

**The future of the police is now a major political issue. Will the result be a further drift towards authoritarianism or a more accountable police force?**

# Policing in the Eighties

## Interview with Chief Constable John Alderson



*Since the riots and since the Scarman Inquiry there's been a much greater public perception about policing issues and that policing is facing a number of choices at the moment. Can you say what you think is the character of the crisis facing the police at the moment?*

The police have been disorientated. Policing policies are still based on out-dated assumptions in many respects. A police service with traditions based on an authoritarian and paternalistic society is not quite in the right kind of condition to handle an increasingly liberated and questioning society. When the police were formed in 1829, society was ruled by a few people and universal suffrage was merely a dream. Indeed, the police of course were partly introduced to police the reform movements and the Chartists, as well as what they would have described in those days as the criminal classes. So, to that extent, the police in the 19th century have to be seen on the side of small power groups regulating the mass of society. But now practically everybody belongs to a power group of some kind. So the police have to face in many different directions at the same time. I think police philosophy, if I might use that expression, hasn't adjusted rapidly enough to accommodate this speed of change one has witnessed over the last 30 years and particularly over the last 15 or so.

*The divide between the police and society over the last 20 years, has been very much associated in practical policing terms with the abandonment of the traditional beat constable and its replacement by a more automated, technologised police force. Why has it happened?*

Well, if one's a policeman in a pedestrian society, one has to be a pedestrian. If one is a policeman in a motorised society one has to be capable of becoming motorised. You can't police a motorised society without motor cars any more than you can police an armed society without guns. Nor can you police a computerised society without computers. The police have to keep pace with technological development. But, having said that, it does not mean that policing in its basic form should become a mechanised concept. What happened was that an undermanned force, facing a growing workload, began to

see technology as some kind of salvation. The police culture itself began to be affected. I mean the younger policemen no longer saw themselves in the personal contact, walking situation or going to where people are. They merely saw themselves as 'responders to incidents', as social controllers *per se*, rather than achieving social control through other people, their communities and informal controlling mechanisms such as family and school.

It was compounded by the introduction of the unit beat policing system in the 1960s. The theory was that you should have men on their own beats working 8 hours, so that their own beats would only be covered for 8 hours out of the 24. But you would have a motorised response element in the team which would be there 24 hours. It would also have its own detectives, it would have its own collator of intelligence and it would be a self-contained entity, policing an area round the clock on different levels. In practice it resulted in all the policemen becoming motorised because people had failed to spot that unit beat policing just devoured manpower. Most forces would have had to double their strength to cope with unit beat policing in its pure form.

*From many recent police statements, you get the impression that up until the 1960s there was a kind of cosy, community relationship in which avuncular, large bobbies trundled round on the beat, giving a warning here and a clip on the ear there. You know, everyone knew their place and all that stuff. It doesn't seem a very good historical model to me. Isn't there a degree of self-delusion in some of the talk about bobbies on the beat, in the pre-unit beat policing era?*

I've often pondered on this particular mythology and I think it is largely mythology. I think the British people have a nostalgia for a good police. They have an innate desire to admire the police as police — as a system. That doesn't mean they admire police as policemen or women necessarily, but there's a feeling that we can do these things better than other people. It's like people will say that British justice is the best in the world. Well, what does that mean? Does it mean it's the best of a bad lot or does it mean that it's just a

kind of chauvinism? One of the recent public opinion polls shows this up remarkably well. A lot of people indicated a falling in their attitudes towards the police, but when they were asked the question, 'Do you think our police are still the best in the world?' over 90% said 'Yes'.

