

# Britain: massive increase in political police operations

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Britain's political police—Special Branch and MI5—are more intrusive than at any other point in history, according to a recent report by Statewatch, the civil liberties group.

This has been made possible through a combination of the “‘war on terrorism’ which is targeting migrant communities and demands to combat EU-wide protests on a whole range of issues—peace and the environment, racism and globalisation”, the report, which is entitled *Analysis of the Special Branch's role in conducting surveillance for MI5 and on public order*, states. (See <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2003/sep/01specbranch.htm>)

Special Branch's primary role “is directed towards counter-terrorism, followed by public order ... the two main methods of targeted surveillance collection being through human sources and surveillance”.

Their intelligence-gathering role includes surveillance—observing, following, bugging and tracking—and the “management of human sources”—a euphemism for infiltration by undercover officers, paid agents or the recruitment of informers”.

Another important role for Special Branch is monitoring demonstrations, which can include undercover officers helping out in preparations for protests. As they have the power of arrest, Special Branch often works in tandem with MI5, which does not have such powers.

Statewatch points out that figures on the numbers of Special Branch police have always been notoriously hard to quantify. It was first established in London in 1883 to monitor Irish Republicans, but by the mid-1960s there were just 300 officers. With the mass worker and student movements of 1968, however, local forces were established across the country.

Today, each of the 43 police forces in England and

Wales has their own Special Branch divisions. The largest Special Branch unit is that attached to the Metropolitan Police in London, which, in addition to spying on groups and activities in the capital, also assumes a national role. This includes work on public order intelligence nationwide, the National Joint Unit, which coordinates national anti-terrorist operations, the European Liaison Section and the unit dealing with Irish Republican terrorism.

In 1980 overall figures for officers employed by Special Branch were provided for the first time by Home Secretary Merlyn Rees, showing a total of 1,638 officers. Statewatch points out that this was in a period when “the Cold War was still in full swing, that industrial strikes were commonplace, the conflict in Northern Ireland was ongoing” and there were “mass confrontations at Grunwick's factory and the enormous anti-racist demonstration in Southall in 1979 (where Blair Peach was killed by a Special Patrol Group officer).”

By the 1990s this had expanded to 2,200 and by 2001 had almost doubled to 4,247. Even this figure is considered an underestimate as the government has never provided definite numbers for Scotland.

In addition, Special Branch “now has far more civilian staff and the means for mass surveillance of telecommunications and the payments of informers which it never had in those days,” the report states.

“Overall it can be said that the Special Branch of today in the ‘war against terrorism’ and EU demands for the surveillance of potential travelling protesters is more than two-and-a-half times larger than it was during the Cold War era and the conflict in Northern Ireland.”

The terror attacks of September 11 have provided the pretext for this massive extension of state surveillance.

The Blair government has embraced the Bush administration's war on terrorism, pushing through draconian legislation that severely limits democratic rights, including open-ended detention for those thought to be involved in terror activities.

Statewatch draws attention to a rare report on the activities of the Special Branch prepared by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary in January 2003, which was barely mentioned in the media. The report's remit was to look at Special Branch's role in the wake of September 11, in "the national security structure of this country" and the "prevention and detection of serious crime and public disorder".

The report claimed that the terror attack on New York had underlined the "urgent need to monitor those who abuse democratic liberties to further their terrorist intentions." And it said that during the 1990s Special Branch faced new challenges from the rise of Islamic extremism and "the emerging threat to public order by extremists such as those within the animal rights movement and others intent on *the violent disruption of the global economy*". (Emphasis added)

The Special Branch review proposed a number of changes, including the proposal that local Special Branch's should no longer be accountable to the Chief Constable on operational matters, meaning that it should no longer be held accountable to local police authorities.

It should be noted that almost a decade has passed since these new threats were identified, yet Britain has not been attacked by Islamic extremists despite almost constant warnings by the government to this effect.

The report's claims regarding the threat of anti-globalisation protesters is even more bogus—there is no evidence whatsoever to implicate the mass protests that have taken place in Seattle, Geneva, London and elsewhere in the planning or commissioning of terrorist activities. Statewatch reports that each Special Branch division in Britain is to provide the names and profiles of those expected to travel to the next anti-globalisation protest outside the European Union summit in Brussels in October.

The report points out that "although the review makes no mention of it, the Special Branch's 'national security' role is not limited to anti-terrorism, but it includes placing 'subversive' groups and individuals under surveillance in addition to its public order role."

In other words, under the veneer of anti-terror activities the internal security services have been strengthening covert operations against any individual and group it believes could present a political challenge to the existing order.



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