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RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4"- 'DRUGS'

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REPEAT: Sunday 11th March 2007 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Stephen Grey

PRODUCER: David Lewis

EDITOR: David Ross

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THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

“FILE ON 4”

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ACTUALITY OF NEEDLE EXCHANGE

MAN 1: Hi there. Need swabs ...?

MAN 2: Plenty of swabs please.

GREY: An addict is picking up the gear for his next injection of heroin.

MAN 2: Two ... please.

MAN 1: Two ...

GREY: He's one of an estimated 300,000 people in the UK addicted to the drug. The country's awash with heroin and it seems to be getting ever cheaper.

MAN 2: A bag's fifteen quid and two bags are twenty. It's all over, you know, it's easier to get hold of than cannabis.

GREY: The war against heroin use in Britain has been going on now for more than twenty years – but, so far, we’ve been losing. Tonight, File on Four reveals new details of that secret war. We hear how some of the country’s top heroin smugglers were working for Customs, how they received protection in return. And how the Foreign Office even intervened to try to get one of them released from prison.

KILFOYLE: I find this ludicrous. I think that there is a limit to which you can afford protection to an informant and I do believe that they lost the plot very very badly. The basic question has to be asked – who ran who?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY IN HARINGEY

GREY: I’m on Green Lanes in Haringey, north London. It’s home to a large Greek community and many too from Turkey – including refugees from troubled Kurdistan. It all looks pretty quiet – the usual mix of cafes, newsagents, betting shops and travel firms. But, behind the scenes, there is an undercurrent of violence.

EXTRACT FROM NEWS BULLETIN, RADIO 1

NEWSREADER: About forty people armed with guns, knives and baseball bats clashed in the street in Haringey at the weekend. Half were injured ...

GREY: 9th November, 2002. Gangs of Turks and Kurds are fighting on the streets. A man is stabbed to death. Shots are fired – and then armed policemen are called out.

DOGUS: I had a call from a girl who was in Haringey. She said there is a rumour going on around here that people are going to have a big fight and so on. I said we could go and stop it. So I went down to Haringey, I saw huge crowds on the street fighting each other. An innocent Kurdish man, he was stabbed to death. It was a frightening moment and then I realised there was nothing that I could do any further.

GREY: Ibrahim Dogus – a young community leader – had gone out to try and defuse the tensions. He was confronted by two men.

DOGUS: They had the guns and they just stopped. I said, ‘What are you doing? Why are you involved in this?’ He said, ‘Don’t talk to us. We are big, we control this area,’ and so I said, ‘Why? You shouldn’t get involved in crime,’ and so then he just said, ‘Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot.’ Then another guy pulled a gun and it was boom and I was down, I was unconscious.

GREY: Why do you think they shot you?

DOGUS: Because I was very influential with young people and where I stand is anti-crime and anti-drug. And by killing me they show how strong they are. This is the aim they had.

GREY: Ibrahim was a target because he’d started speaking out against some the gangs that run this area.

ACTUALITY AT COMMUNITY CENTRE

GREY: People here are afraid to speak to the police – but they come to people like him, at this community centre.

DOGUS: We started to hear about extortion, we started to hear about drug trafficking, human trafficking organised by criminals from Turkish criminal groups who are present here in London. They have recruited members of the Kurdish and Turkish community for their criminal activities. We started to have people coming in to the centre, young people with their families, saying that, ‘They have beaten me because I wanted to leave the gang,’ and they were not allowed to leave, and in a few cases I saw fingers broke, fingers on tables, hit by hammers as a punishment. And if they continue to say, ‘I’m leaving,’ they were beaten harshly and hospitalised. Still in hospital, they go there and they’ll say, ‘You’ve got to come back, you’ve got to continue.’

GREY: You’ve seen these injuries?

DOGUS: Only I've seen the fingers, the fingers broken of two young men and they were like in plasters. We had shopkeepers and café owners coming in saying that they had been asked to pay money so that they can be protected.

GREY: Behind this violence is heroin. This area and its Turkish and Kurdish community plays a central role in the supply of the drug to the entire United Kingdom.

