

Named and shamed but I still think arrests must be public

by Neil Wallis

When Scotland Yard arrested me on suspicion of phone hacking, and boasted to the world about what they had done, it destroyed my life. They seized me in a pre-dawn raid in 2011, ransacked my house, threw me in a cell, forced me to parade in front of the world's press, cost me my six-figure earnings and put my family through hell. As good as unemployable for the next 20 months, the only way to support my family was through the savings accrued from 40 years of hard work.

The stress on my wife and children - one of whom was also publicly investigated because of her connection to me - was huge. Then when the police finally gave up, almost two years after my arrest, and were forced to admit that they couldn't find evidence to charge me with wrongdoing, they didn't even apologise.

Not surprising, then, that people assume that my family and I would enthusiastically back the latest triple-pronged campaign led by Lord Justice Leveson, supported by the judiciary, and enthusiastically backed by the police, to ban the naming of those, like me, arrested by the State. Surely, they ask, I would agree that if I - as a police suspect - had to be investigated it should be in total secrecy so both I and the police could just go about our business in private until resolution?

They couldn't be more wrong.

Far from it. What happened to me - and to many others like me - was pure hell. Yet the new policy of secret arrests - exposed by *The Mail on Sunday* - is far worse. The principle of open justice has been the bedrock of our freedom in this country since Magna Carta and must remain so. Secret arrests are yet another way to take away the freedom of the individual and the ability of the community to care for and support itself.

The prospect of the media not being allowed to report the identity of those being held by the police would amount to another bolt in the wider lock-down on the free press that the Establishment appears to be advocating. It must be stopped - however uncomfortable life in the spotlight is for those wrongly caught up in the criminal justice mincing machine. A complete ban on reporting could lead to even more disturbing and far-reaching consequences.

For example, I know of people living alone who have been arrested and 'disappeared' for the 36 hours that police can hold you in custody without informing others of your whereabouts. More worryingly, secret arrests can also stop possible alibis. People who could provide evidence to clear someone might not come forward. When I was bailed I was barred from contacting a long list of friends, colleagues and contacts.

The worst part of being under arrest is the sense of impotence and injustice, the sense of the powerful state machine simply playing with your fate. After a year on bail, I responded by going public. I wrote blogs, newspaper articles, went on Twitter, appeared on radio and TV, raising concerns about the scandalous treatment of other arrestees and what I felt were the iniquities of the endless inquiry.

One offshoot was twice being ordered to appear at Lord Justice Leveson's inquiry - where I laid out my concerns in no uncertain terms. I refused to be cowed. The very fact that I had been named as a crime suspect allowed me to do that both for myself and for others in the same position. This freedom to fight back will be curtailed by the proposals to stop naming the arrested.

This is not special pleading for journalists - it applies to anyone who has been arrested for a crime they didn't commit. I am lucky, because I am rebuilding the career the police damaged, but the scars of our ordeal will take much longer to heal.

But, people tell me, you could have kept your job if you hadn't been identified, no one would have known. People wouldn't have avoided you in the street. Well, that suggests my family and I would have had to live a complete lie for the next 20 months: lie to my bosses, lie to my colleagues and clients, lie to extended family, lie to friends, lie to neighbours, lie, lie, lie . . . At a time when we

needed as much support as we could get, why should we live a lie, suffer in silence, to facilitate the State's dirty work?

I would suggest that it doesn't make sense for the police either. How often have victims of crime come forward only when they see the name and picture of a suspect in the media? Three women complained about being sex victims of Jimmy Saville when he was alive but were appallingly let down by the police and Crown Prosecution Service who took no action - not least because of his celebrity. Only when he was named after he died did almost 500 women discover they weren't alone and came forward. If only he had been named as a suspect when alive.

There is nothing more precious than your own liberty. If someone is going to interfere with it, that must not be in secret but in the full public gaze.

Trust me, I know.*

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For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website.

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