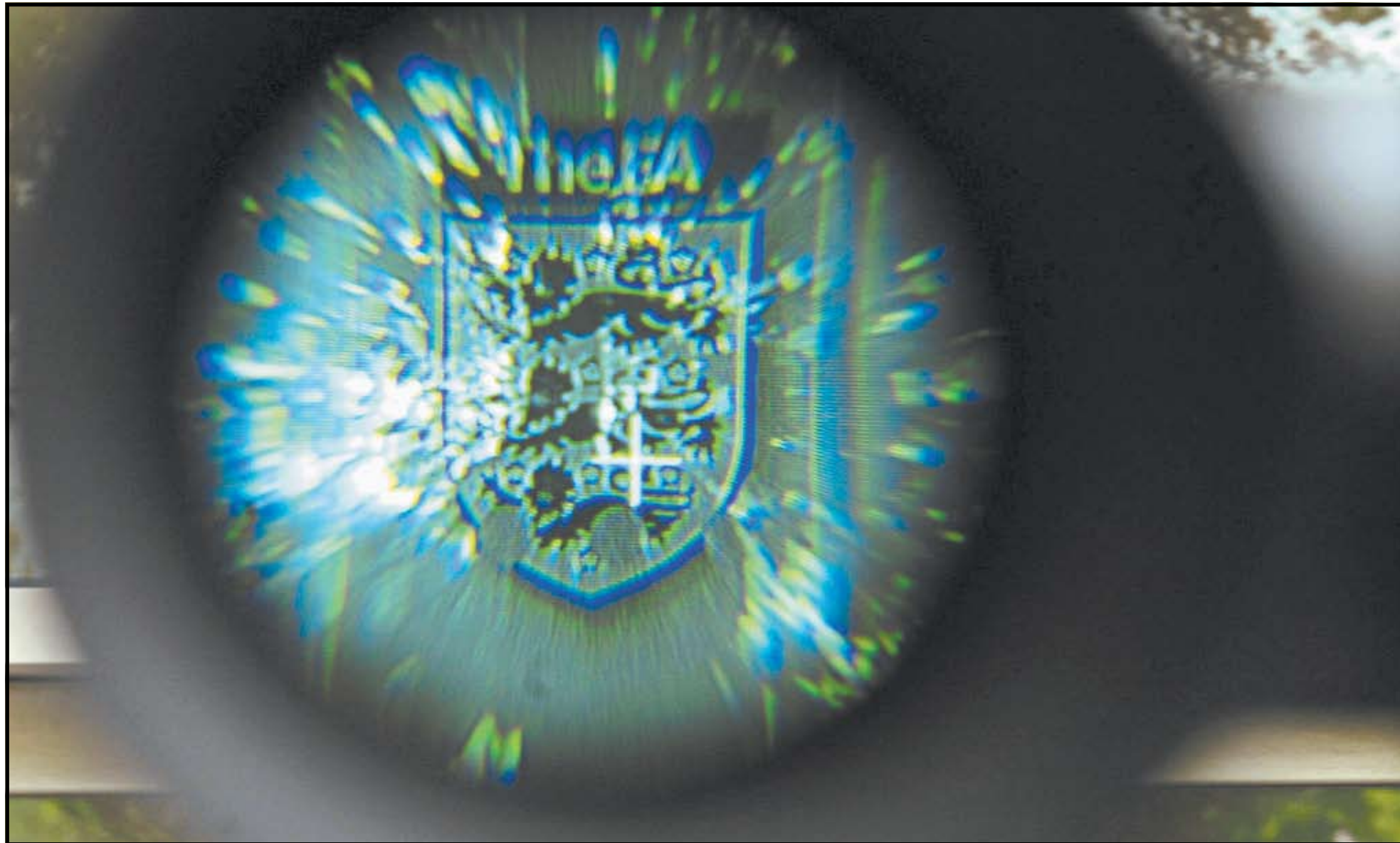


SPECIAL INVESTIGATION



The FA have denied Peter Hargitay has links to ABI, a shadowy security and intelligence gathering agency, but the evidence contradicts their position

Photograph: Getty

UNSEEMLY APPOINTMENT



Andrew Jennings wonders why the FA have employed a man with such murky connections

THE FA last night denied that Peter Hargitay, the man they have hired as a "strategic adviser" to England's 2018 World Cup bid, was linked to a shadowy security and intelligence gathering agency which boasts as one of its range of services, "military and government level surveillance".

