

Point of Interest

Over the years the law enforcement community have allowed the term 'person of interest' to enter the 'police speak' dictionary to describe people who may well be... err, suspects?... or possibly someone who the police would like to talk to.... as they may be suspected, possibly? If there was a chance of jeopardising an investigation or paying out millions in damages by using such a phrase..... why would you use it?

Imagine reading the local newspaper where the circumstances of a crime are being reported.

'Police are seeking information regarding a 'person of interest' seen in the area prior to the attack. A man in his late twenties, dark clothing was seen walking nearby'.

Now the honesty test... What are your initial thoughts? The person seen walking away... be honest. Would you expect to read *'this person could be a good witness'*. I think not. The connotations in the use of the term 'person of interest' should not be ignored. A euphemism for witness or suspect? Members of the jury, you decide.

Those will argue that by not being declared an 'official suspect' then the protection of the law may not be afforded to you. Does a 'person of interest' have access to free and independent legal advice? Would a conversation be deemed an 'interview', conducted under caution?. Should it be recorded and conducted at a police station as per the Police & Criminal Evidence Act 1984.ⁱ

The reluctance to call a person a 'suspect' may well create enough ambiguity for law enforcement to hide behind or may well send a message to the community... 'don't worry, we are closing in'. The term has no legal meaning unlike *suspect*, *victim* or *witness*. So why use it?

Even if history doesn't teach us everything, it can certainly show us what to avoid. Remember the pipe bombing at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and 'person of interest' Richard Jewell. The security guard in the right place to uncover evidence but at the wrong place to appear above suspicion. A completely innocent 'hero' who settled out of court with many institutions for the defamation of his character..... by being a 'person of interest'.

Or take the later case of Steven Hatfillⁱⁱ, the innocent US scientist labelled such a 'person' after the anthrax letter attacks. He lost his career as a result and settled for \$5.8 million dollarsⁱⁱⁱ. Fair price?

Irrespective of any financial costs of using the term, the cost of justice is a price worth fighting for. Would those unfairly labelled as a 'person of interest' receive a fair trial? Or alternatively those victims who are denied justice due to the wrong phrase at the wrong time.

As the IPCC^{iv} have recently used the term and attempt to clarify any ambiguities with a definition, is it not time to be just old fashioned and remain, witnesses, victims or suspects?

Fair point?..... of interest?

ⁱ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/60/contents>

ⁱⁱ <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/US/06/27/anthrax.hatfill>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Person_of_interest#Hatfill_v._Ashcroft

^{iv} http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/investigation_commissioner_reports/Hillsborough_Update_January_2014.pdf