

## **Tayside Special Branch Community Contact Unit - a Briefing from Scotland Against Criminalising Communities (SACC).**

**November 2006**

Officers from the Tayside Police Special Branch Community Contact Unit (SBCCU) have been operating in Dundee's universities and schools for over a year, seeking intelligence on students and providing what they call "reassurance." Tayside's SBCCU is the only unit of its kind in Scotland, and the only Special Branch "contact unit" in Britain to have publicly put such an emphasis on universities and schools.

Many people in Dundee began by regarding the Unit as a silly stunt that would soon be dropped. But Tayside Police announced last May that the unit had been a success and that there were plans to roll out similar units across the rest of the country. Opposition to the unit has been mounting ever since students returned to the city's campuses to find Special Branch officers still in action.

Scotland Against Criminalising Communities is calling for an end to this kind of political policing. And we're asking trade unionists, students and others to help us put a stop to it.

Tayside SBCCU was set up after last year's London bombings as a local response to a national initiative. It has many parallels with the Muslim Contact Unit that has been operating in London since 2002. But it places a novel and worrying emphasis on monitoring universities and schools.

According to a police report issued in January of this year, the strategic aim of the unit is "to improve intelligence gathering opportunities and provide reassurance through community contact".

The report says that the SBCCU has "engaged" with representatives from a range of minority groups, including the Hindu, Pakistani, Indian, Arab, Bangladeshi and Jewish communities. But its activities appear to be directed overwhelmingly towards Muslim communities. Special Branch officers have been regular attendees at meetings of Dundee University Islamic Society. Officially, they are there by "invitation." We can only speculate on the degree of freedom that Muslim students believe they have when they are asked to issue to such an "invitation."

No other community has reported this level of interest from Special Branch. This institutional prejudice is reflected in the day-to-day practice of SBCCU officers. One of them told the Sunday Herald newspaper in June that one possible sign of "extremism" in a school pupil would be "a kid who has gone back to their parents' country of origin [for example, Pakistan] and returned with anti-Western feeling or stronger religious faith than they had shown before."

Muslim parents, like parents with a commitment to any faith, are generally keen to strengthen the faith of their children. Many see this as one of the benefits of giving their child the opportunity to visit their country of origin. They would be appalled to discover that this could bring their child to the attention of Special Branch.

Dundee is being used as a testbed for a new kind of political policing. Tayside Police quote a report by Professor Anthony Glees and Chris Pope, published by the Social Affairs Unit in 2005, that includes Dundee University as the only Scottish institution in list of 27 "universities where extremist and/or terror groups have been detected." The only evidence that Glees and Pope provide for Dundee's supposed link with terrorism is a statement that a man called Shamsul Bahri Hussein, who is wanted in connection with the Bali bombing, studied applied mechanics at Dundee. The police report says that this was in the 90's. As an indicator of ongoing terrorist activity at the university the case is perhaps best filed under the "haunted house" hypothesis.

The police list two other people they sees as problematic – a man and a woman – as having had connections in the past with Dundee University. Both cases are even less substantial than Shamsul Bahri Hussein. The woman's alleged activities were quite clearly political rather than criminal. The man was questioned by police in Manchester and released without charge. The police say he is now living in Pakistan.

According to guidelines current in March of this year, the primary purpose of the Special Branches is "covert intelligence work in relation to national security". The SBCCU is an exception in that it was set up to operate openly. Its practice is sometimes rather different. An SBCCU officer attended this year's Freshers' Fair at Dundee University at the "invitation" of the Student Advisory Service. But the only people who knew the identity of the officer were those who had already met him at Islamic Society meetings. A campaigner at a Stop The War stall who was asked about the group's future activities certainly had no idea that he was talking to a Special Branch officer.

In conversation with their contacts, SBCCU officers emphasise their role in "building bridges" between police and the Muslim Community. But the clear effect of SBCCU activities is to dismantle bridges between Muslims and other communities. Many Muslim students are keen to engage with others, especially on issues of general interest, such as campaigning against the wars in the Middle East. They can hardly expect a warm welcome if they come with a Special Branch minder.

