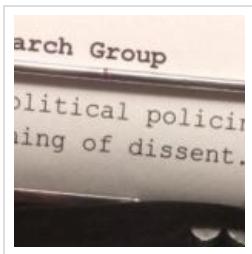


The Fifteen Questions we work with



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As we noted in a recent blogpost on [how we work](#), we have a list of questions that we have developed from close study of the undercovers exposed so far. If someone comes to us with a suspicion about someone in their group, we put these questions to them, to see whether their suspicions are well founded. If many boxes are ticked, there are strong grounds for further investigation.

Here we set out the questions we work with, putting them context (thanks for people taking part in our meeting at the London Anarchist Bookfair for their input!). Some questions are specifically related to the undercover tradecraft. Others are things about what infiltrating officers get wrong, or what we've picked up from our own analyses.

■ Is their background missing?

Generally, the undercover has very little in the way of background story. They will often have a

'legend' – where they are from, why they left. Details will generally be quite sparse, and there is very little overlap between their previous world and their activist one. It is rare to meet friends (or see their photos) from their 'previous' life, even though they may be discussed or the suspect claims he goes to see them. Undercovers will also have a lack of presence in the public record, though this is not always obvious until one starts investigating them seriously.

Caveat: it is known that several undercovers did bring other people through – generally these are considered 'background artistes' used to help bolster an undercover's story. For example, [Lynn Watson](#) introduced several boyfriends to activist friends. Generally these other people have only appeared once or twice, and at times have been noted for their unusual or provocative behaviour.

■ Is their politics missing, underdeveloped or stereotyped?

Related to the first question, in most cases undercovers have had very little to say in relation to the politics of the movement they are infiltrating. Although they are indeed interested in listening to others (though some eschewed any interest in the name of cynicism), they contribute little on that score and generally avoid or head-off such discussions. Where they demonstrate interest, it is often superficial and the books and background material they have are standard, popular stuff showing little depth or breadth.

Caveat: clearly this can be applied to a lot of campaigners, but in some groups it is a reason for standing out.

■ Has anyone ever met their family?

Some undercovers never talk about their family, while some talk about them a lot. However opportunities to meet them never quite come off – there are always excuses. Undercovers can produce photos and other material indicating the existence of supposed family members, and talk about having close relationships with them. Others have spun stories about abusive relationships (and used these stories to build trust), but inconsistently talk about how they are going to see them. Sometimes family crises, such as a seriously ill father, are used as an excuse to go away for extended periods of time.

■ Does their job take them away for periods at a time?

It appears that many undercovers have jobs that require them to be away for extended periods of time, up to several weeks at a time. These jobs would also supply them with money, vehicles and excuses to put receipts 'through the books'. Depending on the nature of the job, most are reluctant to bring activists into contact with their employers. E.g., Lynn Watson was a care-worker, but when friends asked about working with her agency, she kept them at bay

- **Did their home look un-lived in?**

A common theme is how un-homely or not lived-in their houses were, though – again – not in every case. There would be materials around that indicated ‘political activist’, but they are the exception rather than the norm, looking more staged than anything. There would also be a lack of personal touch and possessions. The most noted case of this was Lynn Watson’s house which had overdone Class War posters and little in the way of personal touch.

- **Did they have a vehicle?**

Most undercovers had vehicles and showed willing to use them for the purposes of campaigning, including doing reconnaissances and actions. The vehicles would vary in type and model, and include vans. Sometimes the undercovers claimed the car came through their work.

- **Did they have above-average driving skills?**

Something commented on a lot of undercovers is their above average driving skills, which is not unsurprising given Special Branch / police background.

- **Would you consider them someone who went out of their way to be helpful?**

The charm, friendliness and general kindness of the undercovers is regularly noted upon. They come across as ready to go out of their way to help. In particular, they are happy to give lifts to and from campaigner’s homes.

- **Did they have ready access to money and were they generous with it?**

They are often ready to help people out with money, such as wave petrol costs or buy rounds of food or drink. Sometimes they will claim that expenses are already covered it in some way – through their work for instance. They are not necessarily flash, but seem to have ready access to cash. They show willing to be generous, and will be quick to buy the rounds.

- **Did they focus relationships on key people?**

It is not uncommon for them to – after getting involved in a group – to ‘make a beeline’ for key people and become very close to them personally and in campaigning. This often leads to them being seen as ‘second in command’, etc.

- **Did they ever exhibit noticeable out-of-character behaviour?**

A number of undercovers have been known to do something quite out of character that either disrupted an action and alerted police, or was distinctively away from the norm of the group. Examples are: inexplicable carelessness (Jim Boyling sabotaged a blockade during a Reclaim the Streets action by ‘forgetting’ to keep window closed, so that the car was easy to remove by the police), or doing things beyond the group’s normal mode of behaviour (encouraging activities that put other members at risk, or take them into unplanned confrontations).