SHAPIRO: In the 1980s we had an influx of brown heroin from the Middle East, which was unlike any sort of heroin we had had before. Up to then, most of it was either diverted from pharmaceutical sources or was imported Chinese heroin, both of which you could only inject. The brown heroin was different. You could actually smoke it, which is where our current heroin problem derives from, because when people realised that they could smoke heroin, they didn't actually need needles, it did break down a big taboo that had been around heroin for the previous twenty odd years.

GREY: Harry Shapiro of the research charity, Drugscope, says this new brown heroin got more and more people hooked – to the point there are now some 300,000 addicts. It's been coming mainly from Afghanistan and being brought over land through Iran and then through Turkey.

SHAPIRO: At least 90% if not more, almost all the heroin that is consumed in western Europe and in the UK comes from Afghanistan and Pakistan area.

GREY: And who has been bringing heroin into Britain?

SHAPIRO: If you're talking about the big importers, Turkish organised crime gangs seem have kind of cornered the market at the top importation level. I think police and Customs estimates put it at something like 75-80% of heroin coming into the country at a major importer level is controlled by those groups; the Turkish organised crime gangs that are mainly responsible for the large importations into the country.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

COLLINS: This is Green Lanes, Haringey, which is the beginning of the sort of Turkish café and Turkish restaurant area. I have been up and down this road on surveillance so many times now, that I know it like the back of my hand. This is the place, this is the hub of all heroin trafficking in the UK. This is where it is organised from. This is not necessarily where each individual kilo of heroin arrives at or goes through, but the organisation around here is what brings it across Europe from Turkey.

GREY: John Collins, a policeman for thirty years, was at the heart of the battle against these gangs. In the 1990s, he ran a twelve-man drug squad in north London. In one year his small team seized a hundred kilos of heroin. Collins went on to spend four years helping run the heroin unit at the National Criminal Intelligence Service or NCIS. He became one of the country's leading experts on the drugs underworld. And he's speaking publicly for the first time.

COLLINS: There were five major teams, five major gangs.

GREY: And what percentage of the market were they bringing in, would you think?

COLLINS: I think it would be fair to say that they controlled a good, good percentage, probably 60% or 70% had some connection with them, that they had some hand in it, they may have not actually moved the parcel into the UK, but quite often they'd guarantee the safety of a parcel, they might lend the money to somebody. So they had a good control, three-quarters of the market, I would have thought.

GREY: At the top of these gangs in the late 1990s, he said, were two brothers named Baybasin. It was their gang blamed both for the shooting of Ibrahim Dogus and, by some, for starting the fighting that day on Green Lanes.

COLLINS: The Baybasin family, mainly Apo Baybasin and Huseyin Baybasin, they suddenly appeared in North London from Turkey, and within a very short period of time were major players in the drugs business, major players. And not only the drugs business, the protection business. Huseyin is a typical Turkish godfather really. Always got bodyguards with him, always travelling in big big flash motors. During

COLLINS cont: the time that I sort of had an interest in him, he was probably one of the main traffickers in the UK. He had connections countrywide. He was moving multiple kilos - 50 to 100 kilos. More than nearly anybody else. Apo was different, of course, because Apo had been shot in Turkey and so he was in a wheelchair. But he had his driver, he had his minders, driving round in a big Mercedes, and they had quite a lot of men around them all the time.

GREY: Was drugs an important part of their business?

COLLINS: That was their business. All the other things - the assaults, the money laundering - all stems from the drugs. Their business was heroin trafficking, full stop.

GREY: Last year, the younger of the two brothers, Abdullah, was arrested and jailed for 22 years – for blackmail, extortion and heroin supply. His brother, Huseyin, had already been jailed in 2001 in Holland – he was given life for conspiracy to murder, drug trafficking and kidnap. At first glance, it might seem to be a success for law enforcement – except for one inconvenient truth: the story of how this Turkish family first came to be in Britain.

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: I got a phone call one day that a friend of mine needed me urgently down in Gibraltar, and he had a problem he needed help with, and I shot down there and then found out that he was in Morocco and he needed to get across the Mediterranean with some people.

