

RIOTS AND THE POLICE

In 1971 Major-General Frank Kitson, the Army's leading counter-insurgency theorist, issued the following much-quoted warning in his book *Low Intensity Operations*: 'If a significant and serious grievance arose such as might result from a significant drop in the standard of living, all those who now

developed through the formation of 'police support units' in most forces since 1974. These consist of uniformed police officers who ordinarily perform routine patrol work, but are trained and available for rapid mobilisation to help out neighbouring forces in the event of civil disturbance. In addition to the SPGs and support units, numerous

unreasonable that there should have been renewed demands for improved protective clothing and equipment, and that riot helmets have been introduced for the first time. Far more disturbing and questionable is the availability and use of offensive equipment and tactics which (as observers have been forecasting for a long time) have brought home to the mainland lessons learned by the police and army in Ulster, such as Anderton's use of snatch squads in Manchester, and the promise of plastic bullets, water cannon and armoured vehicles. Perhaps the most shocking occurrence of all was the abuse of CS cartridges intended to penetrate buildings which, as the *New Statesman* revealed, were fired directly into crowds in Liverpool.

Although the British police response to riots remains lower in profile than most foreign forces, there has clearly been a stiffening of tactics over the last decade. But the rapid escalation of the problems they face and the response of the Government and some chief constables has surprised many police officers themselves. Both the Government and the police are falling into the trap of regarding riot control as an isolated and technical problem of the management of violence. Mrs. Thatcher is blind to the contribution of her disastrous economic and social policies to the causes of the riots, while the police remain insensitive to the close interdependence of routine, everyday policing policy and the violence they face. It is clear that a major grievance underlying the riots is police behaviour, in terms both of overpolicing of blacks and others in the inner city, and underpolicing of white racists.

This heightens the urgency of the long standing demands from the Left and civil libertarians for democratisation of the police force in terms of selection and training of personnel, investigation of complaints (especially of police violence), and accountability to elected local authorities for general policy. Despite the continued opposition of the police to any concrete independent channels of outside accountability (as opposed to the nebulous and abstract claim of police answerability to 'The Law'), the present vicious cycle of increasing hostility between police and blacks, as well as many white youths, cannot be in the interest of the police themselves. Robert Mark used to boast of the virtues of the traditional British softly, softly approach to crowd control: 'The real art of policing a free society or a democracy is to win by appearing to lose.' His successors seem in danger of losing while appearing to win.

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dissipate their protest over a wide variety of causes might concentrate their efforts and produce a situation which was beyond the power of the police to handle'. In recent weeks both the architects of police riot control strategy and civil libertarians who have documented their activities over the last decade had the grim and dubious satisfaction of seeing their worst predictions confirmed.

During the 1970s the police capacity to handle public order disturbances has been both expanded and refined. Between 1972-4 while the Heath government was facing up to the implications of its defeats in the 1972 miners' strike there was much debate about the need for a CRS-style 'third force', intermediate between police and army, to cope with demonstrations, strikes and terrorists. The police succeeded in scotching the idea, but have in effect created 'third forces' within their own organisations.

Following the example of the Metropolitan Police, which in 1965 established the Special Patrol Group as a mobile reserve to provide rapid additions of manpower where needed, more than half the forces in the UK now have similar units. Although performing a variety of duties (from rescue work to the highly controversial exercises in saturation policing of high crime areas) the SPGs have become *de facto* riot squads, with notorious consequences at Red Lion Square, Grunwick, Southall and elsewhere. In addition a sophisticated system of mutual aid has

other police officers regularly receive training in crowd control techniques and the use of riot shields (first used at Lewisham and Notting Hill in 1977). The intensity of these exercises is suggested by the fact that a plea was made at the 1978 Police Federation Annual Conference that training be made less realistic because of an unacceptably high level of injuries to police on courses.

For some years now there have been frequent rank and file calls for better protective equipment, and even offensive weapons. In 1978, for example, a *Police Review* booklet *Public Order and the Police* argued: 'riot shields, strengthened helmets and goggles are only the beginning; the question of long staves and firearms must soon be considered.' It quotes an anonymous officer's solution to controlling riotous mobs: 'All you have to do is spray them — spray them with machine-guns.' In addition, police at all levels have pressed for a tightening of the laws regulating public order, for example by requiring advance notice of demonstrations and gaining powers to ban static meetings as well as marches. In recent weeks there have been demands from several quarters for a new form of Riot Act, which would render all people at a scene of disorder liable to arrest following a police warning.

In view of the high levels of injury suffered by police during the April Brixton riots, and the obvious vulnerability of their shields to petrol bombs, it is neither surprising nor