

Police surveillance used to report disabled protesters to UK government for alleged benefit fraud

Dennis Moore
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Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, spoke at a conference in Belfast last month to warn that innocent people are being caught up in a mass surveillance system enacted by the UK government to combat welfare “benefit fraud.”

His comments followed warnings from disabled rights activists in the north west of England, who claim that disabled demonstrators—who lawfully demonstrated against austerity measures—had personal information passed on to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) by the police.

Earlier this year Alston published the findings of a visit to the UK in which he condemned the “systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population.” Alston described it as a tragedy that many imagined that “the ever more intrusive surveillance system by the UK welfare state” was used only against those alleged to have committed benefit fraud. He declared this wasn’t the case and that the surveillance system stood the presumption of innocence on its head. This was because everyone applying for a benefit was “screened for potential wrongdoing in a system of total surveillance.”

Rick Burgess, a disabled rights activist from Manchester who is part of Disabled People Against Cuts, said fears that footage of his members and supporters demonstrating was being passed from the police to the DPW had a “chilling effect” on people’s willingness to protest.

The Disability News Service (DNS) reported July 25 that Greater Manchester Police (GMP) have admitted that they had a written agreement to share information about disabled people and other activists who take part in protests with the DWP.

This revelation followed repeated denials by the police and DWP that the practise was taking place. Many disabled activists said the existence of the agreement was a blow to a benefit-claiming disabled person exercising their lawful right to protest.

Concerns about spying operations came to light in December last year when it was revealed by DNS that peaceful anti-fracking protesters had been targeted by police forces across England. The police had been passing on protesters’ details to the DWP in an attempt to have their benefits removed.

Greater Manchester Police told DNS that information had been passed to the DWP about protesters that had taken part in anti-fracking protests at Barton Moss in Salford between 2013 and 2014.

The police also admitted they had passed on information to the DWP about protesters not connected with the anti-fracking movement. Many disabled activists have raised concerns that police have been passing on information about disabled protesters that have taken part in protests against welfare cuts and anti-austerity movements.

In the past, following Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, both the GMP and DWP have denied that they have shared information about disabled activists. However, following a second FOI request from DNS, a member of GMP’s information team confirmed that there was an information sharing agreement.

DNS asked if GMP had an agreement to share information from various protests with the DWP. The team member said he had “located a multi-agency agreement to which DWP are one of the many partners,” but that this had “not yet been assessed for disclosure to you.”

On April 17, DNS was told that the GMP information team member had “identified the area of the force that is responsible for the sharing agreement” and had posed the question to them and was awaiting a reply. GMP failed to respond to further emails, which could have constituted a breach of the Freedom of Information Act. In July, a member of GMP’s management team said he would “risk assess the agreement next week for disclosure” to DNS.

Following the revelations that GMP had been passing on information, the force’s press office refused to comment on why they had previously claimed there was no such agreement.

Speaking to DNS, Brian Hilton, digital campaigns officer with Greater Manchester Coalition for Disabled People, said the organisation was “extremely concerned” that its local police force was “spying on disabled protesters and passing on their details onto the DWP.” He added, “This news sends a clear message that disabled people should think carefully before they take to the streets and exercise their legitimate right to protest.”

The sharing of information with public bodies is not just carried out by the police but many other organisations, including the largest private corporations. Last year, it came to light that the Sainsbury’s supermarket chain shares CCTV footage if asked to do so by a public body or regulatory authority such as the police or DWP.

The DWP routinely uses information that has been taken from airport footage, gym memberships and surveillance video from public buildings, when preparing cases against benefit claimants who they charge may be fraudulently claiming benefits. The DWP also uses social media posts to suggest claimants are not telling the truth about their disabilities, with an increasing number of private companies being asked to provide video footage.

Parallel with the agenda of successive governments to slash what remains of the post-war welfare state, benefit recipients have been demonised as feckless and lazy by plethora of divisive television programmes.

With the escalation of the government’s anti-immigration agenda, the far-right have exploited this, with a parallel rise in “hate crimes” particularly against Muslims. Such has been the scale of government and right-wing media against welfare “scroungers” that

there has been a 15 percent rise in hate crimes against benefit claimants. Some 800,000 people have experienced verbal abuse and 4 percent of these also report physical abuse.

The propaganda that fuels the never-ending slur against those claiming benefits conceals the reality of who is really committing fraud, and on a gigantic scale.

The DWP operate a benefit fraud telephone hotline, the Fraud and Error Service, where members of the public can tip off the DWP if they think someone is committing benefit fraud. Information obtained by the *Independent* newspaper through Freedom of Information requests revealed that over the financial years 2015-16 and 2016-17, 332,850 cases had been closed that had been reported by members of the public—with 287,950 of these (87 percent) found to have little or no evidence to substantiate the allegation.

According to government figures for the years 2017 and 2018, benefit fraud accounted for just 1.2 percent of the DWP’s overall budget—equivalent to £2 billion, a figure far less than the amount in taxes which it is estimated goes unpaid by the rich. This year’s estimate by the government for the tax gap—the amount of tax they claim is lost through avoidance, evasion, omission and error—stood at £35 billion, its highest ever.

Figures showed that as of October 2017 there were 4,045 members of staff employed by the DWP to investigate benefit fraud. Of these, 1,900 were directly involved in investigations. In stark contrast, in March 2017 HM Revenues and Customs employed just 522 staff to tackle tens of billions of pounds of potential tax evasion.

The spying on citizens and passing on of information are measures more synonymous with the actions of a police state, not one that defines itself as democratic. Under conditions of growing class conflict where the ruling elite are drastically curtailing democratic rights, these attacks on the right to protest must be opposed by all.



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