

Whistleblower uncovers London police hacking of journalists and protestors

By Trevor Johnson
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The existence of a secretive unit within London's Metropolitan Police that uses hacking to illegally access the emails of hundreds of political campaigners and journalists has been revealed. At least two of the journalists work for the *Guardian*.

Green Party representative in the British House of Lords, Jenny Jones, exposed the unit's existence in an opinion piece in the *Guardian*. The facts she revealed are based on a letter written to her by a whistleblower.

The letter reveals that through the hacking, Scotland Yard has illegally accessed the email accounts of activists for many years, and this was possible due to help from "counterparts in India." The letter alleged that the Metropolitan Police had asked police in India to obtain passwords on their behalf—a job that the Indian police subcontracted out to groups of hackers in India.

The Indian hackers sent back the passwords obtained, which were then used illegally by the unit within the Met to gather information from the emails of those targeted.

The letter was published in part in the *Guardian*, with its anonymous author writing, "For a number of years the unit had been illegally accessing the email accounts of activists.

"This has largely been accomplished because of the contact that one of the officers had developed with counterparts in India who in turn were using hackers to obtain email passwords."

The letter continued, "Over the years, the unit had evolved into an organisation that had little respect for the law, no regard for personal privacy, encouraged highly immoral activity and, I believe, is a disgrace."

As proof of its validity, the letter contained "a list of ten people and the passwords to their email accounts." As proof that the hacking was directed against spying

on political groups and activists, the letter states that four of the ten people work for the environmental group Greenpeace, with one of them in a senior position.

The Bindmans LLP law firm, acting on behalf of Jones, contacted six of those listed to verify their passwords (the others could not be traced). In response, five of the six gave passwords that matched those given in the letter, and the sixth was nearly a match. The BBC noted that one of the 10 activists said "their password may have still been in use as recently as late 2015 or early 2016."

The Met has claimed such activities were solely aimed at tracking down criminals, even though any evidence obtained through hacking—which is illegal—would not have been admissible in court. Rather, such claims are a cover for a hidden agenda.

Jones writes of the police acting "with impunity." Exposing her own close relations with the state—while at the same time showing how widespread and intrusive police spying is—Jones writes the following: "The police put me on the domestic extremism database during the decade when I was on the Metropolitan Police Authority signing off their budgets and working closely with officers on the ground to fight crimes such as road crime and illegal trafficking. If someone in my position—no criminal record and on semi-friendly terms with the Met commissioner—can end up on the database, then you can too."

The *Guardian* failed to point out in its report that new legislation proposed by the Law Commission would make the author of the anonymous letter, Jones herself, and the journalists at the *Guardian*, liable for prosecution—with up to 14 years in jail.

The intention to uncover criminal activity by the police could not be used as a defense. It is the aim of

the Law Commission's proposals to prevent whistleblowing activities that reveal the extent of mass surveillance becoming known.

The existence of a group acting illegally within the Metropolitan Police raises several questions that have not been broached by the media:

- When and on whose orders was this group set up? What was the remit of the group?

- Who authorized its use of hackers in India?
- How many people were targeted and for how long? How many of these were journalists?

- Is the group still in operation?

Under existing legislation, hacking—as described by the whistleblower—is unlawful if personal communications were intercepted for any other reason other than to combat major crime or terrorism. The home secretary must approve any such monitoring of personal communications.

The use of illegal hacking by Scotland Yard makes a mockery of the claims made by both the government and the Labour Party that judicial safeguards in the Investigatory Powers Act (IPA) can ensure that the police and spy agencies will not misuse the new powers it gives them.

Jones states in her *Guardian* piece, “Please don’t fall for the old establishment lie that the problem is a few rotten apples. This alleged criminality is the result of a deliberate government policy of using the police and security services to suppress dissent and protest in order to protect company profits and the status quo.”

While true, it is not simply the case that the police and security services are just being used by the government. In fact, the police and security services are becoming emboldened to take a more independent role as direct agencies of the ruling elite, overriding other bodies.

The National Domestic Extremism and Disorder Intelligence Unit (NDEDIU), which tracks political activists, illegally shredded documents they had been ordered to preserve over a number of days in May 2014.

This was revealed by another whistleblowing letter to Jones last year, which stated that the shredding began only two months after Theresa May, then Home Secretary, announced the intention to hold the now Pitchford Inquiry into undercover policing.

As a result of the revelation on shredding, in May

2016 the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) was called in to investigate. Almost a year later, nothing has been made public by the IPCC of the results of this investigation, other than to confirm that “a large number of documents were shredded over a period of days in May 2014.”

The more recent letter to Jones confirms that shredding had been taking place “for some time... on a far greater scale than the IPCC seems to be aware of.” The police had destroyed the documents because they “reveal[ed] officers were engaged in illegal activities to obtain intelligence on protest groups.”

This illegal hacking and shredding by the police is part of a pattern. It follows the shooting of innocent man Jean Charles de Menezes by an armed police unit in the aftermath 2007 London bombings, the use of undercover officers who took on the names of dead children and formed long-term relationships with people when they were already married, and the use of a plethora of illegal spying methods against millions of people—as exposed by former US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The law was then changed. The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 put on the statute book the mass surveillance of the UK’s population, previously carried out illegally.

The media in Britain has recently followed the lead of the US media by subjecting people to a daily barrage of propaganda on alleged “Russian hacking”, based on no evidence other than assertions by the intelligence agencies.

Their response, however, to real hacking by the British police, backed up by concrete evidence, has been virtual radio silence, with only two newspapers and the BBC giving the story any coverage at all, which they then dropped from their coverage immediately.

The author also recommends

British parliament passes “Snoopers’ Charter,” expanding spying powers [22 November 2016]

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