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# Secretive review into claim that police spy set fire to Debenhams

Undercover policeman Bob Lambert has been accused of causing £340,000 of damage to a High Street store, but is the allegation being investigated properly?

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Will the public ever find out the truth about the latest allegation surrounding the activities of undercover police officers?

This month, [Caroline Lucas](#), Britain's only Green MP, aired an allegation that undercover policeman Bob Lambert planted an incendiary device which set fire to a High Street store. The device, whoever planted it, caused damage totalling £340,00 to the [Debenhams](#) store.

The allegations originated from Geoff Sheppard, one of the activists who was convicted of setting fire to [Debenhams](#) as part of an animal rights campaign to stop the store selling fur. Lambert has strongly denied the claim.

The allegations were made in a parliamentary debate (a transcript can be found [here](#)). We published [this story](#) on the allegations, along with a more in-depth article [here](#) and a video [here](#).

Also worth looking at is a Newsnight piece [here](#) (the coverage starts about 25 minutes into the programme).

By any measure, the allegation is startling and serious, and the public should know whether it is true or not. So who is investigating?

The answer to that question is typically opaque. It seems that it is the Met police which is "reviewing" whether one of its (former) officers did do it. The public is however not allowed to know that officially.

The position is this - last October, [Bernard Hogan-Howe](#), the [Metropolitan police](#) commissioner, [announced that Scotland Yard](#) had set up an internal review into the deployment of undercover police officers in political groups between 1968 and 2008. It followed a series of disclosures about the undercover infiltration.

Since then, the Met has added little to Hogan-Howe's statement that the review was "assessing various issues arising from covert deployments" and was "a complex process due to the time elapsed and the nature and volume of the material and the inherent sensitivity of issues involved".

Nominally a Deputy Assistant Commissioner (initially Mark Simmons) was in charge of the review. However the day-to-day work of the review is being conducted by the Met's Directorate of Professional Standards - in everyday language, the section within the Met which examines allegations of misconduct involving its officers.

The Met says it will not confirm or discuss which specific allegations are being looked at in this review. The rationale for that stance is, the Met says, the standard police policy to neither confirm nor deny which officers have worked undercover. Therefore it will not say if that review is examining the latest allegation that Lambert planted the device which set fire to Debenhams. The Met gave the same response when asked if the review encompassed the disclosure that **Lambert and another undercover police officer secretly fathered children with political campaigners** they had been sent to spy on and later disappeared completely from the lives of their offspring.

All the Met will say is that officers involved in the review met Caroline Lucas after she highlighted the allegations and that "she has been updated and her concerns have been discussed". **Lucas said she met the head** of the directorate, Commander Peter Spindler, who told her that the Met had "extended their ongoing review in light of points raised in the debate".

For those seeking to hold the police to account, this is worrying for two reasons.

Firstly, this appears to be a review of 40 years of undercover operations covering serious allegations of misconduct, but the public is being told nothing about what is going on. **Like all the other 11 inquiries** set up following disclosures surrounding the police spies, it is being held behind closed doors, with no input from those who were affected by the spying. It is a far cry from an over-arching full public inquiry which many including **former DPP, Ken MacDonald**, have called for, but there are no prizes for guessing what the authorities would prefer.

Secondly, the review appears to have quite a low status. Even the Met does not describe it as an inquiry or investigation, merely a review. It is not serious enough to warrant supervision by the **Independent Police Complaints Commission**. Instead the IPCC is taking a hands-off approach. The IPCC has agreed that if the Met review comes across any serious misconduct or possible criminality, the Met should notify the IPCC. Other than that, the IPCC has no involvement, and the Met is left up itself to decide whether to report itself.

Is it too cynical to think that these arrangements do little to command public confidence and trust?

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