GREY: This man was a go-between. We've agreed not to name him. He had a connection in the boating world, and also with British law enforcement. And he was asked to bring Huseyin Baybasin, his wife and two children, across the Gibraltar Straits.

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: After a few phone calls I picked up a 52 foot motor cruiser to go across the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco in a raging storm where no one thought that there were any boats ever going to come in that day. But we arrived like Vikings out of the storm and that was where I then met Huseyin and the family, who

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN cont: didn't have a clue where they were or where they were going. Loaded them on and then we set sail back for Spain. As we approached Spain, a Spanish gunboat was coming out, so we decided we'd run the Gibraltar courtesy flag up and go into Gibraltar instead, it was a bit more friendly.

GREY: In Gibraltar, he spent days waiting with the Baybasins.

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: I started learning a lot about them and the reasons why he wanted to come to the UK. The Turkish authorities had been trying to kill him and his wife and children, I think they had about five or six attempts on his life. And he just felt it was time for them to leave Turkey. And they just wanted sanctuary, as Huseyin put it, that's all he ever wanted for his family. And he told me about the past, that he was involved with drugs and that he was no longer anything to do with it, he just wanted away from all that, he realised that the money that they were providing was being used to fight his own Kurdish people.

GREY: From Gibraltar, Baybasin and his family came up by road, and crossed into Britain on the ferry. Once in the UK, a meeting was arranged.

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: Previously, through work I'd done, I'd met a very high up guy in the British authorities and I gave them a phone call and asked if they'd be interested in meeting this gentleman, and I was told that they were very very interested in meeting and talking to him, not to arrest him, but to talk to him. They needed his help.

GREY: What did they want to talk to him about?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: Various aspects to do with Turkey and the government in Turkey at the time.

GREY: Was it information about the drugs trade?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: I think drugs trade and one or two other things, money laundering trade going on out there, and various things in that guise. I had a meeting with some people up near the Monument, made the introductions and then I left them to talk on their own.

GREY: So while you were there, was there any discussion about what Huseyin Baybasin was expecting in return for his help?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: Absolutely. Huseyin, because of the information he had, he wanted sanctuary, as he put it, for his family and his immediate family, his brothers and his wife and children.

GREY: So by family, he meant how many people?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: Probably about ten, I would think, because his brothers had wives, etc.

GREY: And why did he want to bring his whole family over?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: Because he feared for their safety in Turkey with the information he was going to help people with.

GREY: While you were there, did the British authorities, did they give any promises about what they would do in return for his help?

ANONYMOUS GO BETWEEN: They talked to him about it, they said they'd see what they could do, and as far as I know, they went off and the deal was done, because his family duly arrived in the UK.

GREY: The key broker of the deal with Customs was one of his friends, a man called Brian Jones. He first met Baybasin in the 1980s, when he visited Baybasin in a British jail, where he was serving a sentence for heroin smuggling. Jones is now

READER IN STUDIO: You set yourself up as a leader of a large gang of thugs. To put it bluntly, you set yourself up as a godfather and set about collecting money from the Turkish and Kurdish community, and you did that by the application of violence, threats of violence and by fostering a well-founded reputation for serious violence. You are, in truth, a very dangerous criminal.

GREY: We wanted to ask Customs why they helped the Baybasin family to come to Britain and what was the benefit of the deal. They wouldn't be interviewed. But we did get confirmation of the Baybasin connection from an unlikely source.

ACTUALITY ON STREET, HOLLAND

GREY: I've come to Holland, to the prison where Huseyin Babyasin is being held, serving life for conspiracy, drug trafficking and kidnap. It's about an hour's drive out of Amsterdam. I've been inside to meet him. I couldn't record an interview inside the jail, but he's arranged to call me soon.

BAYBASIN: My name is Huseyin Baybasin and I am calling from Holland from prison

GREY: In our phone call, Baybasin confirms that he did negotiate a deal with Britain to bring over his entire extended family, along with the transfer to the UK of about £3 million of family wealth. He says he did a lot of work for the British authorities, although he's coy about revealing the details. Because of the poor quality of the phone line, we've used someone else to speak his words.

