

More Evidence of Police Infiltration of UK Political Groups

By [Julie Hyland](#)

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Picture: Mark "Stone" Kennedy then and now

In a move intended to draw a line under the exposure of a network of undercover police officers that have been working in political and protest groups for a number of years, the UK government has announced that the Metropolitan Police will now oversee operation of the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU). The action, which shifts the NPOIU from under the purview of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), represents a further assault on democratic rights.

An extensive covert state penetration of protest groups came to light in early January, when a trial against six environmental campaigners accused of conspiring to shut down Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station in Nottingham collapsed.

It subsequently emerged that the Crown Prosecution Service had been forced to abandon the trial when police agent Mark Kennedy offered to give evidence on behalf of the six. Kennedy had been undercover in the environmental movement for eight years, posing as activist "Mark Stone". During this time his activities, which covered much of Britain and Europe, included not only the gathering of information, but also acting as an agent provocateur. Involved in organising, financing and leading campaigns, witnesses say Kennedy played a role in instigating violent confrontations with the police. These confrontations were then used to bolster the powers of the police and clamp down on demonstrations and opposition groups.

Kennedy is just one of three undercover officers confirmed to have been working in direct-action groups for years. The exact number is unknown.

Kennedy worked out of the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), which was created in 1999 under the pretext of clamping down on animal rights activists that had threatened attacks on scientists and science facilities. It is one of three covert organisations targeting "domestic extremists" in Britain, including the National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit (NECTU), set up in 2004, and the National Domestic Extremism Team (NDET), set up in 2005.

All were created under the Blair Labour government, and all were run by the Association of Chief Police Officers. The three were working under Detective Chief Superintendent Adrian Tudway. As the national coordinator for domestic extremism, Tudway reportedly has a budget of some £9 million a year, of which £5 million is said to go to NPOIU.

According to the Guardian, NPOIU's official remit is "to gather, assess, analyse and

disseminate intelligence and information relating to criminal activities in the United Kingdom where there is a threat of crime or to public order which arises from domestic extremism or protest activity.”

In his role as provocateur, Kennedy often financed the organisation of direct-action campaigns, presumably with monies funded by the taxpayer. He was reportedly so generous that he was known as “Flash”.

Reports that undercover officers were paid some £250,000 a year and that several were known to have sexual relations with members of the groups they were infiltrating led to widespread criticism in the media.

The general line, however, is that the scale and longevity of such covert operations is due to a lack of regulation, or “mission creep”. Having dealt with the threat of animal rights activists—including the jailing of a number of key leaders—those officers in charge of the infiltration unit began targeting legitimate and peaceful organisations in order to justify their existence and keep the money coming in. Writing in the Guardian, Tom Griffin said, “Environmentalists have become the victims of out of control bureaucratic empire-builders, intent on carving out fiefdoms by criminalising legitimate protest.”

In this regard, most attention has focussed on ACPO, which established the three covert units. Although funded in part by the Home Office and police authorities, ACPO is a private company with no statutory basis and no parliamentary oversight. It is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Run commercially, it generates revenue in part by selling certificates detailing whether or not an individual has criminal convictions. The information, which is gathered from national police records and costs £70 a certificate, is often needed by people for work or travel purposes.

Questions have also been raised about the relationship between ACPO and major corporations affected by environmental campaigners. NECTU, for example, advises energy, research, agricultural and retail businesses on the threat from protestors.

The claim that the subversion of the right to protest demonstrated by the Kennedy affair arose somehow organically, or was directed by a handful of officers, is a diversion from the real motives behind the attack on democratic rights.

The activities of ACPO and its various covert surveillance units did not emerge from nowhere. They were directed by the Labour government under Tony Blair as part of a wholesale assault on civil liberties. In 1999, the NPIOU’s remit was expanded to “include all forms of domestic extremism, criminality and public disorder associated with cause-led groups”—a deliberately ambiguous formulation that effectively criminalised all forms of protest and opposition deemed prohibited by the government and police.

The terror attacks of 9/11 gave the justification for Labour to step up its assault on civil liberties under the guise of the “war on terror.” Control orders, detention without charge for up to 42 days and the overturning of freedom of speech were just some of the measures imposed by the Blair government as it established the legislative framework for a police state.

The full consequences of these measures were bloodily revealed on July 22, 2005, when plainclothes police officers murdered Jean Charles de Menezes in broad day light in a London

subway carriage.

This draconian assault on democratic rights was made necessary by the foreign and domestic policy of the British bourgeoisie. Blair had defied mass protests in order to join with George W. Bush in the criminal invasion of Iraq. By riding on America's military coattails, British capitalism hoped to secure its presence in the geopolitically strategic Middle East. This strategy was directly related to the big business policies pursued by the Labour government at home, which had seen social inequality widen to unprecedented levels.

This agenda, opposed by working people both in Britain and internationally, was incompatible with the preservation of democratic norms—hence the turn to police methods.

The situation today is even more polarised. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government is implementing unprecedented austerity measures that will destroy public services, further undermine wages and see hundreds of thousands of workers made unemployed, while destroying the futures of millions of young people.

The student protests in November against the tripling of university tuition fees and the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance were only the first expression of the hostility and anger that is developing among large sections of the population. The brutal police assault on those protests is indicative of how the government intends to respond.

It is under these conditions that Policing Minister Nick Herbert announced that ACPO would be stripped of all “operational duties” and that the Metropolitan Police would take over control of NPIOU. The move was presented as one of greater “transparency” and “accountability”. It is nothing of the sort. The NPIOU, NECTU and NDET are to be subsumed into Scotland Yard's Counter Terrorism Command. As a result, “domestic extremism” has become synonymous with terrorism.

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