

UK police to mount nationwide roadblocks

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15 August 1998

Britain's police forces are to mount random nationwide roadblocks next month in conjunction with a number of government agencies.

In operation 'Mermaid' the country's 52 police forces will be able to stop and search vehicles on the pretext of conducting road-safety checks. However, the checks will also involve a number of agencies, including immigration officials, benefits agency inspectors and customs officers who will be on hand to question those 'suspected of criminal activity'. Those whose vehicles are stopped for a safety check may then be questioned regarding the purpose of their journey, whether they are working or in receipt of welfare, and whether they hold a British passport.

The civil liberties organisation Liberty has condemned the operation as an 'abuse of power'. It is planning a legal test case against people being compelled to answer questions from other authorities when they are stopped by police for road-safety checks.

Random road blocks have been a growing feature of policing ever since the miners' strike of 1984-85, when police prevented the movement of 'flying pickets' by sealing off entire cities and motorways. There have also been several occasions when entire working class suburbs have been cordoned off and all movements in and out subject to control by armed police.

Police have used the campaign against drink-driving to demand wide powers to conduct random checks to breathalyse drivers, not just those who have committed a motoring offence or whose driving arouses suspicion. This could soon see police operations being conducted outside public bars.

Following a series of IRA bombings in London, police enforced a 'Ring of Steel' around the City of London, erecting control barriers and installing video surveillance cameras on all approach roads. Despite the IRA cease-fire the surveillance by police video cameras continues to this day.

Operation Mermaid has been underway since 1995 and has grown to encompass more regional forces. In total 93,000 drivers have been stopped, leading to 673 arrests and 5,500 vehicles being banned from the road.

These operations have seen an unprecedented increase in collaboration between police and other government agencies, including Custom & Excise, the Vehicles Inspectorate, Benefits Agency, the Health & Safety Executive, the Drive & Vehicle Licensing Agency, Trading Standards, the Contributions Agency, the Immigration Service, and the Environment Agency. Nor is this collaboration confined to police operations. Police and social security investigators supported an immigration service operation mounted at the Alton Towers leisure park.

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