



Opinion Police

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Police undercover work has gone badly wrong. We need a public inquiry

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Undercover work is a necessary part of police activity, but recent scandals reveal a failure to take seriously the rights of citizens

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New Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan police, in London. Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/PA

Undercover policing is the lifeblood of many dangerous and sensitive investigations. The evidence that's obtained in these operations can bring intelligence of the highest quality - and it can lock up dangerous people. That's all to the good. But it also involves deceit and intrusion on a grand and perhaps growing scale, sometimes practised on those caught up in things they have no responsibility for and don't understand. So getting this balance right, between the effectiveness of undercover work, and its accompanying abuses of privacy and intimacy, must be the key to public confidence.

But it seems things have gone badly wrong. From secret policemen having sex with their unknowing targets and [fathering and abandoning undercover offspring](#), to sworn officers on duty [harvesting the names of tragically lost children](#), we seem to be reaching the point where a collapse in public faith may be inevitable.

There are all sorts of ways to create a false identity. You don't have to [steal one from a dead child](#). It is a careless and bullying intrusion into the most shattering human grief. The crassness and cruelty of this quite unnecessary technique is beyond belief - and that undercover officers have employed it persistently, presumably at the behest of their commanders over many years, should be a matter of deep shame for British policing. It also raises the

most serious questions about the planning and execution of undercover police work in this country.

The response of the police establishment to all this has been contradictory and confused. It has ranged from a blanket denial that officers were "authorised" to have sex with their targets, to an indication that it might sometimes happen, to relieved reliance upon a bizarre recent finding by a high court judge that when it passed legislation regulating undercover police activity, that parliament must have anticipated officers having sex as part of their work, because MPs have all read James Bond.

Setting aside the remarkable complacency of this weird trivialisation of the anxious debates that accompanied the parliamentary passage of the [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act](#), the reality is that the employment of calculated sexual intercourse as part of a policeman's armoury is bound to corrode and corrupt. This is because it represents the most jagged invasion of another person's privacy, the grossest attack on their autonomy, and it is bound to unhinge the relationship between officer and target and bystander in a manner, to put it mildly, unlikely to serve the cause of fair and objective policing. What, for example, are the possible impacts upon the officer? What if he, or she, falls in love? It is, in every way, inappropriate - and deliberate impregnation is surely to stoop even lower.

What seems to link all these techniques is a failure on the part of the police to consider in any way the boundaries of intimacy, or even some evidence of a desire on their part to operate in a milieu where the recognition of those boundaries is barred. But this is a totalitarian way of looking at the world, in which the targets of investigation are stripped of the protections of humanity, and infants, if they are dead, are just objects for use in the face of grief. Of course undercover work is intrusive, that is its whole point. But the state is not entitled to assume ownership of people's souls, even in the face of grave crime. Clearly, the police service has not always understood this.

It is, however, difficult to see where a change in culture will come from. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) is reeling from cuts and questions about the effectiveness of its investigations, and the high court appears mired in (notoriously misogynist) fiction. It seems only a [public inquiry](#), taking stock of the picture both nationally and locally, receiving evidence and advice, and setting standards and mechanisms of control, is capable of rescuing us, and necessary undercover policing, from a steady drip of exposure and seediness.

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