*The policing of demonstrations is a subject which has got a lot of attention recently and has been an area of conflict. Do you think the police have got their approach to major demonstrations right and if they haven't, what's wrong with it?*

Well, I think what's wrong with it is that the social context has changed. It became obvious in the March 1968 Vietnam demonstration on the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. I think the police would now admit that they got it wrong — tactically wrong, in as much as people got trapped in Grosvenor Square, that there was confrontation between police and public, that the mounted police were seen to be inadequate, that individual officers were going around committing acts of violence on groups of people and so on. A lot of lessons were learned from that and it was in 1968 that the Yard began to change its tactics towards public order. Instead of the situation being controlled by the commander on the spot, there was the building up of a new command centre at New Scotland Yard with television cameras and so on, so that the public order situation could be viewed from this remote position and reinforcements could be deployed strategically and the commander could see what was going on. So, by the time of the October demonstration in Grosvenor Square, which was attended by some tens of thousands, where London had braced itself for tremendous mayhem because of what was going on in Paris and other parts of the Western world at the same time, it never happened. It resulted in a triumph for the demonstrators and a triumph for the police. People acted out their roles and it passed off in a note of some triumph and self-congratulation.

But, you see, since then things have taken on a different characteristic. We have seen a repetition of the Communist/Fascist clashes in the 1930s which were policed with some vigour by the Metropolitan Police. We have seen also the deliberate use of right wing extremist groups to intimidate and upset sensitive racial areas of cities. Again the police have been seen as almost protectors of these extremist groups and that's been unfortunate for the police because it has to some extent damaged their image of impartiality.

*Do you think there is a more imaginative alternative to that? Because I've always had the feeling that when questioned about their tactics on National Front marches, most police chiefs have taken the view that they're doing the only thing that they possibly can do, which is to load literally thousands of officers into the streets to allow a march to go ahead. As you say, one effect of that is for the police to be seen to be protecting racist groups.*

Yes, I think this is grounded in the understandable belief that it's the duty of the police to facilitate the right of freedom of demonstration. Bans under the Public Order Act 1936 are available to the police and to the Home Secretary to avoid some of the worst excesses. But it was a characteristic of police thinking that it was a failure almost to have to seek a ban on a march and I think that led at times to some

misunderstanding and to people feeling that wasn't always the best attitude to take.