Clearly you came to Britain at a time when there was a desperate need to get information about the drugs trade, because of the increased volume of heroin particularly that was coming into Britain. Do you think that any of the information you provided helped to either capture some of the people responsible or to seize any of the heroin that was heading towards Britain?

BAYBASIN: My intention was not to arrest the individuals, which would not end drug trafficking, but to stop the drug trade from beginning to end. That way that was handled in the UK as well as Europe. My explanation, in public and in private, when questioned by officials. How helpful that was, I will leave to officials to tell you.

GREY: How many meetings do you think you had with British officials?

BAYBASIN: On a daily basis. Sometimes more than once in a day.

GREY: What Customs, and the British government, wanted to know about was sensitive - an allegation that the heroin trade into Britain was being masterminded not only by crime families, but some of the key figures then in the Turkish Government. It's a story with more than a ring of truth about it. Huseyin Baybasin was prepared to tell all – even at the price of becoming an enemy of his home country. He says he's been wrongly convicted in Holland – the victim of a concerted revenge campaign by the Turkish authorities.

BAYBASIN: If I was a drug dealer, I would not have been allowed to enter the UK. That must be clear. There can not be one single evidence that I talked with someone about heroin for business purposes. Never. I was never involved with it. My job was to stop drug trafficking, not to act as a drug dealer.

GREY: But why do the police in Britain think of you as a major drug trafficker?

BAYBASIN: I believe it was based on false documents from Turkey and more false documents added to it from the Holland police, some more from the German police, and they misled the English officials.

GREY: I mean, it does sound like a huge conspiracy.

BAYBASIN: Turkey and Holland and German governments brought this conspiracy. Secret documents from England, from Holland and from Turkey provide proof of what we are saying.

GREY: Many people in England would not understand why it was that the British government helped to bring your family to the United Kingdom, whereas a judge recently said in the case of your brother, he described your family as heroin godfathers, people who are responsible for violence and for the drug trade in London and around Europe. I mean, it would surprise many people that you were of help to Britain.

BAYBASIN: I count myself a British citizen. My brother was never involved with drugs. The judge was misinformed about my brother. Whatever they say about my brother is not fact.

GREY: Huseyin Baybasin was convicted in the Dutch courts largely as a result of his phone being tapped in Holland. And File on 4 has discovered that these taps provide more evidence of his Customs connection. They record him talking to his Customs handlers, even when they knew the Dutch police were investigating him. According to John Collins, this angered police at Scotland Yard, who by then had heard about the Dutch tapes.

COLLINS: I can remember a time going to an intelligence meeting. There were a number of people present: there was a Detective Chief Inspector from SO11 at Scotland Yard, the intelligence department, there was Customs and others, there were members of my unit, the Heroin Intelligence Unit. And I can remember the Metropolitan Police DCI standing up and refusing to attend the meeting because the Customs officers were present, and walking out of the meeting. And he said why. I'm aware of what's happened in Holland, I don't trust you, I won't ever trust you, and that was the end of that.

GREY: What was the reaction of everyone else in the meeting and the Customs officer himself?

COLLINS: All very embarrassed. There was a little bit of a sort of five minute cigarette break and we continued, but the guys at intelligence SO11 at the Met were livid about it. They took the same view as me, that there was a chance of locking up Huseyin Baybasin for thirty-odd years in Holland, who was one of the top five problems in the UK. Why would you want to try to change what's happening out there?

GREY: Huseyin Baybasin wasn't the only criminal arrested in another country that Customs got involved with. In the north London crime scene, there was another man who boasted of his connections to the law. He was a Greek Cypriot named Andreas Antoniadis. Holding court in a hotel in Finsbury Park and doing business with the Turks and Kurds, he told contacts he was protected not only by Customs but by British intelligence too - he was, it seems, untouchable.

EGAN: Antoniadis was an unusual character. We understood he was recruited at the time of the Cypriot war in the seventies by MI6, and he had a very high-level intelligence handler who he would boast about. And he was like Teflon.

GREY: Siobhain Egan is a defence lawyer with Turkish and Kurdish clients. They've told her that Antoniadis began his career as a British agent in Cyprus in the 1950s, where he informed against Eoka, the Cypriot guerrilla force. At the end of the war, Antoniadis was resettled to Britain for his own protection. But he soon turned to crime. He was jailed for four years after shooting a man six times in the leg. But Antoniadis stayed an informer.

