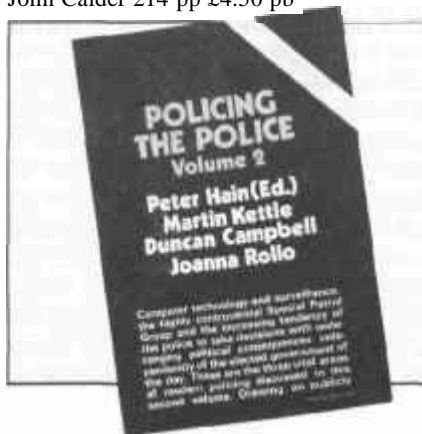


**POLICING THE POLICE VOLUME 2****Peter Hain (ed.)**

John Calder 214 pp £4.50 pb



Investigative reporting on the police is becoming a journalistic growth area. The bi-monthly *State Research* bulletin is a regular source of vital information about the work of the police and security agencies, and *Time Out*, *New Statesman* and *New Society* provide frequent outlets for reports by Duncan Campbell, Rob Rohrer, Martin Kettle and others who have monitored the use (and abuse) of increasing police power and the insidious politicisation of police forces. The first volume of *Policing the Police*, edited by Peter Hain last year, provided an extremely useful and thorough critical evaluation by Derek Humphery of the Police Act of 1976 (which instituted for the first time

a form of independent review of complaints against the police), and of the 1974 and 1976 Prevention of Terrorism Acts (by Brian Rose-Smith). This new volume contains three important articles, by Martin Kettle (of *New Society*) on the politics of policing, by Duncan Campbell (of the *New Statesman*) on the growing sophistication and capacity of surveillance techniques, and by Joanna Rollo (of *Socialist Worker*) on the Special Patrol Group. Altogether the book is an extremely valuable and timely compendium of recent developments in state control, which deserves wide attention and debate. It provides a useful, updating complement to Tony Bunyan's earlier path-breaking 1976

study of the state's repressive agencies in *The Political Police in Britain*.

Martin Kettle describes the growing political involvement of the police over the last few years. This has taken two major directions. First, the police have emerged as a vocal and influential pressure group, seeking to alter the laws they are required to enforce and the social context within which they operate. The starting signal for this process was Robert Mark's famous Dimbleby TV lecture of 1973 in which he argued for greater police powers and reduced suspects' rights on the somewhat disingenuous grounds that failure to grant these 'will increase the pressures on the police to use arbitrary methods.' Since then several other police chiefs, notably David McNee, James Anderton, and John Alderson, have followed Mark's footsteps in becoming media superstars. The Police Federation, the rank-and-file representative body, has since 1975 been engaged in a 'law-and-order' campaign aimed to reverse what they see as a liberalising trend in social and penal policy. Alarmed by possible dangers to the image of the police caused by maverick chief constables and the rank-and-file, the Association of Chief Police Officers has itself resolved to adopt a more public stance in future. It has, for example, played a prominent role in trying to restrict the legitimacy of political demonstrations in the recent inquiry by the new parliamentary home affairs sub-committee into public order law.

The second aspect of growing political activity by the police in recent years is their increasing concern with the policing of politics. The specifically political police, the Special Branch, has expanded rapidly in the last decade (although this can only be estimated, for it is only since 1978 that the size of the Branch has been officially disclosed, thanks to persistent questioning by MP Robin Cook). The most disturbing aspect of the branch's work (and of all the other security agencies too) is the virtually complete absence of democratic accountability or even any extensive public disclosure of the nature of their activities. Reports by investigative journalists, accompanied by parliamentary questioning, probably prompted the departure from previous practice in 1979 when about half the chief constables of England and Wales discussed the work of their Special Branches in their Annual Reports for 1978. Unfortunately, the purpose of Special Branch work was almost invariably covered by the vague rubric 'terrorism' and 'subversion'. The elastic range of the latter term was made evident in a parliamentary debate in April 1978 when Merlyn Rees defined it as activities which

'threaten the safety or well being of the State, and are intended to undermine or overthrow parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.' Clearly this includes much legitimate, democratic political and industrial action. The even greater arbitrariness of the scope of the Branch in practice was indicated earlier by Rees when he declared: 'The Special Branch collects information on those who I think cause problems for the State'. In fact, however, it is unlikely that the Home Secretary exercises anything like as a close a vigilance over the security professionals as this statement implies.