Last week the Sunday Herald asked the FA to explain Hargitay's links with the Zurich based "intelligence gathering" agency ABI, which offers clients "covert operation assignments", a "software expert with hacker-credentials" as well as "military and government-level surveillance" operations. On its website ABI boasts that one key operative is "a Cuban army colonel with a martial arts black belt." Come to a private meeting and ABI will disclose, "the full extent of services ... their implications and advantages".

Last November the FA announced that because of Hargitay's close relationship with Fifa chief executive Sepp Blatter they were "delighted"

to hire him and his European Consultancy Network Ltd (ECN) to advise on the 2018 World Cup bid. They seemed unaware ECN had ceased trading three years earlier. Hargitay has since registered a company with the same name in Cyprus.

Hargitay had registered ECN in England in 2002 but in 2006 told Companies House his address was "ABI, 81, Lavaterstrasse, Zurich." Although he lives in Notting Hill, Hargitay has for more than five years invited potential ECN clients to contact him at ABI's Zurich phone number.

Asked about the relationship between Hargitay and ABI, the FA press office said, "We have been advised by ECN that there is no relationship between the two companies other than the fact that ECN were renting office space at the address a few years ago, before a subsidiary was formed, and at that time used the telefax services of the main tenant, ABI."

The FA press office went on: "ECN have also informed us that the number now belongs to ECN and not ABI, and ask ABI to remove it from their contact details on their website."

But Hargitay has a much closer relationship with ABI. In January 2002, shortly before signing up with Blatter, Hargitay registered a Zurich-based business soliciting funds to "fight for human rights". It claimed, surprisingly given the potential illegality, "we investigate bank accounts". Its address and phone number? ABI in Lavaterstrasse.

Additionally, among its "senior managing partners," ABI's website boasts one unnamed Swiss-Hungarian who specialises in crisis management,

has language qualifications, claims to have been Hungary's consul in Switzerland and has Caribbean experience.

Hargitay is a Swiss-Hungarian who specialises in crisis management, has language qualifications, claims to have been Hungary's consul in Switzerland and has Caribbean experience. Hargitay and the ABI senior managing partner are the same age.

Last November, Hargitay delivered a lecture at a Fifa-funded course at Leicester's De Montfort University. He provided the organisers with his biographical details – Swiss-Hungarian, crisis management, languages, Hungarian diplomat, Caribbean experience. Just like ABI's unnamed managing partner. Yet the FA insists: "Mr Hargitay has confirmed that he is not that person."

When Hargitay launched his ECN company in England he promised clients with embarrassing problems, "powerful strategies to stay out of the media" and to prepare such briefs, news items and alternative scoops as would "divert, detract and destabilise imminent media interest".

Yet, when the Sunday Herald put its questions to the FA it received an unsolicited response from Hargitay which accused this reporter of "pathological lies, innuendos, libel and misrepresentations". The email continued: "If you are man enough (!), we can meet face to face. I'll let you know when and where."

Powerful strategies indeed.

Hargitay has vast experience going back decades in the slimmer side of public relations. In 1984 he performed crisis management for Union Car-



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Peter Hargitay

bide after the company's poisonous gas killed 2,500 people and maimed thousands more in Bhopal, India.

He also served notorious sanctions buster and tax evader Marc Rich, one of America's Most Wanted, who lived in exile in Zug, Switzerland. Rich made a fortune illegally shipping oil to South Africa during the apartheid years.

Moving to Jamaica, Hargitay was cleared of cocaine trafficking in 1996.

So why have the English FA hired this man? Are they aware they run the risk of being accused of hiring him to spy on people who might jeopardise England's bid? Or to investigate rival bids and obtain the bank records of Fifa leaders to discover if they have taken bribes? They would not be the first bid team to try.

The FA insists, "The FA has not engaged ABI in any form and would not use that type of service as part of our bid campaign."

Then why risk employing the volatile Hargitay when London boasts dozens of highly skilled and above board public relations companies?

England lost badly to Germany in the 2006 vote back in 2000 and will to have to play hardball to win the next vote in 2011. The FA faces an uphill struggle, promoting the English love of the game and modern stadiums to Fifa's Executive Committee, some of whom received unorthodox payments from associates of the successful German bid to stage the 2006 World Cup, as revealed by BBC Panorama in October 2007.

In employing Hargitay, FA chief executive Brian Barwick and chairman Lord David Triesman may have taken on more than they can handle.