Related to this is spreading stories about more serious involvement in radical action elsewhere to give the impression they are ‘up for it’, though this would differ from how they normally present and actually behave in given situations.

- **Have you spotted oddities?**

A number of things we have encountered in our research, that are worth noting if you encounter them:

- Have documents in other names (sometimes can be explained away; not all are without good reason).
- Organisational skills at odds with their persona.
- Not having the skills they claim, especially where it is within their alleged job ([Mark Jenner](#), for instance claimed to be a professional joiner but was unable to fit a kitchen). Related to this is not knowing enough about something they claim to be into, particularly a football team.
- A focus on cleanliness and order that puts them at the far end of the activist spectrum, or at odds with it (e.g. [Mark Kennedy](#) getting his hair regularly styled in professional hairdressers).
- Characteristics that indicate some formal training (the way they do their boots).
- Reacting to surprise situations in ways that indicated some other training (At a noise outside Jenner dropping in the correct moves to react to a bomb explosion).
- Owning a very expensive bit of equipment that is somewhat out of characteristic for them or their milieu (top of the range phone, watch).
- Doing something that seems to be signalling to someone else.

- **Have there been weird things around court cases or - lack of - police interest?**

Sometimes undercover officers have been dropped inexplicably from a legal case, or chose to have a different solicitor from everyone else. Or you may have experienced a noticeable lack of police interest during the period the undercover was part of

your group, or people would not be arrested when it would be otherwise be expected. It is now known that the undercovers' handlers were turning a blind eye to illegal activities at occasions, and would go out of their way to keep the undercover from going to court.

Caveat: The opposite might be true too: there are several strong examples of [undercovers turning up in court](#) using their false names to give evidence for instance – leading to overturned convictions eventually.

▪ **Did he or she suddenly disappear and cut off all contact?**

This question is a section in itself as the 'exit strategy' is one of the most important aspects of the tradecraft when investigating a suspicion. In every case, undercovers have served a term of four to five years, then left relatively abruptly. It is quite telling how time and again two strategies are used, sometimes in combination: a) they go abroad, or b) act out and demonstrate a kind of mental breakdown, including actual tears. More importantly, they disappear completely, totally cutting off from their activist social life.

In several cases, not attending funerals or coming to other events related to people they were once very close to, gave rise to suspicions.

Sometimes, the situation has been more complicated, because the undercover continued to tangle up their personal life and their professional undercover one, which is called 'going native'. [Mike Chitty](#), for instance, returned after supposedly having left for Canada to socialise with activist friends, while he continued his job in the protective service – a different section of Special Branch. Kennedy came back after he had left the police, and tried to use his activist contacts to set up shop as a corporate spy selling the information he gathered.

▪ **Can you help us kill these myths?**

We are aware from conversations that some people believe or have believed undercovers had a code of conduct, that there were things they would not do. We flag them up here to put an end to these myths:

- commit illegal activities;
- have sexual relationships with people they were targeting;
- deny they are police when asked directly (some would even joke about it).

We now know that all of these things have been done regularly by undercover officers.

Important caveats.

If you find someone whose story ticks a number of these boxes, it does not necessarily mean you are dealing with an undercover officer. It merely means that your suspicions warrant further digging and investigating. These questions are a starting point, not an end in themselves to proof a case.

We strongly discourage people from spreading rumours based on suspicions alone, and recommend following up with research and proceeding with that as quickly as possible. Gossiping without confirmation can do much harm and destroy groups from within, regardless of the actual infiltration.

It is important to remember that while there might be commonalities among the way undercovers operate, there are as many differences, particularly around what they seek to achieve: some directly facilitate a group, while others seek to destroy it, for instance.

We also note that there are many good reasons for people to fall into the same categories without being an undercover, our framework is not fail-safe. For example, there are pretty valid reasons for not having contact with your family, or for people to disappear. Suffering from burn out is too common a reason for activists to withdraw, for instance (which should not happen in the first place – but that is another story. For support contact [Counselling for Social Change](#)).

Furthermore, not all undercover stories are exactly the same, there will be variations: so not fitting the pattern does not necessarily put someone in the clear either. Apart from that, other forms of infiltration (by security services or corporations, or through informers) will have very different patterns. If you have any questions or concerns or want to run unusual situations by us, do get in [contact](#).

N.B. If you post these questions anywhere, please leave the caveats in place.

Final note

The nature of this work means all our experience and research is about historical undercovers, all prior to 2011 and all about those who have been extracted from their role. As this tradecraft is exposed, the police will have to change tactics to some degree.

Furthermore, the growing use of social media makes it more and more impossible to enter into a scene without any traces of a past, another part of one's life and without family (though we know the police are actively looking into [building 'online legends'](#) to deal with this problem).

This article is here to help those who have been targeted in the past to identify individuals who should be investigated further, and should not be seen as the most up-to-date understanding of undercover police tradecraft.

Profiles of undercovers mentioned in this article can be found [here](#). Some details taken from undercovers yet to be publicly exposed.

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