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# A Stasi comedy

OUR SPEAKER began with the words, "My name is Mark Thomas and I'm an NUJ member." Mark was at LFB's April meeting on the judicial review he's bringing, with NUJ support, on the Metropolitan Police practice of gathering data on journalists for "Domestic Extremist" databases. Mark was "very happy to have my co-litigants with me" – Jason Parkinson, David Hoffman, Adrian Arbib and Jules Matteson, four of the other five NUJ members bringing the judicial review.

Mark's "accidental journalism" started with *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*, whose mission was to "just take the piss out of people... mock them," starting by interviewing Tory MPs while he was dressed as a bear. One bewildered MP blurted out "eighteen" when questions about honey suddenly turned to capital punishment and "at what age we should kill people?" Mark turned to something a bit more "factual based... we were actually investigating". His fake media training school for arms dealers at an Athens arms fair got Indonesia's military to admit on camera to torture.

Mark has come across "instances of spying" before. When Martin Hogbin, his close friend at Campaign Against The Arms Trade, was outed as a spy for BAe Systems (British Aerospace), "the immediate effect was to deter people associated with Hogbin from activism."

And Mark was "very proud to say that according to the Met I am a domestic extremist," noting the absurdity of the term: "it's housebound, so it's possibly in the kitchen: am I a radical when it comes to cooking?"

A Data Protection Act request to

the Met revealed "they had noted when I did book readings... fundraisers and various anti-nuclear stuff." The data compiled on Mark was "like being spied on by the Stasi crossed

with an Ealing Comedy." One report on a demo noted, "Mark appeared at the South side of the Square, with a mountain bike with yellow forks; he

See DOMESTIC on p 4



Mark Thomas: Photo © Hazel Dunlop

## Contracts campaign gathers pace

THE IMPOSITION of unfair contracts on journalists is the focus of campaigns by the Creators' Rights Alliance (CRA) and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) – the NUJ is active in both. In the UK, the case was put to MPs from the three largest parties, and a Green Party representative, at a "general election hustings for the writing community" organised by the Society of Authors and Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society on 24 March. For the Liberal Democrats, Martin Horwood MP gave the impression that this issue was a priority for the party.

For Labour, Chris Bryant made sympathetic noises and asked for more information. Ed Vaizey, Con-

servative, invited LFB's Phil Sutcliffe to intervene.

This Phil did, passionately. The contracts creators are made to sign "are totally unbalanced by the difference in economic power between me and Murdoch, or the BBC, or the government." The issues go beyond grabbing rights and depriving creators of the income we need to carry on as professionals feeding the much-vaunted "information economy". The contracts we are presented with "extend to dumping total liability onto the writer," Phil noted. They often demand the right to change the work and deny corporate liability for legal actions resulting from the corporation's altered version. "There

goes my house, or my shirt," Phil observed: "These contracts are crushing for individual creators and if the government doesn't have the guts to do something about it that sector of the economy will be starved. It's strangling us."

Vaizey returned the default answer that his party supports "freedom of contract". Mike Holderness, also of this parish and CRA chair, replied that this is a mere slogan: it serves to pander to the myth that he and Rupert sit down across a table, negotiate as equals and strike a fair bargain.

In any case, "freedom of contract" isn't as sacrosanct as some pretend.

See CONTRACTS on p 4

### LFB meetings

11 May

Medical journalist Susan Mayor will give very practical advice for journalists on dealing with statistics

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