

British police spying operation caught on audio

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29 April 2009

“UK police can afford more than 20 quid,” said the intelligence officer, during an exchange in which members of a unit associated with Strathclyde Police sought to recruit art student Tilly Gifford as an informant within the environmental protest group Plane Stupid.

Excerpts from a transcript of the interview, made secretly by Gifford, were published by the *Guardian* on April 25 (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/apr/25/p-olice-informers-tape-recordings-gifford>).

The unnamed officer’s comment epitomises the growing importance the British government and the UK’s financial and corporate elite attach to policing political dissent.

The evidence of police spying follows the brutal police attack on protestors at the G20 summit in London, the “pre-emptive” arrest of 114 environmental activists planning a protest at a Nottingham power station, and the arrest and subsequent release of 11 Pakistani nationals and one UK citizen on April 8.

Plane Stupid member Gifford was arrested on March 3 during a protest at Aberdeen airport. She was charged with vandalism and breach of the peace during a peaceful protest against climate change.

She was arrested again on March 22 in Glasgow while surveying an abandoned building as a potential exhibition space. After the second arrest, items in her possession were confiscated by the police. Most were returned on her release, but her house keys were retained.

Gifford complained about the missing keys and was given a hand-delivered letter asking her to collect her belongings from Partick police station, Glasgow. On arrival she was invited into a back room for a chat about Plane Stupid. A conversation ensued in which Gifford was both threatened and offered cash to act as an informant. She had the presence of mind in the course of this to switch on the voice recorder on her mobile phone.

Following discussions amongst Plane Stupid members, the group decided to attempt to expose the police efforts to cultivate informants amongst their members. Two further conversations took place over the next five weeks, which were also surreptitiously recorded.

The captured interviews reveal the two police officers trying to offer rationales for Gifford acting as an informant. They lift the lid on a domestic spying operation directed against various protest organisations.

At one point in the first interview, Officer 2 [no names were released by the *Guardian*] states, “We are not concerned about Plane Stupid. We are concerned about individuals within Plane Stupid.”

Officer 1 elaborates in a Northern Irish accent: “Look at the big picture—we work with hundreds of people, believe me, ranging from terrorist organisations right through to whatever... We have people who give us information on environmentalism, left-wing extremism, right-wing—you name it, we have the whole spectrum of reporting.”

He continues on the same theme in the second interview.

“We have men, women, who are now, yeah—right now—doing their work, their daily work. They go about their work day in, day out. They then go home to their families. They go home to husbands, wives, children. We are way, way down. That would be exactly the same with you. You would still have your life, Tilly. You go about your life as you do every day—we would be sitting somewhere way down here.

“But when you would be going to the meetings that you would be going to anyway, we would maybe be meeting you about once every two weeks, once every three weeks, once every week maybe.”

The officers offer Gifford a variety of rationales for spying and hint at cash payments running to thousands of pounds. Gifford has been reported as saying that she was threatened with a criminal record.

Although these comments are not recorded, Gifford's student loan, which can easily run to tens of thousands of pounds if her circumstances are similar to those of many students, was mentioned.

In one particularly odious comment, Officer 1 notes, "Can I tell you, Tilly, we actually have people working, who actually take the money and they give it to charity, because what they're doing is moral, they're doing it for a moral reason. So they give the money to, maybe Cancer Research, Save the Whale, whatever. Other people use it because, believe it or not, they actually need it. Because their own jobs aren't well paid."

Gifford presses them for a figure. Concluding the second interview, Officer 2 replies, "It depends on the information."

In the third recording, from a phone call, Gifford asks Officer 1 why, according to her lawyer, neither his nor the second officer's names are listed as members of the Strathclyde police. They claim there are lots of unlisted individuals.

Gifford also tries to find out the name of the police unit. Officer 1 states, "We work for the community—what have we changed our name to now—intelligence section."

The *Sunday Herald* April 26 reported that two other Plane Stupid supporters, including another art student, had been approached. Kate Mackay said that she had been left a hand-written note on Strathclyde Police-headed notepaper asking for a meeting. When she tried to pursue the matter, the named officer could not be found.

Which unit the two police officers were working for is unclear. In line with the Association of Chief Police Officers National Intelligence Model, Community Intelligence Units or similar entities have been established in some police forces in recent years to collect and collate low-level information on both criminal and political matters, focussing particularly on young people.

Strathclyde Police's web site does not mention the existence of such a unit. It is possible that the officers were from the force's Counter Terrorism Intelligence Section, which has been the subject of protests for its treatment of foreign nationals, or one of a number of units attached to the CID. It is also reasonable to speculate that the operation against Plane Stupid is being nationally coordinated across several forces.

Strathclyde Police initially denied to Gifford's lawyer that the intelligence officers had anything to do with them. A later statement from Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton merely noted, "Officers from Strathclyde Police have been in contact with a number of

protesters involved with the Plane Stupid protests, including Aberdeen Airport. The purpose of this has been to ensure any future protest activity is carried out within the law."

Hamilton cited the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 as the legal basis for the contact.

Gifford wrote in the *Guardian*, "Over the last six months Plane Stupid has been targeted by a campaign of police intimidation and intrusion. Some of us have been approached and menaced to inform on the rest of the group; others have been arrested for perfectly lawful protest, including one elderly protestor who was interrogated and held in a cell overnight for writing 'you fly, we die' in the snow."

In addition to airport protests, most recently at Aberdeen and Stansted airports, which disrupted flights and airline revenue, people associated with the group have carried out some high profile stunts. These, no doubt, embarrassed the government and their security staff. Dan Glass super-glued himself to Prime Minister Gordon Brown's jacket in 2008, while Leila Deen recently poured green slime over Business Secretary Lord Peter Mandelson.

That such a relatively innocuous group of people should be the target of covert police operations says a great deal about class relations in the UK. Largely out of public view, an apparatus of political spying and repression is being constructed with the aim of providing the state with information intended to undermine political protest. Ultimately its target is the working class.

This apparatus, drawn up largely by the Labour government, faces little opposition from within the political establishment. The Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh defended the operation. A spokesman for Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill told the press that he "has discussed the matter with Strathclyde Police's Assistant Chief Constable and is satisfied the force has acted proportionately and legitimately."



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