

UK: Spying powers used more than 55,000 times by local government agencies

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Laws introduced in 2000 by the Labour government, under the guise of “fighting terrorism”, were used by UK local councils to carry out more than 55,000 days of covert surveillance of citizens over a period of five years.

Councils were given permission under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) to carry out the surveillance, including spying on people walking dogs, feeding pigeons and fly tipping (illegal dumping). Many councils used spying to question the legitimacy of welfare benefit claims.

The councils gathered evidence by planting secret listening devices and cameras and by using private detectives.

Members of the Liberal Democrats obtained this information on the use of spying by issuing a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. Every local council was asked if they had used the powers and if so how many times.

The councils’ responses showed they had launched 2,800 separate surveillance operations, lasting up to 90 days each. Of the 283 councils responding, two-thirds had used the powers allowed under the RIPA spying legislation. Lincolnshire County Council alone requested nearly 4,000 days of spying operations.

All the claims made in parliament and elsewhere—that judicial oversight of the newly passed and even more authoritarian Investigatory Powers Act/Snoopers’ Charter would ensure it would not be used beyond its original purposes—have been disproven at one stroke.

If it was so easy for councils to obtain warrants to invade the privacy of ordinary people over transgressions like not cleaning up after their dog, can anyone believe that the Investigatory Powers Act will not be used just as freely by the secret services to spy on people, including their political activities?

Equally, if the powers allowed under RIPA were misused on this scale, how much will the new, more intrusive powers of the Snoopers’ Charter be utilised

against the wider population under conditions of growing crisis and escalating inequality?

Among the examples cited in the *Guardian* were Midlothian Council in Scotland, which used RIPA to obtain data on dog barking and Allerdale Borough Council in Cumbria, England that used the powers to determine who had been feeding pigeons. Lancaster City Council used the powers in 2012 for “targeted dog fouling enforcement” over a period of 11 days.

In another case, Bromley Borough Council in London used RIPA following a complaint about the accumulation of rubbish in a rear garden. The complaint claimed the perpetrator was a “serial fly tipper”. In response Bromley Council, reported the *Guardian*, “deployed a ‘covert camera’ in the upstairs bedroom window of another property, which gathered evidence of what was happening.”

The attack on democratic rights inherent in the RIPA legislation was criticised from the outset by civil and human rights organisations. A report published in 2010 by Big Brother Watch, a civil liberties and privacy rights group, noted, “most people would imagine that these serious powers—to spy on people, without notice—were meant for law enforcement use against terrorists and crime kingpins. One might also presume, wrongly, that these powers are meant to be used sparingly in serious cases, rather than by council officials on members of the public, not convicted of any offence, in relation to trifling allegations.”

In its report from that year, “The Grim RIPA: *Cataloguing the ways in which local authorities have abused their covert surveillance powers*,” Big Brother Watch found that “372 local authorities in Great Britain have conducted RIPA surveillance operations in 8,575 cases in the past two years. This means that councils alone have carried out over eleven surveillance operations every day in this country over the past two years.”

The latest report confirms that in the years since that report, use of the RIPA by local councils became more frequent rather than less.

RIPA was introduced even before the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and was the beginning of the imposition of a battery of legislation which has eviscerated civil liberties and democratic rights in the UK. It permitted the opening of postal correspondence, the review of subscriptions and phone numbers, details of Internet searches and email communication, bugging of buildings and vehicles, pursuing and monitoring of individuals, and the use of informers.

Among the main legislation introduced, each piece more draconian than its predecessor, were the:

- Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA)—passed 26 July 2000
- RIPA extensions in December 2003, April 2005, July 2006 and February 2010
- Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 (DRIPA)—passed July, 2014
- Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (IPA/“Snoopers’ Charter”)—passed November, 2016

On July 14, 2014, a new bill was brought forward by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition strengthening the authorities’ ability to retain large amounts of data on every citizen and to spy on the population at large. The bill that led to the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 (DRIPA) was rushed through parliament on “emergency” grounds.

DRIPA, now replaced by the Snoopers’ Charter, was also widely misused by the state and its auxiliaries. Some half million requests were granted to access DRIPA data each year. Hundreds of public authorities, including the police and every other branch of the state and intelligence agencies, were given access to confidential data—illegally according to the European Court of Justice.

In its December 2016 ruling, the European Court of Justice found that the general surveillance on a mass scale allowed under DRIPA was unlawful.

The vast state spying operation that was carried out illegally for years by the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) spying operation—before being exposed by US whistleblower Edward Snowden—has now been made legal by the introduction of the Snoopers’ Charter.

While highlighting the disproportionate and absurd use of anti-terror legislation to target dog walkers and pigeon-feeding pensioners, the media organisations that saw fit to publish the latest RIPA figures, including the *Guardian*

and *Independent*, did not raise the implications of the far more intrusive Snoopers’ Charter.

On the basis of the draconian raft of legislation now in place, the UK has been dubbed the “surveillance state.” Along with its gigantic, legalized spying dragnet, the UK has more closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras per capita than any other country in the world. In 2013, there were already up to 5.9 million CCTV cameras in the UK, approximately 15 percent of the world’s total. The UK has more CCTV cameras than China—even though China more than 20 times as many people.

People in urban areas of the UK are likely to be captured by around 30 CCTV systems every day, with each CCTV system made up of multiple cameras.

Increasingly complex computer software is now being used to pick out and recognise faces from CCTV footage. Following the London riots of August 2011, police trawled through more than 200,000 hours of CCTV footage to identify potential suspects. Around 5,000 individuals were found by such means over a period of more than five months.

Software to record car number plates and identify cars and their owners has been available for nearly a decade and is widely used by UK police. According to a recent estimation, every single vehicle in the UK and its driver is captured on the Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) database around six times every week. Some 30 million motorists are photographed every day, with images of cars and their drivers taken at the rate of 350 every second. A staggering 11 billion reads of number plates are taken annually via a vast network of 7,858 cameras—many of them unmarked. This equates to an almost trebling of reads taken since ANPR was introduced in 2009.



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