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Top cop says sexual relationships with activists are "almost inevitable"

Scotland Yard commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe's claim that it is "almost inevitable" that undercover officers will form sexual relationships with activists has been condemned

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Britain's most senior police officer was questioned yesterday about the sexual relationships formed by undercover policemen.

Bernard Hogan-Howe, the commissioner of the Metropolitan police, was up in front of the home affairs select committee.

He was asked by Labour MP David Winnick if it was appropriate for undercover officers to have sexual relationships with the people they had been sent to spy on.

Here's the reply in full from Hogan-Howe :

"It certainly should not be part of the strategy to do that. The fact that it may sometimes happen, I think, could almost be inevitable, not that I would encourage it obviously.

"When you are deploying an officer to live a lifestyle and they are going to get close to a target or group of targets, it is not impossible to imagine that human relationships develop in that way, so we put various things in place to make sure that if it is going to happen or there's a likelihood of it happening, we spot it early and get the UC [undercover officer] out before it happens. But it is not impossible given human relationships."

A few points about that reply.

Firstly, Hogan-Howe makes it sound as if the relationships are or have been a relatively rare event. This is plainly not true. What has come out so far makes it clear that the relationships were frequent and routine. As we reported here, "eight of the nine undercover officers identified over the past 21 months are believed to have had intimate sexual relationships with protesters they were spying on." The relationships spanned a period from the 1980s until 2010.

Secondly, it is also highly unlikely that undercover police officers deployed in political campaigns have been withdrawn when they about to start or

were in a relationship with a campaigner. Quite the contrary, it would seem.

Thirdly, his comment that the relationships are "almost inevitable" has been roundly condemned today by the group of eight women who are suing police chiefs.

They said his claim was "both outrageous and alarming. Although claiming not to condone such behaviour as acceptable 'strategy', he made no effort to express remorse for the actions of his officers, which have caused serious psychological damage to the women concerned, nor to show compassion for the devastating experiences of the women.

"The suggestion that 'boys will be boys' and are incapable of acting with self restraint towards women in political movements shows institutionally sexist attitudes are prevalent at the very highest levels of the Metropolitan police.

"Instead Hogan-Howe should be sending a message to his officers that such conduct is not acceptable in any circumstances."

You can see Hogan-Howe's response at yesterday's meeting of the home affairs committee here - it's about 15 minutes in.

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