

Scottish National Party arms police in preparation for rising social opposition

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) government covertly agreed to the arming of police officers on duty last year, the first time that officers have been allowed to routinely carry arms in Britain, outside of Northern Ireland.

As part of a centralisation of the police force under SNP Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill, officers were permitted to bear firearms during street patrols. The decision was kept secret at the time by MacAskill, who was forced to concede an inquiry into the policy this month.

Defending his decision in the Scottish Parliament, MacAskill stated that there were checks and balances in place to ensure that the power was not abused, adding that the public “understands and accepts the need for a small number of police officers to be authorised to carry firearms.”

There is no indication that this development will be seriously investigated, or that the strengthening of the police is confined to a small minority. The inquiry will be overseen by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA), the civilian body ostensibly charged with overseeing policing, and will involve HM Inspectorate of Constabulary. A conclusion to the investigation is not due until December.

Inspectorate of Constabulary head in Scotland, Derek Penman, commented that the review would be comprised of an “objective, professional assessment” on whether Police Scotland has complied with “relevant guidance” on armed officers. In other words, while questions of training and adhering to guidelines will be examined, the issue of whether police should be carrying guns on the streets will remain untouched.

SPA chief Vic Emery told Parliament that the SPA had only been notified of the decision to have armed officers on routine patrol two months after it had been

implemented. Summing up the SPA’s role as a form of window dressing, he told the Parliament’s justice subcommittee on policing, “The scrutiny role that we have is pretty much after the fact, and that is not really my view of governance and I think I have expressed that to this committee various times.”

MacAskill was informed of the decision long before it became public and he took no action. In a damning admission of the SNP’s central role in allowing the police to carry arms, he told Parliament that the policy was first implemented in the Strathclyde area in 2008, before being rolled out nationally last year. “The current standing firearms authority is not new,” he said. The SNP government took power in 2007 at Holyrood, including full control over policing in Scotland.

MacAskill has come under increasing pressure, and there have been calls for him to step down. On Wednesday, the former solicitor general described the arming of the police as disturbing, commenting, “I fear the firearms policy could be the thin end of the wedge; that it may lead to the wider arming of the police and may indeed bring about an Americanisation of the Scottish police force.”

The reference to an “Americanisation” of the police in Scotland must be taken seriously, particularly in light of recent events in Ferguson, Missouri. When the mounting social protest to its right-wing, pro-business agenda inevitably emerges, the SNP would not shrink from utilising the full force of the state apparatus, including armed officers.

The arming of the police is part of a much broader build-up of the repressive state apparatus, which was on display during last month’s Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. A large part of the city was placed under virtual lockdown in what was described as “the biggest security operation in Scotland’s history.” Steel barriers

and turnstiles appeared on streets. Armed officers were deployed in the athletes' village in the east end of Glasgow, and at all thirteen venues in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

According to the Commonwealth Games official website, Police Scotland was put in charge of "a mix of police officers, private security guards, stewards and military personnel to cover all aspects of the security operation." This included sections of the army, navy and air force. 2,000 armed forces personnel and Typhoon fighter jets were placed on standby, and flying restrictions were imposed over areas in Glasgow.

Earlier this year, against strong opposition from legal circles, MacAskill led the way in removing the principle of corroboration, the requirement that more than a single piece of evidence was necessary to secure a conviction, from criminal trials.

The centralisation of policing under Police Scotland has been accompanied by an explosion in stop-and-search incidents. According to figures obtained through a freedom of information request, 640,000 stop-and-searches were carried out in Scotland in 2013. In a country with a population of just five million, this equates to around 12 percent of the total population.

According to reports in the *Herald* newspaper in July, officers are pressured by police management to increase stop-and-search numbers.

The invasive measure is targeting the most vulnerable, with over 26,000 incidents of children under the age of 14 being searched in 2013. Police have the power to search individuals without any suspicion of a criminal offence.

In comments to the *Guardian* in January, MacAskill was unapologetic in his defence of the police. "It's about being proactive, about preventing crime happening in the first place and it's reasonable and proportionate. I don't accept that it's discriminatory. It's quite clear and self-evident that crime is disproportionately perpetrated by young people."

MacAskill's outrageous labelling of all young people as potential criminals completely ignores the terrible social and economic conditions faced by the vast majority of the population across Scotland and the rest of Britain. By implementing its share of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's austerity measures, his SNP administration has presided over a deepening of social inequality and a growth in poverty

rates and food bank usage.

This social reality is directly linked to the strengthening of the forces of law and order. In the current referendum campaign, the SNP has expressed unflinching support for the European Union. This means an acceptance of the stability pact criteria that have been used to impose brutal austerity across the continent.

The SNP's authoritarian move has hardly been mentioned by the official "No" campaign, Better Together, other than a few token criticisms of MacAskill. Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have all supported a vast expansion of police powers in Britain, above all through the implementation of anti-terror legislation. The establishment of a vast surveillance apparatus, incorporating the police and intelligence services, has been backed by all the major parties.



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