



News

**Baillieu takes aim at police spying**

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THE SPYING GAME

OPPOSITION Leader Ted Baillieu has demanded the State Government and police Chief Commissioner reveal how they guard against improper police spying.

Mr Baillieu's call comes after The Age revealed that an undercover officer from the police's security intelligence group (SIG) had infiltrated several activist groups including the Stop the War Coalition, Animal Liberation Victoria and Unity for Peace. The undercover agent also played a role planning this year's Palm Sunday peace rally and attended organising meetings with church and activist groups.

Premier John Brumby yesterday backed the police's intelligence operations, saying there was a very limited number of files kept by the SIG and that its activities were overseen by Deputy Commissioner Simon Overland.

"The intention of police here is not to silence people or to remove people's democratic rights, it is to ensure that we properly protect property and properly protect human life," Mr Brumby said.

But Mr Baillieu called on Police Minister Bob Cameron and Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon to reveal what checks and balances are in place to prevent inappropriate surveillance. "I imagine some people would be very keen to know more about what the Government has been doing," he said. "One of the questions that has to be answered is to what extent the Government itself was aware of these activities?" Mr Baillieu said.

Jamie Gardiner, chairman of the Law Institute of Victoria's charter of rights committee, said the instances of spying revealed by The Age yesterday could breach Victorian laws protecting human rights.

Under the Victorian charter of human rights people are allowed to associate in groups and have a democratic right to lawful protest, Mr Gardiner said. Any infringement of individual rights by police was acceptable only if there was a strong likelihood of crimes being committed. "There is something deeply sneaky and unpleasant about it. It looks as though deceit and fraud have been used. It has to be asked, is this authorised by law and if so, should it be?" he said.

He supported calls for the covert work of Victoria Police to be accountable to a joint state parliamentary committee or a similar body "who don't have a vested interest in protecting their own".

Former state labor attorney-general and now barrister, Jim Kennan SC, said it was concerning that lawful groups were having their political views monitored. -- With DAVID ROOD