



Opinion Police

This article is more than 13 years old

Police spies must keep everything firmly zipped

Barbara Ellen



No, it's not OK for undercover cops to have sex with unsuspecting activists

Sun 17 Jun 2012 00.04 BST



📷 Mark Kennedy, who had relationships with women when he worked undercover. Photograph: Philipp Ebeling/guardian.co.uk

Could someone please take Nick Herbert, minister for policing and criminal justice, aside and explain that *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* is a comedic film, not a police training video?

Last week, Herbert said that the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act "does not explicitly cover the matter of sexual relationships, but it does make it clear that close management and control should be exercised by the undercover officer's management team". Herbert also said that if there were [set rules banning sexual relationships](#) formed by officers infiltrating gangs, then this would create a simple way for their loyalties to be tested and their true identities to be exposed.

Herbert, who is gay with a civil partner, was also in the news for challenging the Church of England over its [intolerant reaction to gay marriage](#), so his cavalier attitude towards other people's relationships is extraordinary. Questioning him, the Green party's Caroline Lucas cited the eight women who are taking legal action against the Metropolitan Police, claiming that they'd been "duped into forming long-term loving relationships" and "subjected to degrading and inhumane treatment". One policeman, [Bob Lambert](#), the focus of another row about his level of participation in planting an animal rights bomb in the 1980s, is said to have had sex with activists. [Mark Kennedy](#), whose undercover activities led to the collapse of a trial against environmentalists, is alleged to have done the same.

What a dilemma for romantically inclined activists. "Are you the [Swampy](#) of my direct protest dreams or just another PC Plod?" Then again, it's not funny. Not all activists are criminals, but that's beside the point. The deceived, humiliated adults are bad enough, but Lambert, for one, is said to

have also fathered a child with an activist and then disappeared. So, not just fake relationships, but fake fatherhood too? Was the child deemed the ultimate responsibility of Lambert or the police? How would that have played on Father's Day?

Some might argue that these, shall we say, phantom relationships are not just confined to undercover police. Lies, deceptions, even fake identities and disappearing acts abound in everyday civilian life too. However, should this be happening with police officers, officially or unofficially? Moreover, is there any substance to Herbert's assertion that banning these sexual encounters would make undercover officers too easy to spot, putting them, and their operations, at risk?

Not everybody joining a new circle of like-minded people instantly tries to have sex. I'm sure activists don't deliver ultimatums: "Shag or we'll think you're from the filth." Even if such bizarre initiations existed, and were scripted by Lynda la Plante on an off day, it seems easy to get around them. Undercover police could be given fake partners from the off, to render such suspicions redundant. Too much expense and admin? I would imagine that a partner would be much easier to fake. And this state of affairs would be much less likely to end in exposure and disaster.

Indeed, this could be so easily done that the line "Infiltrate, gain trust and, if necessary, have sex" seems as ridiculous as it is creepy and unprincipled. Given the circumstances, the question of whether "sexual consent" has even been given by the activist is a genuinely troubling grey area - how many activists would willingly consent to sex with police officers? Concerns over police surveillance, such as the recent "web snooping charter", are increasingly tinderbox issues, and situations such as this only serve to undermine police efforts in a difficult and dangerous job.

As for Herbert, he might consider giving others the validity and respect he rightly demands for his own relationship. If, as he states, the police haven't got rock-solid legislation in this area, then it's high time they got around to it.

Now, now. No more fighting on the beaches

Skegness is under fire for planning a "smear" poster campaign against Brighton and Blackpool, using images of their graffiti with the tagline: "For sights you'll want to remember, visit Skegness". As someone who once lived in Brighton, visited Blackpool a fair few times, and had Skegness ("Skeggy") as my nearest beach as a child, I feel uniquely placed to settle this seaside skirmish.

Basically, Brighton is chi-chi, Blackpool exudes timeless kitsch appeal, somewhere between saucy seaside postcards, a congealed fry-up, and a fraying poster of Cannon and Ball. At present, Skeggy is nowhere near as well known as either of them, which may explain this latest unpleasantness that shames us all.

With the euro in freefall, this is surely an opportunity for all varieties of British seaside to come together in a mutually beneficial poster campaign? Suggested tagline: "Holiday in the UK - where else could you eat a 99 cone, in a force 10 gale, with a bull mastiff trying to bite you?" At least, could we stop this trash-talking-on-sea madness? It's just not British. Winston Churchill once said something about fighting on the beaches - good people of Skeggy, this is not what he meant.

What next - Phwoar and Peace?

Jane Eyre - what a goer! At least she will be once the classic receives an "erotic rewrite" by Eve Sinclair, in a book called *Jane Eyre Laid Bare*. Just for one moment, let's resist the temptation to rethink the famous line: "Reader, I married him" and instead muse on why any of this has been deemed necessary. All fingers point to the successful *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy and the mounting (apologies!) interest in erotic books, which people can now enjoy on e-readers without startling other passengers on public transport.

Each to their own. Who am I to judge if people enjoy reading about Rochester taking Jane roughly in the east wing or Darcy ravishing Elizabeth at the summer hop ("Mr Darcy, you are indeed in possession of a... good fortune")? As for what those mucky tykes, Heathcliff and Cathy, would end up getting up to, one only asks that the moors be cleared of small children and wildlife and the surrounding vegetation fumigated immediately afterwards.

But is this really the way forward? Does anyone really want to think of Anna Karenina nipping into Ann Summers for some furry handcuffs? Actually, maybe some of you do. Personally, this reminds me of something far away from literary matters. Namely, the porn industry's sexualised, and often brilliant, subversions of well-known film titles, such as *Riding Miss Daisy*, *Schindler's Fist*, *Dyke Hard* and *Pulp Friction*.

On the one hand, a sexy take on a movie classic; on the other, an erotic take on a literary classic. Take a moment to inhale that cultural synergy. It's taken a bit of time but, finally, the British literary world has seen sense and chosen to follow the same trajectory as the LA porn industry.

- This is the archive of The Observer up until 21/04/2025. The Observer is now owned and operated by Tortoise Media.

Most viewed