Duncan Campbell's chapter documents the alarming growth in the technological capacity for surveillance available to the police. This underlies the development of a more 'pre-emptive' style of policing, gathering information and intelligence in advance of any specific crime. 'In this pre-emptive view, any citizen, certainly any socially uncharacteristic citizen, is a target for suspicion and observation.' (p. 65) Pre-emptive policing is facilitated by the rapidly growing capacity of the Police National Computer, first adumbrated in 1968. One of the most disturbing aspects of the information included on the PNC, and in other police files, is the extent to which it includes suspicions and 'intelligence' about large numbers of people that do not relate to any actual involvement in crime. Campbell quotes, for example, a bulletin circulated by a provincial force collator (a role established in 1966 in all police forces as part of the Unit Beat system of policing, with the responsibility of being the 'information centre' of the system, collating data from all operational units). This well illustrates the gossipy character of much of the information collected: 'John Smith, a well known local druggie, has moved into 15 New Road together with Ann Brown and child. As we know, Brown is also on the stuff and this new combination should prove interesting. As far as we know Mr Brown is still at home in King Street. It will be interesting to see who visits the new couple.' (p. 131 - names are fictitious).

Joanna Rollo's chapter on the Special Patrol Group usefully assembles what is known about the controversial Metropolitan unit, and its provincial counter parts. It shows how the routine work of the SPG, which is purported to be to relieve hard-pressed police manpower in 'high crime' areas, in effect involves periodic blitzes on mainly black areas using tactics of indiscriminate stop-and-search. This is the basis of some tension between the Group and other local police who claim the heavy-handed tactics of the SPG undermine their

relations with the community. Also charted is the transformation of the SPG into a *de facto* specialist riot-squad through more intensive training and regular use in confrontations. The evidence of the Group's brutality on these occasions, and its implication in the murder of Blair Peach, is outlined. The disclosure on March 10th (following an internal Scotland Yard inquiry) that the Group would be reorganised, suggests, despite official disclaimers, that the substance of these accusations has been conceded. Henceforth, officers will only work in the SPG for a maximum of 4 years (which means that about half the present men will be transferred elsewhere) to prevent the development of a gung ho, garrison mentality. The Group will be decentralised into four units, with the intention of facilitating closer links with the local community, and with the consequence that there will be a higher ratio of supervisory officers and closer control.

One problem with the results of this sort of investigative journalism is what are the consequences for political strategy. The police are notoriously sensitive to criticism, and tend to divide the population into those who are pro or anti-police, the latter being dubbed either 'mischievous' or 'misguided'. This paranoid response to outside questioning has recently become so intense in tone that even *The Daily Telegraph* admonished the police for not conceding that there might be justified cause for concern in recent revelations of brutality and malpractice. The danger for the left is not to fall into the opposite trap of being easily labelled and dismissed as anti-police. Peter Hain underlines this in his introduction when he cites the Police Federation magazine's dismissal of his previous volume with the headline 'It's mat Hain again!'. As Hain argues, this makes it 'impossible to engage in debate at a level that rises above the mere exchange of slogans'. Hain tries to emphasise that the book is not intended as a blanket criticism or attack on the police, but a questioning of present trends in policy, organisational structure and ideology.

The regular monitoring of police activity accomplished by this kind of investigative reporting has two crucial functions. First, it provides detailed evidence highlighting the need for more adequate constitutional means of democratic accountability, which was the purpose of Jack Straw's recent private members' bill seeking a greater role for elected police authorities. Second, in the absence of such formal channels, the process of detailed investigation and revelation may be the only real means of accountability we have.

**Robert Reiner**