*That's putting it mildly.*

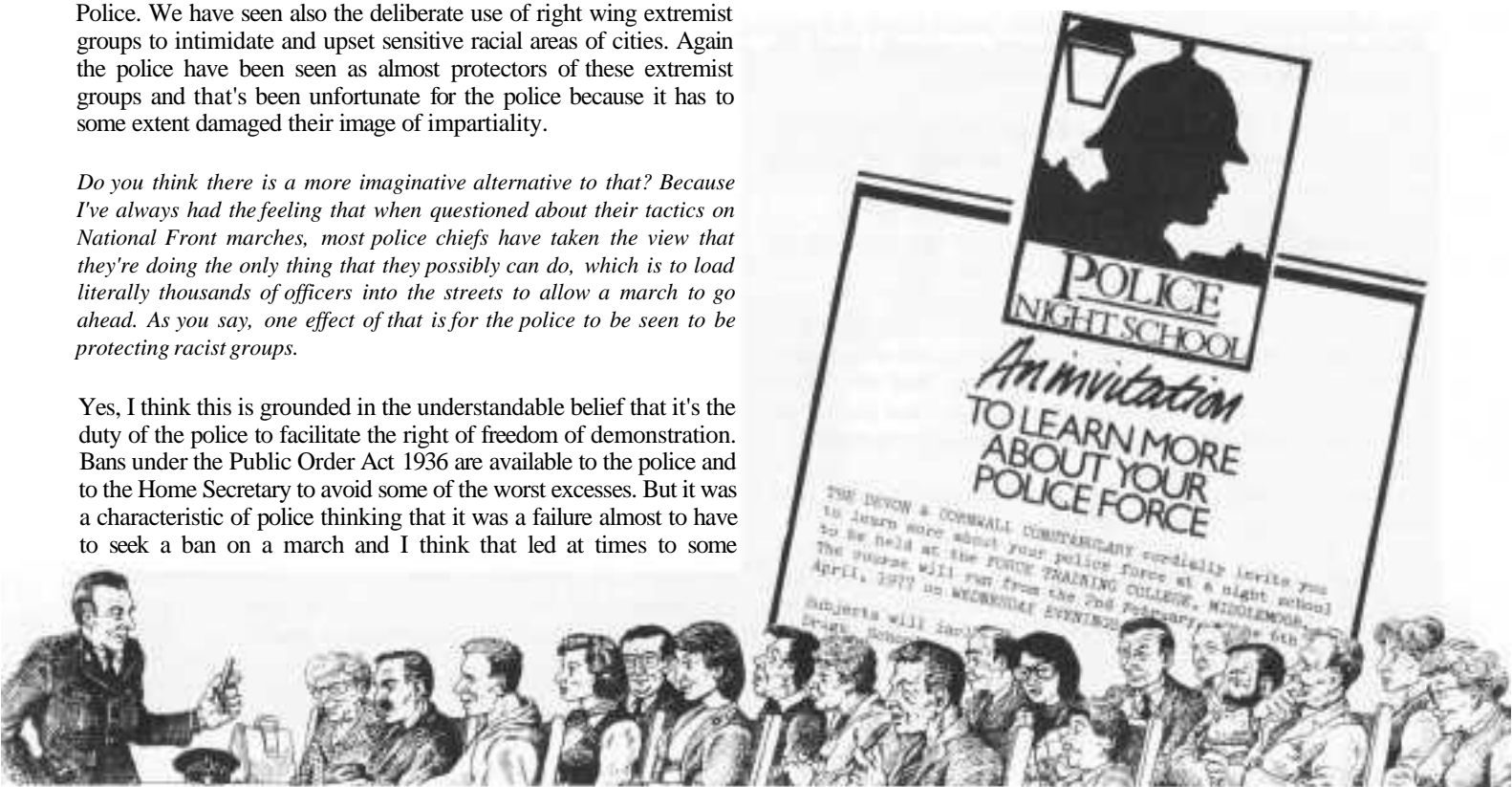
That's putting it mildly, yes. Since then there has been a greater readiness to seek bans on marches. In most parts of the country, certainly in the last few years, as a result of some of the damage caused by allowing marches to take place which maybe should have been banned, chief constables, local authorities and the Home Secretary have been much more ready to ban these marches and that's been happening in the last few years.

*Do you approve of that?*

I approve of it, reluctantly, obviously, because it's a very difficult line to tread between freedom of demonstration and political control of demonstration. If carried too far it could become a political mechanism and could become abused. But I approve of it at the present time, in its present form, but I do acknowledge that ultimately if people in positions of power and authority wanted to use the Public Order Act widely, it could result in a diminution of the right to protest generally.

*You said to your police authority some time after the riots that you didn't intend to equip your force with the kind of technology that was then being discussed and made available to other forces, water cannon, plastic bullets, CS gas and so on. Can you explain what you were thinking of there?*

Yes, I remember quite well that it seemed to me that the police found themselves in something of a watershed here. It appeared that it wouldn't have taken much to drive the police into a situation where they had passed the point of no return in the style of policing which we like to see in this country. We would get a quasi-military police armed with weapons for shooting at people. Even though they're called rubber bullets, they're capable of killing people. That would



have given hostages to fortune. So would other equipment, particularly the gas which is indiscriminate in its effect on people. I think once policing passes that threshold of police violence, you have probably raised the level of violence to a point where it's acceptable. The only thing that can go on from there is more violence. So my protest was almost a moral one, as well as a practical one, and that's why I took that particular position.

*If you'd been in charge of an inner-city police force, would you have done the same thing?*

Well it's difficult to answer a hypothetical question like that. I was sending men to these areas and was responsible for their attitudes and their images and their place in society so to that extent I was already involved. I think one shouldn't be excluded from the debate on this even though one isn't necessarily in the hot seat. I can only go back to my point that some of these riots were anti-police and I want to ask why should that be?

