

Britain: Kent County Council creates its own private police force

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Conservative-controlled Kent County Council is contributing more than £1 million (\$ 1.4m) towards the creation of its own private police force. Added to £1.6m (\$2.27m) already earmarked by the local police authority for the purpose of increasing policing in rural areas, it will pay for 62 additional full-time police officers and supporting services, plus a new force of 12 village "crime wardens".

The crime wardens will be paid between £30,000 (\$42,500) and £35,000 (\$49,350) a year (twice the salary of a junior police constable) and will wear distinctive dark red jackets and "sheriff"-style badges and be trained by the Kent police force.

The decision to establish the private force was taken after a meeting between former Rhodesian farmer and council leader Sandy Bruce-Lockhart (Conservative Party) and the Kent Chief Constable Sir David Phillips. Bruce-Lockhart, one of the Tories leading local government spokesmen, declared: "Our demands for extra bobbies were getting nowhere, so we decided to take action and do it ourselves". Referring to the "crime wardens," he wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, "They will be the eyes and ears of the police in the countryside. Our community partnership is the first of its kind in England, and we have already had shopkeepers and parish councils interested in contributing for a warden."

For months, the Police Federation and Britain's main pro-Conservative newspaper the *Telegraph*, have complained about a crisis in rural policing, in a campaign designed to keep up pressure on the Labour government for rightwing law-and-order measures. In September, Labour announced the introduction of 270 "crime wardens" as locally based adjuncts to the police. In February this year, Home Secretary Jack Straw unveiled a 10-year scheme for reducing crime, which, in addition to recruiting thousands more police officers,

stated that private security firms could "contribute to public safety" by replacing police officers. The police would be able to accredit private companies to carry out some of their activities, such as patrolling crime-ridden estates. To mark the publication of Labour's "crime plan", a central part of its election manifesto, Tony Blair visited Pentonville prison with Jack Straw—the first time a serving prime minister has visited a gaol.

The Tories are keen to upstage Labour's right wing stand on crime prevention, while the police are far from satisfied. The chairman of the Police Federation, Fred Broughton, who has called for "New York-style" policing on the streets of England and Wales and a 10 percent increase in police numbers, also urged the establishment of village police officers, complaining rural areas had been abandoned.

Speaking prior to the Police Federation conference earlier this month, Broughton told the *Telegraph* that the case of Tony Martin had focused attention on rural communities and "their demand for the reassurance of the local police station and the local officer they can rely on... We want to see officers back in villages". Martin is a Norfolk farmer who was jailed for life earlier this year after killing a 16-year-old burglar with a shotgun blast, and also wounding his accomplice as they fled. Martin is a psychologically disturbed individual, obsessed with crime, who slept with a shotgun at his side. When the opportunity finally arose, he showed no mercy in dealing out retribution to those threatening his property.

Following Martin's arrest, he became a *cause célèbre* amongst the conservative countryside lobby and the tabloid press. Scores of neighbourhood watch schemes have since sprung up across rural Britain, reflecting the sharp social tensions in the British countryside.

Kent is an old county situated in the southeast of England. Dubbed the “Gateway between the UK and Europe” by the council, it has a population of 1.3 million and is the site of many famous historical landmarks such as Canterbury and Rochester Cathedrals, Leeds Castle. The council has grown in importance in recent years with the building of the Channel Tunnel linking Britain with continental Europe. Dover provides the main port for cross-Channel shipping, used by millions of private motorists and haulage companies alike. Many towns and villages in Kent are little more than dormitories for commuters travelling to work each day in London. Kent's closeness to the capital, its easy access to Europe and the natural beauty of its landscapes has also made it popular with the rich and famous.

However, many of its towns contain large council estates, blighted by deprivation and the attacks on the welfare state. Kent is also the first point of arrival for many asylum seekers crossing the Channel. Dover in particular has become a focal point for right wing and racist campaigns against immigration and refugees, in which Kent County Council has played a leading role. This combination of social pressures makes Kent a region ready to explode.

Although trounced by Labour in the last parliamentary elections, the Conservatives retain control of a large numbers of rural local authorities. Among these Kent County Council functions as their flagship. It is in the forefront of privatising social services, destroying welfare and pushing forward its own far-right educational agenda.

In another *Telegraph* article, Bruce-Lockhart explains that the money that Kent intends to spend on more policing has come from the destruction of social welfare. “Perhaps the most important challenge for both central and local government is the need to reduce the ever-growing social security, welfare and benefit system that now absorbs one third of total government expenditure.”

“When, in 1997, the Conservatives regained control of Kent County Council after four years under Labour and the Liberal Democrats, within four months we cut £27 million [\$38m] of waste. We reduced bureaucracy and overheads, halving the number of senior officers and selling unused council property. This drive for efficiency has been ratcheted up each year, and the

savings reinvested in the direct services that the public want,” he boasts.

He goes on to explain how the council contracts 80 percent of its budget to the private sector. In education, he says the Tories have fought to keep more grammar schools than any other county, enshrining selection at age 11.

Proclaiming the county to be a bastion of rightwing “family values”, Bruce-Lockhart told the press: “In Kent, we have passed our own 'Section 28' and have placed family and marriage at the centre of our new Kent Curriculum.” Section 28 of the Local Government Act was introduced under the Thatcher Conservative government in 1988. It outlaws the “promotion” of homosexuality by Local Authorities, preventing councils giving assistance to gay and lesbian groups. Last July a half-hearted attempt by the Blair government to repeal the homophobic legislation was twice voted down in the House of Lords, after a Tory-led campaign for its retention.



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