There is a larger issue at stake. Signs are being put up across the political landscape that say, "Muslims keep out." Muslims can't be trusted to discuss politics without a visible police presence; others can be left to manage themselves. Political statements by Muslims must be examined for evidence that they carry the terrorism bug;

political statements by others, however radical, are not usually examined this way.

Writing in the Times Higher Education Supplement (October 20), Brian Young of Tayside SBCCU hinted that he engages in undisguised political propaganda amongst Dundee's students. He said that he is happy to talk to students about university life, but that he has also to be "brave enough to talk about the sometimes sensitive issues that many seem reluctant to discuss." These conversations must require a great deal more bravery from students than from Brian Young. This sort of activity seems a lot closer to the work of a political commissar than to intelligence-gathering.

Information gleaned by all these tactics might perhaps contribute to what Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee calls "building a rich picture." But a terrible price is being paid. Political discussion risks being driven underground, at least for Muslims. With one of its limbs buried, civil society will be in no position to challenge the government when it needs to. But for anyone attracted to terrorist methods, underground life is likely to prove very pleasant indeed.

Political policing isn't just a threat to social and political life on campus. For some overseas students it's simply and literally a threat to life. SBCCU officers have said that they share intelligence with police forces across the UK. According to the Intelligence and Security Committee, Special Branch acts as "major extension to the Security Service intelligence collection capability." And the government has stressed on many occasions that British intelligence and security services work closely with services overseas, including services in countries where human rights violations are commonplace.

Tayside Chief Constable John Vine said last October: "What we have to change is the mindset which questions whether it is appropriate to gather intelligence in schools." The gauntlet is on the ground. We can't afford to leave it there. For schools and universities contacted by Special Branch officers, the next step is easy. Just say No.

## Read More

*Dundee Terror police target student antiwar campaigners*  
SACC Press Release 18 September 2006 [tinyurl.com/yhnnngx](http://tinyurl.com/yhnnngx)

*Dundee terror allegations inaccurate*  
The Courier, 21 September 2006 [tinyurl.com/ykwwm5](http://tinyurl.com/ykwwm5)

*Freshers Fair Surveillance Criticised*  
The Courier, 19 September 2006 [tinyurl.com/ym59et](http://tinyurl.com/ym59et)

*Halt anti-terror police activities in Dundee*  
SACC Press Release 13 June 2006 [tinyurl.com/yaabc4](http://tinyurl.com/yaabc4)

*Anti-terror police target schools and youth groups*  
Investigation by the Sunday Herald 11 June 2006 – recommended reading: [tinyurl.com/yx9sv3](http://tinyurl.com/yx9sv3)

*Special Branch Terror Unit*  
SACC Press release 26 May 2006 [tinyurl.com/yapkcc](http://tinyurl.com/yapkcc)

*Intelligence-gathering to take place in Scottish classrooms*  
8 October 2005 [tinyurl.com/yak4rz](http://tinyurl.com/yak4rz)

## **YOUR RIGHTS**

You are NOT obliged to provide information to MI5 officers.

Under most circumstances you are NOT obliged to provide information to police officers.

If you are approached for information by police or MI5 officers, especially in relation to political activities or activities said to be related to "terrorism" or "extremism", SACC advises you to:

- Obtain the officer's name and telephone number;
- Avoid any discussion with the officer;
- Tell the officer that you will be contacting a lawyer;
- Contact a lawyer experienced in these matters;
- Don't be dissuaded from this by any promises or threats the officer may make.

**Scotland Against Criminalising Communities** is a grassroots group that campaigns for the repeal of Britain's terrorism laws and offers solidarity to the communities most affected by them. More information at [www.sacc.org.uk](http://www.sacc.org.uk)

Stay up to date with the free SACC e-newsletter – sign up at [www.sacc.org.uk/subscribe/](http://www.sacc.org.uk/subscribe/)