*You've taken the view that your Special Branch records are unnecessary to a considerable degree and you've instructed your force to weed them out. The police are, however, always greedy for intelligence. How do you approach the police role in political information gathering?*

I think it's fair to say that generally there's an appetite amongst policemen to seek more power and more information, generally. It's a natural tendency, but for the leader there is a further responsibility placed on one's shoulders to ensure that this appetite is contained within reasonable bounds. I think it's fair to say that, as far as political activity is concerned, unless there is a subversive, unlawful element attached to it, then there is no place in Special Branch records for that kind of information. The Special Branch was set up to counter the Fenian movement at the end of the 19th century. But now it has extended into those areas where political subversion of an unlawful kind has either been the declared or covert intention of an organisation. I think that in a democracy, which has to be defended to some extent, there is a place for that sort of police work.

*What do you mean by political subversion of an unlawful kind? The precision of that kind of definition is all important here.*

Well it would certainly at one end include organisations with the intentions of overthrowing democratic institutions by force or intimidation.

*Overthrowing the institutions themselves rather than changing the policies of those who control or govern those institutions?*

Oh yes, certainly. That's legitimate political activity. That's what makes our country work. That's what enhances the evolution of society into higher ideals of fairness and liberty. And without the freedom to act, to collaborate, to combine to bring about pressure on institutions, and the individuals with power, there is no democracy.

*And have you found that from your examination of Special Branch work, that it has blurred that distinction?*

I've found, by making checks on the activities of my officers, that there is this innate tendency to want to record almost anything, however remotely connected it may be with activity which might in the loosest sense be regarded as subversive. This word 'subversion' needs to be defined, I agree with you. Some people would regard subversion as anything which is designed to change society. That's

not what the Home Secretary means when he speaks in Parliament on this issue. It has to do with unlawful activity and, I've said, that would include at the one extreme, the use of armed force to overthrow institutions, or to undermine them, or to undermine the confidence of people generally, or to collaborate with foreign powers

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*Obviously the police need to keep records. I don't think anyone can dispute that. It's one thing, however, for them to keep records on people who have been convicted of offences. But we've seen more and more that police are beginning to computerise and make more generally available, information of a more general kind which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with people's criminal activities. Now, I want to know what kind of constraints you want to see on that?*

Well there are many levels of the acquisition of knowledge about society, I mean there's the individual observation of a policeman and the storing up of information in his mind. Now you can't do anything about that. He acquires this knowledge as he goes around his daily duties, and if he's a man with a good memory he knows a great deal. The question is, what use is that put to? If it's put in a bank of information in order that known criminal activists can be brought to justice then I see nothing improper, immoral or unethical about that. If, however, information is collected for its own sake then I do think that is unethical. Putting pressure on people because of what you know about them and inhibiting their activities and restricting their lives and their work, is totally repugnant to me. And that is why the collection of information about people *per se* is unacceptable.

*So would you support statutory data control legislation affecting the police?*

Certainly, yes.

*And it would affect criminal intelligence records?*

Yes, yes, certainly. I think one would have to be careful not to disclose information on individuals. But the type of data protection I have in mind is the ability to examine the type of information being kept and the areas of information restricted from people. When you get to criminal intelligence, particularly if you are dealing with extreme cases of terrorism and violent organised crime, the police depend so much on information from other people, and if there is any chance of that being disclosed, it would endanger the sources of information which are necessary for the police to deal with it. But I would have thought that data protection could quite rightly be introduced which would control the scope of information gathering and the types of information regarded as necessary to discharge the police function properly, having regard to the other things I have said about the rights to privacy and the rights not to be put into a position where people can blackmail or intimidate or destroy one's reputation.