EGAN: He would be a participating informant or an agent provocateur, where he would, in the instructions that I've had over the years, and there's been consistency to these instructions, that he would set up a deal or a meeting and then he would disappear from the scene, and of course then the authorities would be there to arrest whoever was present at the location with seizure of heroin invariably.

GREY: One operation where Antoniadis helped Customs was targeted at Turks and Kurds in North London. According to Siobhain Egan, it used a mobile phone shop run by his associates. The idea, she says, was to sell phones to drug dealers and then use them to track their movements and calls. One of her clients was caught in the net.

EGAN: The evidence against my client was circumstantial evidence. It was basically mobile phone evidence, and we couldn't understand how they would know which phone could be attributed to my particular client, because it was never made clear. So after doing some investigative work, we discovered that the phones concerned all came from one shop in Walthamstow and this was run by close associates of Antoniadis. And our view was that the phone numbers were then logged and handed to Customs, who would then use the information for cell site analysis, where they can tell where you are when you make a phone call and can log and follow through phone calls are made to which individuals at which time and calls that were received from certain individuals at which time. Essentially the case against him was that, that he was involved in telephone traffic that could only have supported their view that he was involved in a heroin conspiracy.

GREY: It sounds like a good tactic though. I mean, what's wrong with it?

EGAN: It is a good tactic, except that the place was run by people who were criminally active themselves - one of them has recently been convicted - and who were close associates of a major criminally active informant. If Customs themselves were running it, then that's fine, there's nothing wrong with that. But to actually have these organisations run by people who are criminally active is very questionable.

GREY: It wasn't just defence lawyers that began to ask if Antoniadis was involved in running drugs - the same allegations came in to Scotland Yard, who soon had a detailed file. Even at Customs, the agency that was handling him, there were suspicions too that he'd crossed the line. After all, the whole point of handling such an informant was to help defeat crime. One officer reported that Antoniadis was:

READER IN STUDIO: Suspected of being involved in organizing large shipments of heroin being imported into the UK by various methods.

GREY: One police officer also declared suspicions that:

READER IN STUDIO: This target arranges the importation and subsequent delivery of heroin across North East London.

GREY: By 2001, NCIS - the body then tasked with monitoring Britain's major criminals – was also getting interested.

COLLINS: The intelligence suggested that he was trading big amounts of drugs, heroin. His favourite trick apparently was to sell somebody 10 kg of heroin and then get the money, and then arrange for his heavies to go round and steal the heroin back off the guy that he'd sold it to. He'd moved down to the south coast. There were suggestions that he was using boats to bring drugs in, there were suggestions that he was dealing in illegal diamonds, amphetamines, guns, passports. We came up with the top ten criminals in the UK that were dealing in drugs and were not the subject of an operation. No one had arrested them, no one appeared to have tried to arrest them. Antoniadis appeared on our list, he was one of the top ten, and it was quite obvious from the intelligence we had that he was a major, major player.

GREY: By then John Collins already had his own concerns about the way Customs were dealing with Antoniadis. Back when he ran his squad, he'd noticed how some major heroin suspects, people like Antoniadis and the Baybasins, were being declared as targets for investigation by Customs. But there didn't seem to be any real inquiries going on. All this showed up in a system called 'flagging'.

COLLINS: In the law enforcement business, if you decide to make a particular guy or a family the subject of your investigation, you have to what they call flag it, and what you do is, you notify the National Criminal Intelligence Service that you are working on that guy and that stops blue on blue situations. That stops you going out and doing work which other people are already doing. I continuously did checks, but it soon became apparent that no one was working on these people, that they were flagged but they weren't being worked on.

GREY: So it was a false flag?

COLLINS: It was a false flag, yes, it was obvious. And the flag was there to protect them as informants.

GREY: What you're saying is, the computer system said that Customs were working, targeting these people, trying to get them arrested, but actually they were protecting them in this way?

COLLINS: Correct. They had flagged these people to stop other people from arresting them and working on them and doing operations against them, and the reason they'd done that is that they were Customs informants, they were allegedly helping the Customs to arrest drug dealers.

