

Confidential Intelligence Unit: Unaccountable spying operation established in Britain

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22 April 2009

With little press coverage, let alone investigatory journalism, it was reported in February that a new police intelligence operation, the Confidential Intelligence Unit (CIU), had been established in Britain. According to the only information that is available on the CIU, its remit is to spy on and organise surveillance of “domestic extremists”.

The CIU has been established by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), made up of the heads of all the regional police forces in the UK. Its existence only came to light through a February 8 article in the *Mail on Sunday*, entitled “Secret police to spy British ‘subversives’.”

The source of the article was an internal police job advertisement for the “Head of Confidential Intelligence Unit” obtained by the newspaper, which outlined some of the units wide ranging powers.

According to the advert, the CIU is a part of the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) and works closely with government departments, university authorities and private sector companies with a remit to “remove the threat of criminality and public disorder that arises from domestic extremism”.

The NPOIU was established by the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair in March 1999. Its role, as described by the Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary which is responsible to the Home Office, is to perform “an intelligence function in relation to politically motivated disorder (not legitimate protests) on behalf of England, Wales and Scotland” by “co-ordinating the national collection, analysis, exploitation and dissemination of intelligence on the extremist threat to public order”.

Under the heading of “Main purpose of Role”, the head of the CIU is to “manage the covert intelligence function for domestic extremism, and the confidential intelligence unit. The post carries membership of NPOIU Senior Management Team and you will be expected to make a significant contribution to the overall performance of the police service of England and Wales and the national Domestic Extremism units in reducing or removing the threat, criminality and

public disorder that arises from domestic extremism in England and Wales specifically, and the UK generally”.

The advert states that “Domestic Extremism may be categorised as; Animal Rights Extremism, Environmental Extremism, Extreme Right Wing, Extreme Left Wing, Emerging Threats”.

It requires the head to “Develop effective relationships with government departments, other agencies, the commercial and academic sectors and communities and develop policies and strategies that enable the police service to be effective in dealing with the DE [domestic extremism] threat”.

The head of the CIU will be required to “Develop the National Intelligence Model and in collaboration with NCDE [National Co-ordinator Domestic Extremism] units and Regional and Force investigations” and “Where appropriate, set strategic direction to national intelligence collection plans, and covert intelligence development operations that may involve CHIS [Covert Human Intelligence Sources] and technical assets”.

A key task of the head of the CIU will be to maintain the secrecy of the organisation and to prevent any legal action being taken against it. The advertisement states that the head of the CIU will “Represent NPOIU at Public Interest Immunity hearings, and legal meetings regarding sensitive source material”.

This means that the CIU will seek to obtain Public Interest Immunity Certificates from government ministers in order to prevent its spying and surveillance operations from being disclosed to the public.

According to the *Mail*, “Details of the senior vacancies were circulated to police forces last year—the closing date for applications was November 14, 2008. The top job was open to officers of at least the rank of Detective Chief Inspector”.

It also reported, “Another vacancy, for an administration officer, states that the CIU will be involved in the collection of ‘secret data’. The job descriptions indicate that the postholders will have links with MI5”.

The CIU can only be described as a political police force.

What has been created is a new national organisation charged with spying on the population, specifically monitoring political activity, which operates outside of any parliamentary oversight and cannot be held accountable in any way. It is to be exempt from public scrutiny under the Freedom of Information Act, as the ACPO is legally characterised as a private limited company. PLCs are not required to comply with the Freedom of Information Act.

Previously “counter-subversion” and domestic spying was usually conducted by the MI5 Security Service. Whilst the organisation routinely engaged in illicit activity, it still remained formally subject to ministerial, parliamentary and judicial oversight.

The CIU is not subject to these restrictions on its activity. Its all-embracing power to spy on the political activities of the population recalls the practices of the Stasi—the notorious state security agency that operated in East Germany under the Stalinist regime.

ACPO is a virtual law unto itself, developing ever more authoritarian policing strategies and policies which have been enthusiastically adopted by the Labour government.

In an article on the CIU, *Guardian* journalist Henry Porter commented, “Few understand that ACPO is a private company, which happens to be funded by a Home Office grant and money from 44 police authorities. But despite its important role in drafting and implementing policies that affect the fundamental freedoms of this country, ACPO is protected from freedom of information requests and its proceedings remain largely hidden from public view. In reality ACPO is no more troubled by public scrutiny than the freemasons.” Porter continued, “Senior police officers are acting with increasing autonomy in drafting these authoritarian new policies. If you wonder how it came to be that police officers are being equipped with 10,000 stun guns, despite the reports of hundreds of deaths in the United States, or how the automatic number plate recognition camera network was set up to record and store data from most road journeys, look no further than ACPO.”

The CIU’s definition of “extremism” is so broad that it encapsulates virtually all forms of legitimate political protest. In an article entitled, “We are all extremists now”, *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne wrote that the “ACPO spokesman tells me, it is in the business of targeting groups such as those involved in the recent Gaza war protests, trade unionists taking part in secondary industrial action and animal rights organisations—though only if they break the law or ‘seek to break the law’.”

Regarding the definition of an “extremist”, Milne states that the ACPO spokesman told him that “there doesn’t seem to be a single, commonly agreed definition”.

Milne correctly points out that those under surveillance by

the CIU would include “all those students who have been occupying university buildings since the new year in protest at Israel’s carnage in the Palestinian territories; all those engineering construction workers who staged mass walkouts at refineries and power stations over the past couple of weeks; and all those who blocked streets—or threw their shoes at police—around the Israeli embassy in London at the height of the Gaza bombardment in January.”

The formation of the CIU immediately presaged a number of large scale police operations. These included the brutal police clampdown on the G20 protesters in London earlier this month, the “anti-terror” police raids on 12 students in the northwest of England on April 8 and the mass arrests of 114 environmental protesters in Nottingham on April 13.

On March 30, immediately prior to the G20 Summit, five people were arrested in Plymouth under the Terrorism Act. Paul Netherton, Devon and Cornwall assistant chief constable, said of one of those arrested that he was in possession of “material related to political ideology”.

When asked what this consisted of, Netherton replied, “It’s political, it relates to political organisations, it’s not extreme but it’s a different political view. It leads to motives and things like that.”

Aside from the two articles published in the *Guardian* in its online Comment is Free section and the single article in the *Mail on Sunday*, there has been no further commentary in the media or even an acknowledgement that the CIU has been established. Such indifference underscores the contempt for basic democratic rights that is prevalent among official “opinion makers”.

The CIU job advertisement can be viewed here



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