

UK police mount political campaign against government reforms

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A rally of 10,000 off-duty police officers outside parliament Wednesday March 13 was the public face of an unprecedented political campaign against police reform. Largely reported as a dispute over pay, the demonstration was only the latest action by a police force opposed to any encroachment upon its privileged status.

Having adopted the slogan of “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” as an election mantra, the Labour government has been keen to tackle inadequacies in crime detection rates and introduce the type of performance related pay schemes common throughout the public sector. It does so under conditions of acute social polarisation, which necessitates the refashioning of the police as a more direct instrument of political repression.

At the centre of the proposed reforms, though not openly stated, is the creation of a two-tier police force in which so-called Community Support Officers will deal with the more routine aspects of policing, leaving regular officers to focus on public order issues. Having abandoned any commitment to alleviating the miserable conditions affecting growing layers of society, Labour has set itself the task of creating a political police force, along the lines of the FBI in the United States, directly under the control of a government hell-bent on clamping down on democratic rights.

At the same time, however, Home Secretary David Blunkett, who has brought forward the reforms, is acutely aware that public confidence in the police service is at an all-time low. The Macpherson report into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence branded the police as “institutionally racist” and catalogued a series of errors provoking allegations of incompetence if not outright corruption that had enabled Stephen’s killers to walk free. This prompted a number of cosmetic changes to police procedure, including the recording of dealings with minorities, redefining racist crimes and recruitment quotas. The most significant change was the reduction in the use of stop and search powers. However, stop and search is now to increase once more as part of the Blunkett reforms after Mike Best, editor of Britain’s leading black newspaper the *Voice*, called for this as a means to tackle inner-city crime. The police are still not satisfied, however, as they are required to log all such stops and are complaining at the amount of paperwork this will entail.

Police have opposed the introduction of Community Support Officers (CSOs). A pilot scheme has been launched in the northern town of Hull in which 19 street wardens have begun patrolling, with limited police powers. The nationwide scheme, which is set

to see 700 such wardens with powers to detain people for up to 30 minutes until police arrive and to collect mandatory fines for traffic offences and the like, has been condemned as policing on the cheap.

But Conservative Lord Strathclyde revealed the more fundamental source of the present conflict between police and government when he told reporters, “There is one issue more important than any other, which is the ability for the home secretary to control every police force in the country.

“Our aim is to stop him from doing so and we are busy building up an alliance of Labour backbenchers, crossbenchers, Liberals and of course Conservatives in order to do that.

“We will do what the House of Lords always does in these circumstances, which is to stand up for natural justice and common sense and get the home secretary to re-think his policy on this when it returns to the Commons [parliament] some time at the end of April or the beginning of May.”

Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin said two sections of the reform bill “pose a fundamental threat” to the rule of law in Britain.

“What the home secretary does is to give himself the power to direct at every level the operations of every police force in England and Wales,” Letwin said. “The reason we will fight until the last ditch is that the fundamental bastions of our liberties under the rule of law are the courts and the operation of the independence of the police force.”

Neither the Conservatives nor the police have suddenly become the defenders of democratic rights. The claim of an independent, non-political police force is fraudulent, and shown to be so by the actions of the police in recent weeks. Amid reports of secret meetings between top police officers and opposition politicians, aimed at securing a vote against the reforms, Metropolitan Commissioner of Police Sir John Stevens made a public and overtly political statement attacking the government’s proposals and the criminal justice system itself.

In a lecture at Leicester University, Stevens claimed the police were treated with “utter contempt” by the “appalling” justice system. He singled out judges and magistrates for freeing robbers on bail, denounced lawyers for turning the criminal process into a “game” and attacked the government’s policing legislation.

“The process actually encourages criminals in the belief that crime is merely a game of no consequence to society, local communities or their victims so they are not held to account. So

we see robbers with strings of previous convictions, strutting across the estates of inner London, having won their most recent game in court—arrogant, untouchable, fearless and ready for anything. It is not uncommon to have muggers released on bail eight or nine times before they face trial for their first attack. You could be forgiven for thinking that the criminal justice system is treating violent and abusive robbers like shoplifters,” Stevens said.

