

Police reform to create FBI-style national agency in Britain

Jordan Shilton
7 August 2010

Britain's Conservative-Liberal coalition government is seeking to implement what has been described as the most "radical" reform of policing in 50 years.

The government's proposals, "Policing in the 21st Century: Reconnecting Police and the People", have been described as efforts to "democratise" the police force and make it more accountable to local communities.

But this is merely the cover for measures aimed at centralising and strengthening the police, particularly through the establishment of an FBI-style National Crime Agency (NCA).

By 2013 it is proposed that the new NCA will replace the existing Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) that was set up by Labour in 2006. The NCA will also take on many of the responsibilities of other agencies, such as the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), which is set to lose its influence over operational matters at the national level.

Significantly, counterterrorism strategy is to become the responsibility of the NCA, with reports also indicating that the head of the agency would enjoy considerably greater powers than those currently available to the Metropolitan Police commissioner. The agency will also be tasked with stepped-up security on Britain's borders.

The police and security forces in Britain already enjoy significant powers that were brought in under the guise of the "war on terror". The Labour government lengthened the period of time during which suspects could be detained without trial, implemented a "shoot-to-kill" policy that resulted in the death of an innocent man, Jean Charles de Menezes, and oversaw ever more brutal police responses to protests and demonstrations. The power of the police to stop and search individuals was also expanded.

Just one week prior to the release of the government's reform bill, the police were acquitted of any responsibility for the death of Ian Tomlinson during last year's G20 protests in London, in spite of substantial evidence proving that the newspaperman had been assaulted by a number of officers.

Although much remains unclear about the extent of the powers which the NCA would wield, the establishment of a national agency would allow for more coordinated and stronger measures to be taken against "threats to the public", as Home Secretary Theresa May has described it.

According to the *Financial Times*, the power to mobilise a national police force could be handed to the new body. Another indication of the character of the new organisation was given when it was revealed that personnel working for the NCA would be known as agents rather than officers, and that it would oversee certain intelligence gathering operations.

A government source was explicit in linking the new force to the American FBI, stating that the plan for the NCA "has been designed specifically to become Britain's very own FBI." The source continued, "The overview used is to closely follow the American model, which is deemed to have worked well and can be mirrored by our own British team."

In a speech delivered to the ACPO annual conference at the end of June, May indicated that the new agency would enjoy wide-ranging powers. Referring to a national plan that ACPO is helping to draft, she commented, "I want that plan to identify where collaboration (between forces) can strengthen the police response to terrorism, organised criminality and threats to the public that cut across force boundaries."

The reform of the police is not merely the work of the new coalition. It has been under consideration amongst

ruling circles for some time with a number of think tanks producing studies into how best to alter the system. One view with which all the reports agreed is that more power over policing must be concentrated at a national level, to tackle issues such as organised crime, “terrorism”, and “domestic extremism”. Currently, there are 43 local police forces in England and Wales, each of which has significant operational independence.

A study from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) published last November called for a strengthened national policing agency, whose focus would be very similar to that now being proposed.

On the eve of the General Election, a report from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) urged the incoming government to push forward with reform, the key part of which would be to encourage the merger of police forces, if not the creation of a national body.

Another important factor driving the government’s reform is the desire to slash budgets, in particular by compelling officers to take wage cuts and by “freeing up” the police from government regulation.

Speaking at the ACPO conference, May said, “police officers and staff need to be ready, along with the rest of the public sector, to make sacrifices and accept pay restraint. It cannot be right, for example, that police overtime has become institutionalised.”

As for the government claims that its measures will ensure more “accountability”, the opposite is the case.

The government has not said if it will grant police and security services their demands for access to people’s emails and Internet traffic—a measure they have presented as required by the need for “enhanced national security”.

At the same time, in accordance with Prime Minister David Cameron’s “big society”, by which provision of public services is handed over to charities and other voluntary organisations, the police reform proposes a vast increase in volunteer “special constables” to help deal with minor offences in local areas. One report claimed that the aim would be to increase the number of such officers from 15,000 to over 60,000.

It has also proposed the election of police commissioners, whose role will be to oversee the budget for the local force. Commissioners will also have the ability to fire chief constables, and the responsibility to develop a “strategic plan” for the

force.

Behind the democratic rhetoric, the latest proposals for police reform represent a greater concentration and expansion of state powers. As the inevitable social struggles develop in response to the savage cuts that are being pushed through by the coalition government, there will be no hesitation in turning these forces against working people.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact