

Analysis

# Questions remain over animal rights activists' case

Paul Lewis and Rob Evans

An undercover operation 25 years ago that led to the jailing of two animal rights activists now appears shrouded in mystery



📷 Mark Kennedy, who was exposed last year as a police officer after a seven-year deployment among environmental activists. Photograph: Philipp Ebeling

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It seemed like - and may well have been - a heroic police triumph that thwarted a campaign to firebomb department stores. When anti-terrorist officers caught two animal rights activists red-handed as they assembled incendiary devices to set fire to branches of Debenhams, it appeared their timing could not have been better.

As police burst in, the Old Bailey was later to hear, the activists were sitting at a table using a soldering iron that was still hot.

But on Wednesday, 25 years after an audacious police investigation led to the jailing of two activists for inflicting damage totalling £9m on three

Debenhams stores, new questions have been raised in parliament about the ethics of the operation and the conduct of one particular police spy.

The MP who raised the case - Caroline Lucas of the Green party - conceded that much of the infiltration of a cell of the Animal Liberation Front in 1987 remains shrouded in mystery.

What is unlikely to be disputed is that an undercover police officer, Bob Lambert, adopted a fake identity to live deep undercover among hardcore activists - gaining crucial intelligence about their campaign against the fur trade.

The **question raised** on Wednesday was whether Lambert went further, potentially acting as agent provocateur. According to the accusation levelled by one convicted activist - and aired by Lucas in parliament - Lambert is suspected of planting one of three incendiary devices in branches of Debenhams. Lambert has strongly denied the allegations.

A long-standing investigation by the Guardian has brought to light various aspects of Lambert's clandestine surveillance unit, set up in 1968 to gather intelligence about anti-Vietnam war protesters.

Police continue to maintain an army of spies living long-term in activist groups - the most infamous example being **Mark Kennedy**, who was last year exposed as a police officer after a seven-year deployment among green activists. Kennedy's double life as 'Mark Stone' ended in ignominy last year after it emerged he had developed sexual relations with women while undercover.

Since Kennedy was unmasked, a further eight undercover police officers have been identified, most of whom stand accused of developing sexual relations with activists - behaviour police chiefs insist is banned. They include Lambert, who has apologised for deceiving "law-abiding members of London Greenpeace" during his deployment and admitted **he tricked an innocent woman into having a long-term relationship** with him, to lend credibility to his alter ego. Lambert also **fathered a child** with a woman activist he had been sent to spy on.

Responding to Lucas during the parliamentary debate, the policing minister, Nick Herbert, said police officers can start sexual relationships with suspected criminals if it means they are more plausible. He said that the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (Ripa), the law that has governed their activities since 2000, does not explicitly prohibit sexual relations, but requires the operations to be strictly managed.

Herbert said it was important police were allowed to have sex with activists because otherwise it could be used as a test for outing suspected undercover officers.

In his almost total adoption of a new identity, and his willingness to develop close personal relations with women activists, Lambert followed a similar

path to that of Kennedy. His journey into the core of the animal rights movement started around 1984.

Like other members of the covert unit, then known as the Special Demonstration Squad, Lambert radically changed his appearance, growing his hair long to reinvent himself as the militant animal rights activist 'Bob Robinson'.

Insiders from the covert police unit confirm Lambert's work inside the ALF burnished his reputation as one of their most successful spies. He went on to become a spymaster in the unit before leaving the police for a career as a lecturer at St Andrews University.

However, his respected record was placed in doubt on Wednesday when Lucas raised questions about the extent of his involvement in a campaign to target Debenhams stores with incendiary devices. Lucas admitted "we just don't know" exactly how far Lambert may have taken his operation.

By 1987, Lambert had infiltrated the small ALF cell co-ordinating arson attacks on stores in protest against their sale of fur. The relatively simple devices - the size of cigarette boxes - were placed under inflammable objects in the stores and were designed to set off the sprinkler systems, causing extensive flooding. They were set to go off at night so that people were not harmed, according to the activists. In July that year, the incendiary devices were simultaneously planted and ignited at three Debenhams stores in Luton, Romford and Harrow. But only two activists - Geoff Sheppard and Andrew Clarke - were caught and convicted. It appeared that the perpetrator who planted the third device had got away.

Lucas told MPs: "Sheppard and Clarke were tried and found guilty but the culprit who planted the incendiary device in the Harrow store was never caught. Bob Lambert's exposure as an undercover police officer has prompted Geoff Sheppard to speak out about that Harrow attack. Sheppard alleges that Lambert was the one who planted the third device and was involved in the ALF's co-ordinated campaign."

