Opinion

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# Undercover policing: betrayed
## Editorial

Revelations of police officers infiltrating protest groups and taking the identites of dead children have shaken the public's trust

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Covert police operations are an unavoidable part of national security. But by their very nature they challenge the boundaries between state and citizen. In a report published on Friday, MPs on the home affairs committee reiterate the basic truth: the only way we can be confident that the state is on our side is by continuous monitoring of its activities against publicly accepted criteria of proportionality and conduct. Over the past two years, the Guardian has found serious evidence that officers - apparently with no fear of challenge - were secretly operating in a way that broke the limits of moral acceptability with a terrifying sense of impunity, which has yet to be adequately challenged by any action by the police themselves.

It was the collapse of a case against environmental activists in Nottinghamshire in early 2011 that led to the discovery that police officers, while infiltrating protest groups, had formed long-term relationships with some women members (there is no evidence of women officers behaving in the same way). One woman had a child with a man whom she discovered only 20 years later - long after he had walked out on her and their baby - was an undercover officer. In a private hearing last month, some of them told the MPs of the psychological devastation of finding out that their betrayal by men to whom they were committed had been nothing more than collateral damage in a covert operation aimed against a cause in which they passionately believed. Eleven women are now arguing in the high court that, whatever happens in James Bond, they experienced trauma and a breach of their human rights.

It did not stop there. In the past few weeks we have been reporting equally shattering revelations of the theft of the identity of dead children by officers constructing false personas. It now seems that the identities of perhaps as many as 100 children have been cruelly expropriated, but since no official is prepared to confirm or deny anxious inquiries from bereaved parents, the tally remains unconfirmed.

So far 16 separate investigations, including one by Her Majesty's Inspectorate and another conducted by the police, have been launched to try to explain how such activities were ever allowed to happen and why they apparently continued unabated until the Guardian's reports appeared. But only the MPs have addressed the issues that must concern us all: who is guarding the guardians, and according to what criteria?

This is not difficult territory. No one would dispute the unacceptability of forming a serious relationship, let alone starting a family, in the course of a covert operation. Nor can there ever be an excuse for stealing the identity of a dead child; nor, where it happened, failing to acknowledge it or apologise. It may take more debate to set out the broader principles governing the limits of state intrusion into a citizen's life where security is reasonably considered to be at risk. What matters more is that covert operations are authorised externally, and preferably by a judge, and that those decisions can be challenged in the courts, rather than referred only to the investigatory powers tribunal, where there is no further appeal. The most chilling aspect of the behaviour we have uncovered is the sense that it is not clear either to whom the victims can appeal nor to whom the offenders must answer.

The police response so far feels uncomfortably close to the early stages of the phone-hacking investigation. MPs expressed astonishment when the Metropolitan police's deputy assistant commissioner, Patricia Gallan, told them that as boss of Operation Herne, the main inquiry, she had nothing to report - despite spending more than £1m and deploying a team of 20 officers for more than a year. The inquiry is now in the hands of Derbyshire's chief constable, Mick Creedon. He needs to establish quickly what went wrong and how to stop it happening again. But he could start by apologising.

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