

Britain: Police reform targeted at civil disorder

Julie Hyland

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Home Secretary David Blunkett has released the government's proposals for police reform. He claimed that his White Paper, *Policing a new century: a blueprint for reform*, was aimed at overcoming wasteful bureaucracy, providing excellence and protecting the security of millions of Britons.

The document is the first major attempt at police reform since that carried out by John Major's Conservative government in 1993, and sets out the most far-reaching changes in police structures and control for 20 years.

Central to the proposals is the creation of a "new police family of community support," through police-accredited neighbourhood wardens and security staff. So-called Community Support Officers (CSOs) are to be targeted at policing disorder in certain neighbourhoods and areas.

Blunkett claimed this second-tier of "uniformed civilians" would only have powers to use reasonable force to detain, but not arrest suspects. But the CSOs will be able to make house-to-house visits and could be armed with CS spray and batons. Civilian detectives, with expertise in computing, finance and other areas, are also to be incorporated in the new apparatus, armed with powers to search and seize evidence, interview suspects and present evidence in courts.

The White Paper further proposes that community wardens and security guards operated by the private sector should be officially designated as a third tier of policing.

The media, police agencies and the main political parties have given the proposals a cautious welcome, although some police officers have criticised Blunkett's efforts to eradicate police "inefficiency" as an implied slur. The home secretary has gone out of his way to reassure police chiefs that his reforms are

motivated by the highest regard for the police force and are aimed at "dialogue not diatribe".

Meeting to discuss the proposals with 43 police chiefs in England and Wales, Blunkett insisted that agreement on the changes must be made by autumn next year. In a telling remark, however, the home secretary told the meeting that not all of his proposals required "primary legislation. In fact, the more we can agree, the less legislation it will take to bring about significant change." In other words, major changes to Britain's policing could be arrived at behind closed doors, and away from public scrutiny, if police chiefs were willing to compromise.

In making this pledge, Blunkett is no doubt mindful of the fact that the Major government's proposals met with fierce opposition from police chiefs, concerned at any diminution of their status and conditions. At that time, 20,000 police officers gathered in an unprecedented public protest to condemn any changes in their conditions. Labour's then shadow home secretary, Tony Blair, used the conflict to steal the Tories mantle as the party of "law and order" and present New Labour as the only true friend of Britain's police officers.

The latest proposals are a continuation of Labour's efforts to significantly increase state powers and further denude civil liberties. His paper states that crime prevention measures have been a "sustained success". So much so, he boasts, that recorded offences have fallen by 21 percent since 1997, and 12 percent between 1999-2000. All indices of crime—from violent assault to theft—have fallen significantly. At the same time, the government has increased police spending by 21 percent, recruited 1,300 new police officers over the last year and is on course to reach its target of a record 130,000 officers by 2003. "Support staff" have also

increased from 53,011 in 1997 to 54, 558 today, the highest number ever.

Why then, given its apparent success, is the government so keen to push through its proposed changes? The answer lies buried away in the 137-page document. Blunkett states that the government recognises that its current achievements could be jeopardised by “quite small changes in the availability of neighbourhood policing, or in broader issues relating to social cohesion”. The document cites “anti-terrorist work” as a specific instance in which usual police resources could be diverted. With this in mind, new forms of policing will be required to target “anti-social behaviour and disorder”, normally dealt with by uniformed officers.

The implications of Blunkett’s proposals are wide-ranging. Britain’s police force is nominally, at least, meant to be democratically accountable at a local level, an arrangement that has been used to maintain the fiction that policing is “by consent”.

In reality, central government has long exerted a determining influence over police policy and operations, and never more so than during major periods of social unrest and industrial disputes. Policing of the bitter 1984-85 national miners strike was coordinated by a top level government committee, chaired by the then Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and involving senior ministers and members of Britain’s armed forces.

Blunkett’s proposals take this centralisation and politicisation still further. The proposal to grant the home secretary power to sack or suspend an inefficient chief constable is the first step towards the transformation of the police into a US-style Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), long demanded by sections of the British establishment. Such a force would be directly under government control, and aimed primarily at “anti-terror” activities—which are defined so broadly they effectively cover any and all forms of anti-government opposition.

The proposals to create second and third policing tiers become far clearer in this regard. Whilst the main police force would be given over towards what is essentially political policing, the new organisations will be charged with maintaining law-and-order under conditions of growing social deprivation.



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