GREY: Isn't it important to protect informants?

COLLINS: Oh of course, yes, you've got to protect informants. You wouldn't get informants unless you protected them. But when you have intelligence that the top criminals in North London, who have ownership of say 80% of the drugs trade in the UK at the time, if you then protect those people to get information about guys who are dealing with a kilo, it really doesn't make the system work, does it?

GREY: Customs may have been protecting their informants for good motives; they were under pressure to get drug seizures and arrests. But the strategy, says Collins, was tragically short-sighted. It ended up protecting the wrong people. In the summer of 2001, Antoniadis was arrested. He was held in Germany on charges from Greece of smuggling cannabis. Then the might of the British establishment swung into action - not to assist the prosecution of a suspected criminal - but instead to work with his defence lawyers to see how the charges could be dropped. We've seen telegrams signed in the name of then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, telling officials to press the case for "immediate release" of Antoniadis from jail.

READER IN STUDIO: Telex. Confidential. From FCO. Immediate.
Berlin. 31 July 2001. Subject: Antoniadès. Summary: Agree suggested lobbying action.
Customs and Excise ready to fly in to support. Main line of argument – need to protect
informants.

GREY: Officials were told to point out that:

READER IN STUDIO: A public trial in Greece would reveal
Mr Antoniadès' long career as an informant for Customs and Excise and put his life at risk
from criminal elements. Most importantly, Mr Antoniadès continues to be a vital
informant. His extradition would prevent one current anti-drugs operation from
proceeding.

GREY: It ended:

READER IN STUDIO: We understand that the Hesse Justice Ministry is
most likely, in view of the UK interest, to refer the case to the Justice Ministry in Berlin. It
would be appropriate for Her Majesty's Ambassador to make an intervention at that point.
Straw.

GREY: Once again, this intervention abroad raised
eyebrows in Whitehall.

COLLINS: I got information passed to me that senior Customs
officers 1) had written to the German prosecutor; and 2) were travelling over to Germany
to secure his release from custody. And they were actually talking to his defence council
along the lines of the charges from Greece weren't very good, and ways that the defence
counsel could convince the judge in Germany to release him, which came as a bit of a
shock to me, considering he was one of the top ten drug dealers in the UK.

GREY: You protested about Britain's intervention here?

COLLINS: I did a report to the director of NCIS. Within a day or so there was a meeting called. One of the directors of NCIS, myself, a senior Customs officer, and a senior informant handler, where they- they being the Customs - told me that yes, he had been an informant and that he was the best informant that Customs had ever had, and that what he'd given the UK far exceeded any other damage that he'd done, which was absolute rubbish.

GREY: Again, we'd like to have asked Customs about this case, but they refused. File on 4 did, however, speak to several former Customs officials. They wouldn't be interviewed, but they pointed out that no reports have been proven that Antoniadis was involved in heroin; he's not been convicted of any drugs charges. They said he was one of the best informants they had ever had – responsible for the seizure of kilos of drugs and for many arrests. But helping him to avoid going to trial for the Greek accusations appears at odds with the rules for informants that were then in force. They stated bluntly that:

READER IN STUDIO: Informants have no licence to commit crime.

GREY: Rewards for an informant could include cash or a benefit that:

READER IN STUDIO: May include the supply to a Court of information which may lead to a mitigated sentence for such an informant who has been convicted of an offence.

GREY: Helping an informant to avoid any trial at all was no part of any normal deal. Whatever the truth of the accusations against him or the effect of British lobbying, the German authorities soon released Antoniadis. He later moved to Dubai, where he is still believed to live. We couldn't reach him for comment. But in a newspaper interview two years ago, he admitted to having worked as an informer, and was paid a total of £300,000. Former Labour minister and Liverpool MP, Peter Kilfoyle, has spent years asking questions about the way Customs and police handle informers. But when we told him about the Antoniadis telegrams, even he was surprised.

KILFOYLE: I found it absolutely astounding that this should happen. You know, this undermines what the whole thing is about, which is to make sure that there is an effective and coordinated action taken against these people wherever they are, because of the very nature of the trade. It is an international trade in these drugs. And I am frankly astounded that the Foreign Office should intervene in that way.