*Information is central to community policing. So I want to quote to you*

*something which has been written by Tony Bunyan. 'The other aspect of community policing which it is necessary to draw out is the role of the police officer actually on the beat, the community or neighbourhood officers, as they are called. It is part of their training to gather intelligence on the people within their patch and to pass this intelligence to the collator at their local police station. By this means, information gathered by one officer is available to the whole force, including the local Special Branches. . . Community policing, despite its high-sounding purpose, is a double-edged tool to penetrate the community through other professional agencies and by spying on the community under the guise of offering a protective, friendly approach. Consent is thus to be engineered and, in case this fails, intelligence is gathered in an attempt to pre-empt dissent.'*

I think what Tony Bunyan describes there is a plausible scenario and I wouldn't deny that. Therefore a premium is placed on accountability, on consultation and scrutiny. If one accepts, as I do, that what Tony Bunyan describes there is a corruption of community policing, then you've to build in safeguards to prevent that. There has to be a form of social contract, there have to be codes, there have to be bills of rights, there have to be scrutineers — I would accept all that. It doesn't invalidate community policing that it draws attention to a corruption of community policing, and if you acknowledge that, that's healthy.

*I think a lot of people are very unclear about what community policing means in reality. Do people in Exeter co-exist with their police differently from the way they co-exist in London or anywhere else?*

Community policing begins with an appreciation of modern society. It is not primarily concerned with law enforcement but is concerned with social protection and the amelioration of social conditions which lead to the creation of criminogenic circumstances. It's based on a social contract between police in an area, in a community or neighbourhood, and the people who live there. It is a *sine qua non* of community policing that there must be consultation, the sort of thing that Lord Scarman so strongly recommends. Without that

there is no community policing. It needs the input of a whole host of other statutory agencies from schools to social services, housing, planning, youth, community welfare, in addition to all the voluntary agencies working in the community, because it is a mechanism to help people to make representations to officials and to play a part in

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ridding themselves of the fear of crime, the anxieties about the behaviour of their children, anxieties concerning the behaviour of their neighbours and so on. Finally, there must be police officers who are dedicated to the welfare, in its widest sense, of the people in the area. This requires the appointment of well qualified, well chosen, mature, police officers. In its voluntary form it starts by the police assembling as representative a body of people as possible, and that would include the press of course because the dissemination of the proceedings and the attitudes of the police and the people would be very important. But that is only part of the story. It must lead to initiatives within communities and to a dialogue about the crime in a neighbourhood. Each meeting should have a report on crime in the community, what the police are doing about it, how it affects that particular community, what they can do to help themselves. It's not concerned with the enforcement of the law. If introduced by statute, it would represent a considerable constitutional leap forward. So far as I know, there is no developed nation where community policing is constitutionally provided for.

*One of the major criticisms that's made on the Left of what you've written and what you've done is that by setting up this sort of structure you harness all the different social agencies into a more comprehensive form of social control, a more sophisticated and more penetrative form of social control at a local level. It's led a lot of people on the Left to be rather sceptical of what it's all about, and rather fearful.*

Well, if you say 'on the Left' it depends how far left you're going. If

*Alderson, on right holding the balloon, visits the Luxulyan occupation against nuclear power.*



you're talking about the extreme Left, I would have thought they would like it because that reflects the totalitarian model of policing through the communes which I've witnessed in China and which one knows exists in other countries. The same would apply to the totalitarian states of the Right where the police are all powerful too. In Nazi Germany the turning of young people against their parents to inform on them and to point out the Jews was an appalling distortion of community policing. But it is a form of it. There are other forms. The community policing of the IRA in parts of Northern Ireland, for example, where the Queen's writ doesn't run, but where the writ of the IRA runs. That's another distortion of community policing. That's policing by unconstitutional terror and all these things have to be guarded against. The kind of community policing that one is talking about here is totally preventive. It has nothing to do with the activation of the criminal process, whereas these other distortions do have. You've to build the model in such a way as to guard against that. The make up of the community policing group should not be totally political if you're to avoid the tyranny of the majority. That is why my model would be one third drawn from elected representatives, which would represent the democratic element, one third nominated by the police authority, which would mean you could get people of experience and civic ability on to the committee, and one third from voluntary bodies and others who wish to put themselves forward. They would have the right to question the police about how complaints are being dealt with, about the nature of policing the area, that which they found repugnant and that which they've found acceptable. The police would also be able to explain their role and make themselves more accountable and this should be healthy. But I would want to stress that the community policing model is a preventive and not an enforcement mechanism.

