the tactics of covert policing.

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