She added: "Sheppard says that two months after the three Debenhams stores were set on fire, he and another person were in his flat, making four more firebombs, when they were raided by police. Sheppard alleges that the intelligence for the raid was so precise that it is now obvious that, and I quote, it 'came from Bob Lambert' who knew that the pair were going to be there making another set of incendiary devices."

The suggestion that intelligence gathered by Lambert thwarted two activists planning a firebombing campaign is likely to be uncontroversial. On 9 September, police burst into Sheppard's bedsit in Hillside Road, Tottenham and caught the pair red-handed surrounded by paraphernalia for making the devices - alarm clocks, copper wire, bulbs and batteries.

Victor Temple, for the prosecution, said at the time: "They were in the process of what was clearly a well-practised method of constructing

incendiary devices similar in every significant respect to those used at Harrow, Luton and Romford."

Previously, Lambert has spoken about his role in the police operation against the ALF, and his specific involvement in the investigation into Sheppard and Clarke, saying: "I succeeded in my task and that success included the arrest and imprisonment of Geoff Sheppard and Andrew Clarke."

What is likely to prove more controversial is the suggestion, relayed by the MP, that Lambert may have gone further than a mere observer, and planted the third incendiary device in order to bolster his credibility and "reinforce the impression of a genuine and dedicated activist".

That is an allegation that Lambert has firmly denied. He told the Guardian: "It was necessary to create the false impression that I was a committed animal rights extremist to gain intelligence so as to disrupt serious criminal conspiracies. However, I did not commit serious crime such as 'planting an incendiary device at the [Debenhams] Harrow store'."

One possibility is that police chiefs authorised some kind of controlled explosion at the Harrow store - which the court heard suffered £340,000-worth of damage - to maintain Lambert's cover story. That, however, would raise further questions.

If Lambert did not let off the incendiary device, who did? And if police knew about the plan to start fires in three branches of Debenhams, why did they let them go ahead, causing £9m in damages and lost trade?

Both are likely to be questions explored by an internal Metropolitan police inquiry into the activities of undercover officers in protest groups between 1968 and 2008 - a review that has been continuing for several months.

The Met said in a statement: "Any matters arising from the review will be assessed and where appropriate will be referred to the Independent [Police Complaints Commission \(IPCC\)](#)."

Whatever the precise nature - if any - of Lambert's involvement in the firebombing campaign, his success in duping hardened animal rights activists into believing he was a fellow campaigner is beyond doubt.

In 1988 - a year after the Debenhams fire attacks - Lambert later went abroad, telling friends he was escaping the attentions of Special Branch. They could not have known he was in fact one Special Branch's finest operatives.

Following their arrests in 1987, Sheppard and Clarke were convicted for planting devices in the Debenhams branches. Sheppard was jailed for four years and four months, and Clarke for more than three years. Sheppard was jailed again in the 1990s but says he stopped doing illegal protests some years ago.

Sheppard said he did not doubt the motives of the man he knew as 'Bob Robinson' until his true identity was revealed in the Guardian. The

convicted activist told the Guardian: "For 24 years I have believed that my friend ... Bob Robinson was on the run and had most likely gone to a different country and probably made a new life for himself and I just thought - good for him, he was the lucky one that managed to get away."

So instinctively did Sheppard trust Lambert, he said, that he was grateful to him when he visited him in jail. Sheppard said: "I remember thinking 'Bob's still there for me'. Actually, he was the guy who put me there."

Clarke declined to talk about his role in the arson campaign but his lawyer, Mike Schwarz, said: "These allegations are very serious. If true, they cast doubt on the safety of my client's convictions. Over a month ago I wrote to the director of public prosecutions asking about these issues. It is of great concern that the Crown Prosecution Service have still not replied to me."

His letter to the DPP, Keir Starmer, states that Lambert played an "active, participating and crucial" role in the firebombing campaign, and the failure of prosecutors to disclose his information about his role would render Clarke's conviction unsafe.

Herbert indicated on Wednesday that the Home Office was not inclined to investigate the Lambert case. It may therefore turn out to be in the courts where the latest allegations are resolved.

Last year the court of appeal quashed the convictions of 20 environmental activists infiltrated by Kennedy. The key issue was the failure by the Crown Prosecution Service to disclose details about Kennedy's undercover operation to the defence team. On the face of it, the Lambert case presents another example in which police or prosecutors did not disclose all the evidence they had amassed.

In July last year, when overturning the convictions of green activists, the three senior judges said they had evidence indicating Kennedy "was involved in activities that went further than the authorisation he was given" and was "arguably, an agent provocateur".

During her speech in parliament, Lucas suggested Kennedy may not be the police spy to have "crossed the line".

"The latest allegations concerning Bob Lambert and the planting of incendiary devices would beg the question: has another undercover police officer crossed the line into acting as an agent provocateur?" she said. "And how many other police spies have been encouraging protesters to commit crimes?"

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