His remarks were a response to proposals unveiled by Blunkett at the end of last year to take over the running of “failing” police forces, in much the same way as schools and hospitals so designated have been taken over. For a senior police officer to condemn the justice system in this manner is, however, unprecedented and has provoked sharp criticism from the legal profession.

Chairman of the Bar Council, David Bean QC, underscored the significance of Stevens’s statement. Bean, whose organisation represents barristers, said comments from the police were extreme and pleaded for more balance in the debate.

“None of us want a police state, where the knee-jerk response to crime is to ‘round up the usual suspects’ as in the film Casablanca.

“We’ve seen too many miscarriages of justice for that. But if we did unbalance the scales of justice we would, before long, be on the slippery slope to a police state.”

Bean later told the BBC, “They are painting a picture of a criminal justice system where defence lawyers are causing all the difficulties. Really it’s administration mainly on the police side that is causing the difficulties.”

Stevens’s assertion that too many criminals escape a jail sentence due to the inadequacies of the courts is spurious. Britain places a higher proportion of its population behind bars than any comparable European nation . Between 1980 and 1995, the average prison population rose from 43,109 to 51,231 and is projected to reach 74,000 by 2005. The courts are now jailing more people than at any time for 40 years. Average sentences have increased and the population of jails in England and Wales alone has already topped 70,000 for the first time.

Politicians have never been ones to let reality stand in the way of a reactionary policy, however, so Home Office Minister John Denham began a parliamentary debate on policing by saying the government wanted to tackle the “sense of invulnerability” among young offenders. “It means reforms to sentences and court procedures. It means speeding up parts of the system. It means reforms to the police service.”

Among the proposals put forward by Blunkett to “speed up the system” is the electronic tagging of young people suspected of committing an offence, before they have even been charged, let alone convicted.

The Labour government has no fundamental differences with Stevens’s remarks. Already it has effectively done away with the right to silence and proposed the ending of jury trials in certain cases. But the problem is how to proceed with the erosion of fundamental democratic rights, given a thoroughly discredited police force.

The police have always resisted anything that encroaches on their so-called autonomy. The last public protest by police officers

was a meeting in Wembley Stadium in the early 1990s to oppose the implementation of the conclusions of a report commissioned by the then Conservative home secretary, Kenneth Clarke, into incompetent leadership and inflexible working practices in the police. The main recommendation of the report by Sir Patrick Sheehy was performance (or appraisal) related pay. It was roundly defeated after a campaign by the Police Federation.

In order to defend their own privileged position, the police are insisting that they are accountable to no one. This has always been the case historically. As officers of the Crown, the police escape any accounting at a local level. Administration of the police lies with local police authorities, but these never had any real powers. Additionally, because the police are administered by the local police authorities, the home secretary, though formally the minister for the police is not answerable to parliament for their actions. This situation is presented by the Tories as insulating the police from corrupt politicians, but their opposition to the police reforms is more correctly an attempt to maintain their own influence over the force and to use this for political point-scoring against Labour in the law and order debate.

The function of the police in capitalist society is not of a neutral, but rather a class character. They are first and foremost the defenders of private property and the social order that arises from it. For the most part, politicians have tended to take a hands-off approach in relation to routine policing. Only at crucial political junctures have they intervened into policing and then usually in order to strengthen or extend existing police powers rather than curb them.

In the 1984-85 miners’ strike for example, the South Yorkshire police authority attempted to withhold funds targeted for the policing of the strike. The Chief Constable, with the support of both the home secretary and attorney general opposed them. The latter applied to the High Court for powers to coerce the authority into releasing the funds.

The normal balance of power between the police and government is only called into question when it encroaches upon the privileges of the police themselves. The present conflict is magnified by the fact that the reforms are proposed by a Labour government which, no matter how right wing its own agenda, is seen by sections of the police force as little better than a bunch of crypto-communists and Johnny-come-lately converts to law and order policies.



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