*I'd like to just quote to you something that Colin Moore, who is a Chief Superintendent in your force, has written in his book Community Versus Crime, where he points to a number of dangers which need to be avoided in any community policing structure. He fears that 'in carrying out the pro-active role, the police come to believe that they are filling what they see as a leadership void in present day society. This assumption could blow back in their faces and create distress and conflict rather than harmony between agencies and within communities. The policeman's leadership qualities, recognised by many in the community, must be subdued so that they are seen in terms of "service" rather than as a new velvet glove on the old iron hand, a more insidious form of social control. There are real dangers here.'*

I would agree with that comment of Colin Moore's. In Devon and Cornwall we had to take the initiative because nobody else could or knew how to and from time to time we've tried to take a minor role in some of these areas but the people have asked us not to. You know, we have the resources, the skills to take the chair, to provide the secretaries, to produce the minutes and so on. But it's because of my experience in the last 8 years or so in doing this kind of thing and in creating community policing that I came to the conclusion that it would be only proper if it were done constitutionally. If its form were defined by parliament, the police would play the role of servants of the community. We're always saying that we're the servants of the people, we should act as servants of the people rather than their masters. If we were to be given the task of running it, this would be totally against the proper evolution of a more acceptable, democratic form of community policing.

*Doesn't it come down to the question of control? Community policing which is done to the community by the police is one thing. But policing*

*which is actually under the charge of the community in a formal as well as an informal sense is surely the only guarantee that community policing is the property of the community. So doesn't it follow from that, that the police must be much more closely formally controlled by democratic processes than they have ever been so far in this country?*

Yes. I think the police in this country are less democratically controlled in the local sense than in recent history. The Police Act of 1964 created massive police forces and local government reorganisa-

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tion made some of them even bigger. The biggest of all, the Metropolitan Police, is manifesting these growth pains now. I mean, what has been accepted as suitable for London for 150 years is not now regarded as such by many people. It is not sufficiently democratically accountable to local democracy in London. The people who pay a proportion of the Metropolitan Police's bills have no say in how they are policed. Lord Scarman himself recognises this implicitly. The same could be said for the provincial police forces, where the chief constables are more powerful than they ever have been before and less accountable in actuality, whatever the constitution may say.

The problem also centres on the political direction of police activities and political approval of the nature of policing. These are two different things but they're not often separated. The difference can be clarified by expressing it like this. It is not healthy to have the enforcement of the law in particular cases and in particular situations directed by a political force because this could lead to a tyranny of the majority. That's one thing. But it is surely the political right of people to influence and even decide what sort of policing we're going to have in this country. If the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)<sup>1</sup> thought that the country deserved a more militaristic style of policing and if chief constables generally were to decide that—which I'm sure they probably wouldn't—but if they did, without any form of political debate, or say, or control, that would be a quite unconstitutional situation in my view. And I blame police authorities in many ways for not exercising their function properly.

*Can we try to be a bit more specific about that? Let's take an example, the question of smoking of cannabis. If, under the system you're talking about, your police authority came along and said, look, this is a multi-racial community, we've got several thousand people here who smoke cannabis and we feel that any attempt to bring the law to bear on them is actually an attack on them as people, on their whole lifestyle. Don't bring prosecutions for possession of cannabis. How would you respond to that?*

I would say, I'm sorry, I can't give you that promise. Parliament has passed a law and I could be regarded as doing less than my duty to the law and to society if I didn't have regard for that. But I would say, I could caution more often for minor cases, point out that it's regarded as dangerous to health. You don't have to activate the criminal process. It's the wise use of police discretion in regard to cultural susceptibilities.

