

private eye 5 May 2017

## HISTORICAL ABUSE

# More Conifer chaos

**O**PERATION Conifer, Wiltshire Police's investigation into allegations of historical sexual abuse by a VIP paedophile ring said to include the late former prime minister Sir Edward Heath – latterly revealed to include claims of Satanic rituals and child sacrifice (see *Eye* 1437) – has all but collapsed, despite the efforts of 21 officers labouring over 21 months at an estimated cost of more than £1m.

On 13 April the Wiltshire force told BBC News that the only two other (unnamed) people arrested in the investigation had been released and faced no further action. Yet in a statement to Radio 4's *Today* programme the next day, the force insisted Conifer "remains active; it's complicated and complex and is ongoing".

Operation Conifer launched on 3 August 2015 when police controversially appeared on TV outside Sir Edward's former home in Salisbury and appealed for victims to come forward.

On 15 November 2016, the *Daily Mail* reported that two unnamed suspects had been arrested and released on bail; and on 26 November, the *Mail on Sunday* revealed that some of the allegations came from four women who knew each other well and had swapped "fantastical" stories about child sacrifice and Satanic rituals. The "memories" of child sexual abuse of one of the accusers, Lucy X, had been "recovered" in psychotherapy. Dr Rachel Hoskins, an expert in ritual crime brought in by Wiltshire Police to review the witness statements, went public to say the Satanic stories were "preposterous". Wiltshire chief constable Mike Veale said in a statement that the Satanic claims formed only a small part of the investigation and did not involve Sir Edward.

However, as *Eye* 1437 reported in early February – shortly after Conifer officers had visited the *Eye* to ask about cartoons and photo bubbles the magazine had run in the 1970s ribbing Grocer Heath – similar claims against Sir Edward and dozens of alleged devil worshipping paedophiles had appeared on the internet in a blog headlined a "Who's Who of Satanic ritual

abuse" from a report apparently compiled by RAINS, Ritual Abuse Information Network and Support.

This group was formed in 1989 to support mainly psychotherapists and social workers who believed they were dealing with cases of Satanic abuse – a notion debunked after a government-commissioned inquiry concluded in 1994 that it was a myth with no forensic evidence.

Bizarrely, on 19 February the *Mail on Sunday* then ran a front page story by political editor Simon Walters quoting Wiltshire's chief constable saying that Operation Conifer had more than 30 witnesses "who did not know each other" and, according to "a source", he was convinced the paedophile allegations against Sir Edward were "120 percent" genuine.

This was too much for Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, the Grocer's private secretary while he was PM between 1970 and 1974. In the Lords on 7 March he called for a judicial inquiry into Operation Conifer saying Veale had "gone beyond the police duties of investigating allegations and following up evidence and has pronounced a verdict of guilty... even before his inquiry is complete... The inquiry is being pursued in a way which looks to many people more like a fishing expedition..."

Operation Conifer is just one of at least seven investigations into historical abuse allegations involving Sir Edward by police around the country, including the Metropolitan, Jersey, Gloucestershire, Hampshire and Kent forces, according to media reports at the time of the announcement of Wiltshire's investigation in 2015. But if Operation Conifer really is "live" and "on-going" it is hard to see where it is going. In the same direction, perhaps, as the Met Police's £2.5m Operation Midland probe into another alleged Westminster VIP paedophile ring involving high profile politicians? This was abandoned after a scathing report by retired high court judge Sir Richard Henriques criticised police for their reliance on a sole accuser known as "Nick", described as a fantasist.