GREY: So why would someone like Jack Straw and the Foreign Office get involved in this case, do you think? You know them.

KILFOYLE: Well, goodness knows. I mean, I have to assume that there would be some kind of intelligence involvement, perhaps MI6. Because of course now, for some years the security forces have been looking at drugs as well as terrorism. However, I would expect senior political figures to be far more circumspect and they ought to have refrained from getting involved in the kind of trade-off that unfortunately all too often takes place on the part of serious criminals.

GREY: We did ask Jack Straw and the Foreign Office to comment. Both referred us to Customs. They wouldn't answer any questions from us, either about particular cases or the general way they handle informers. We also asked Customs to comment on another criminal, a Turkish man named Nurettin Guven, who until recently lived freely in London. This despite being wanted in France to serve out a fifteen year jail term for heroin smuggling imposed back in 1995. Guven too was a Customs informer. In a statement, Customs would only say:

READER IN STUDIO: The three cases mentioned are historic and date back to the 1990s. There are complex issues involved and they are the subject of current consideration before the Court of Appeal. Under those circumstances we feel unable to comment on these cases at this stage. However since these cases occurred there have been many changes in our handling procedures.

GREY: Her Majesty's Customs are one of the oldest law enforcement agencies in the world. But in the last few years they've taken a knock. Faced with questions about their competence, particularly about handling informers, they've had a series of convictions quashed. And they've been stripped of the right to

GREY cont: prosecute their own court cases. To add insult to injury, they've now been merged with the Inland Revenue, and major drug smuggling cases have been handed over to the new Serious and Organised Crime Agency. The MP Peter Kilfoyle suggests that, for all the changes, the cases we've looked at were symptomatic of a deep-seated failure that still needs to be addressed.

KILFOYLE: It paints a picture of a very very naive agency, which believed it was doing something it patently wasn't – ie, it was getting the inside information on major drug dealers. It wasn't. What it was doing was helping the major drug dealers remain firmly in place whilst perhaps picking up some of the junior confederates in their crimes.

GREY: But to deal with the major imports of heroin we have seen, they need surely to recruit informants at a very high level in these gangs.

KILFOYLE: I think it's important to have informants. But you have to be very, very rigorous in how you handle the informants, what informants are allowed to get away with, and the quality of the information that they give and the quality of the arrests that are made on the basis of the information given, and that was the point. I don't think that there was the kind of success that we would expect of such a well-funded public agency.

GREY: Some of those who study the effects of the heroin trade draw even harsher lessons. Professor Neil McKeganey is director of the Centre for Drug Misuse at Glasgow University. He argues that the harm caused by drug smuggling is so great that it's simply too risky to do business with top level criminals.

MCKEGANEY: Whatever information one is promising, there is no way that you can then countenance activities which are involved in drug production, distribution and supply, simply because the heroin trade, it is having such a devastating impact on our country.

GREY: Given the evidence we've presented, do you think the right balance is being struck in terms of finding the right information as opposed to protecting people involved in crime?

MCKEGANEY: Well, that raises a question about whether there is indeed even a balance that can be struck there. It seems to me that wherever you have a situation where individuals may be significant players in the importation of drugs into the UK, they pose a massive threat to the UK, so I actually don't think there's a balance to be drawn. These are individuals who threaten the UK to such a degree that at no point should one in any way do anything less than one's maximum in terms of apprehending them, ceasing their activities, seizing their assets and trying to create an environment where these individuals cannot flourish in any shape or form.

GREY: The problem of drugs has many roots and causes. And whatever Customs did or didn't do was only one part of the picture. But former police intelligence officer, John Collins, says we can't escape the consequences of a policy that he believes let serious criminals escape serious investigation.

COLLINS: Drugs trafficking, heroin trafficking has expanded beyond anyone's expectations. I would say that if we had had a real joined-up attack against the dealers in the eighties and the nineties, where we weren't allowing people to have immunity, then I think we'd have got a handle on the problem much quicker. We wouldn't have been as far advanced as we are now with the trafficking. It's out of control.

SIGNATURE TUNE