<sup>1</sup> This is the chief constables' 'trade union'. There are two other police representative organisations, the Superintendents Association and the Police Federation (representing constables, sergeants and inspectors)—*Ed.*

*Yes, but would you be prepared to be explicit about the fact that you would show that discretion?*

Certainly.

*You wouldn't leave it to emerge from your practice?*

If the question were put to me, I would deal with it like that. I certainly would say that I would prosecute people who were making a living out of selling cannabis, I would prosecute people who were pushing cannabis. You see you may have another group of people in that area saying 'I hope you deal firmly with my children if you catch them in possession of cannabis'. You have to be very sensitive about

### I think we shall have to keep up reasonable pressure for change if it's to come about. The police certainly won't change for themselves

this because it's not easy in a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-social class area where there are people with competing claims on your discretion. This is why policing is so complicated. It's too complicated for the policemen to do. That's why you need the collective wisdom of the neighbourhood, so they can work out for themselves what their priorities are.

*Doesn't it follow from that, that police should be freer to take a part in political activity?*

Well I think it's fair to say that society will lose if the police are

forced to conform to one idea of policing. In cultural terms, it's expected that there will be one police point of view. I've been reminded on more than one occasion by the president of my own Association that I should not speak at certain gatherings or at certain conferences. And I've found that I've had to break rank to do that and I've done it of course. But I've always done it in the hope that one could discuss ideas rather than personalities. I don't think it would be in the interests of the police to engage in slanging matches about each other because I think it might unsettle the public but I think the serious putting forward of competing views about policing is in the public interest.

*Would you be happy for police constables to attend an open public meeting on the police and give their own points of view, making clear that they were police officers?*

Certainly. In fact, I was reminded by the Home Office in the run-up to the last general election to desist from this practice when my officers were attending meetings of various political parties and expressing their views. It was another politician who drew the Home Secretary's notice to this practice and I was gently reminded that it was not helpful to do that. I think there's all the difference in the world between expressing a point of view at political rallies and being active in party political problems. I don't think that is right.

*What about the possibility that the Police Federation should have the same rights and privileges as trade unions do, including the right to strike and to affiliate to the TUC?*

Well I think the policeman should have as many civic rights as anybody else in society. But let me say this. One has to bear in mind that in our society a lot of people do not belong to trade unions and, if the police become part of trade union power to be used against those sections of society, I don't think that would be, to use an English expression, fair. Now what one has to try to do is to come to terms with this as well as one can and certainly the police should be able to combine to achieve their own progress. Certainly the police in my view, could take part as observers and even contributors to trade union meetings. I myself have spoken at trades councils' meetings about the police.

*Finally. You're resigning from the police force on 30 April. Is this because you are pessimistic about the future for your approach to policing? Have you given up?*

I don't think the future is pessimistic. I think the current political debate about the police together with Lord Scarman's report are likely to bring about some of the reforms in the constitutional arrangements for the police which I myself would wish to see. I think it's a pity in a way that it's taken riotous behaviour to bring this question to the conference table. I don't think I can do much more in the police. I clearly can't get into the police establishment. I'm not likely to be nominated for the position of President of ACPO, which is quite an influential position, or onto that inner group of chief constables who control much of the policy. So I certainly wouldn't want to hang around for another 5 years just being a kind of gadfly. I'd much rather continue this important debate with greater freedom, although I'm well aware of the fact that not speaking as a servant of the police obviously will somewhat diminish the force of some of my arguments. I'm not too despondent about the future, though I think we shall all have to keep up reasonable pressure for change if it's to come about. The police certainly won't change for themselves.

