

FOCUS

CRIME PREVENTION

The Tory government's dominance in the debate relating to crime, policing and other aspects of 'law and order' is to be consolidated in the next few months as a far-reaching crime prevention campaign gets under way. The philosophy behind this campaign is spelt out in a draft document currently being circulated by the Home Office and, significantly, to be issued *jointly* with the Departments of the Environment, Health and Social Security, Education and Science, and the Welsh Office (*Home Office Draft Circular on Crime Prevention*, issued July 1983).

Apart from chief officers in the police and probation services, the views of housing, education and social service chief officers, as well as local government chief executives, are also being sought. The Home Office, which intends to publish a circular this autumn, states that 'given the complex nature of crime it is suggested that agencies beyond the police, whose policies and practices may well influence the incidence of crime in our communities have a contribution to make in developing local preventive strategies' (July 1983).

This 'multi-agency' approach is seen to operate on a number of levels. On the physical level, management and 'manipulation' of the environment is emphasised to reduce the opportunity for many of the most common crimes — vandalism, burglary, theft. Such management ranges from the design of estates to bolts and bars on buildings, improved street lighting, better doors, entryphones and caretakers in blocks of flats.

These suggestions are hardly new. The DoE in its Priority Estates Programme has already recognised the need for resources for such measures to prevent 'hard to let' estates from being totally abandoned. The money is already there for the 'bolts and bars'. But resident caretakers, adequate Direct Labour Organisations to cope with speedy repairs, and more council officers based directly on estates and in neighbourhoods are precisely those services which have been hit by the Tory government squeeze on rates and the rate support grant. As for safer designs of new estates, with public housebuilding ground to a halt by Tory policy there is a grim irony in this suggestion.

The DoE has invited local authorities to submit crime prevention schemes for urban programme funding, but the government strategy of privatisation has not been neglected either in this new campaign: 'Private charities and similar bodies may be

willing to fund local initiatives, while projects requiring resources in the form of manpower might usefully turn to local voluntary groups'. A main beneficiary of the goal that 'crime reduction must come to take its place in the collective thinking of every agency and every citizen' will undoubtedly be the private security industry, as a cynical author in the Policy Federation's journal recently pointed out. 'This industry has boomed under the Tories to such an extent that the profits of some leading companies are now under close scrutiny'².

As well as suggesting 'measures aiming to limit or remove the opportunities for crime' on the physical level, the document goes on to discuss 'those that aim to reduce the motivation of people to engage in crime'. It is at this level that the multi-agency approach takes on a less benefactor tone. Although recognising the background of urban deprivation in 'motivating' offenders, the document does not propose a large scale anti-poverty programme. Instead, responsibility is placed for instance, on the role of education welfare officers to reduce truancy, and intermediate treatment for young offenders etc, and much is made of the collection and collating of information from all agencies.

This approach to multi-agency co-ordination fits into two current trends:

1 The increasing *policing* role attached to the welfare state, such as DHSS treatment

of claimants, checks on the immigration status of NHS patients, reported passport checks on Asian children at schools.

2 The redefinition of crime by the supposed practitioners of crime prevention, the police, into 'serious' crimes (eg, kidnapping, murder) which they can solve, and 'secondary' crimes (eg, car theft, break-ins), which affect tens of thousands and which they can't clear up. Their inability to prevent or solve crime (eg, the clear-up rate of only 8% for burglaries in London last year) has led the police to shift the 'blame' to other agencies, such as schools and town planners; to introduce neighbourhood watch schemes (already operating in South Wales and introduced throughout London in September), mainly as a public relations exercise which also attempts to undermine campaigns for police accountability; and to introduce a 'solvability' points scheme for dealing with burglaries (if a neighbour sees a burglar running off with your ultraviolet coded video recorder, the CID will investigate; if the milk money's missing from under the clock, they won't).

The proposed crime prevention strategy sanctions these developments. It talks of 'core' meetings: 'the police, magistracy, the social and probation services and departments of education, housing and highways will all need to be involved as well as those responsible for planning and the environment and the provision of leisure facilities'.

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If the police were local government employees, accountable to council police committees, this cooperation would be a meeting of equals. But whilst the police are not truly accountable, for instance 'core' meetings such as these (or Scarman-type 'consultative' committees) will just be one-way operations, where the police extract information (to be used for 'targeting and surveillance' of 'front line' areas) without giving anything in return — whether it be information about the incidence of crimes in particular neighbourhoods or guarantees to prioritise particular crimes such as racist or sexual attacks as policing concerns.

It should be noted that the other areas where a multi-agency approach has been adopted are Northern Ireland, civil contingencies planning (such as in the event of a general strike) and in civil defence. The approach should also be seen in the context of the view that 'crime control is just one element of social control' put forward by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Kenneth Newman³ (latterly head of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and a major exponent of the new policing strategy).

Taken as an isolated document, the draft paper on crime prevention could be welcomed as attempting to tackle what is after all a vital concern for large numbers of working class people — security from theft and attack. Unfortunately the document appears at a time when police powers are to be further increased with a new Police Bill, computerisation of police files is expanding, new strategies for 'targeting and surveillance' by police of 'symbolic locations' are being implemented (eg, Notting Hill and Brixton in London) and the prospects of police accountability have disappeared from the horizon.

The new crime prevention policy will be a popular, and indeed populist, development. But it aims to bring together the repressive and welfare aspects of the state in much closer ways than hitherto; ways that go beyond *valid* cooperation to stem crime. Socialists, who have neglected the very real concerns of working people with the impact of crime on their lives, will find it difficult to counter this increased authoritarianism without offering a positive alternative for the protection of individuals and communities.

A socialist strategy will need to respond to direct experiences and not dismiss concern about crime as a sign of unbridled reaction. There needs to be an inclusion of self policing and community protection aspects into our alternative policies, for instance as part of decentralisation pro-

grammes. Police-led initiatives", such as neighbourhood watch schemes, need to be countered with community initiatives based in existing democratic and accountable bodies (ie, through councils and tenants and residents associations). Labour councils need to argue that community protection is a necessary part of their function requiring funds being available to them at borough or district level, rather than uncontrollable handouts from Whitehall. Unless such interventions begin to be made, new strategies such as these will allow the police to operate with an even higher political profile, and worse performance rate, than at present. *Brenda Kirsch*