

## 2 The Paramilitary Drift

*Do not let yourselves drift into a paramilitary role and away from policing as you and I know it.*

RUC delegate to the Police Federation Conference, May 1986

When a thousand police officers arrived at the Scarborough conference centre at the end of May 1986, they might have guessed that they were in for a lively three days. The previous year, they had shouted at their star speaker Leon Brittan. Television news bulletins had shown to millions the unprecedented spectacle of a Conservative Home Secretary being heckled, booed and jeered, not by the students at Manchester University, but by the lower ranks of the British police service.

As their monthly magazine *Police* boasted, the new Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, must have travelled to Scarborough in 1986 'well aware that his predecessor's rapid political decline could be dated from his disastrous public performance at our conference last year'.

But neither Douglas Hurd nor the Police Federation could have foreseen what would become the most memorable moment of the 1986 conference. It was certainly not the comparatively sedate reception the new Home Secretary earned for his address; and Mr Hurd can have been little surprised by the verdict that he is 'an altogether more astute platform speaker' than Mr Brittan. Nor was it the succession of stunned tributes paid to the memory of PC Keith Blakelock, who had been killed in the riot at Broadwater Farm seven months earlier.

The event which upstaged all others was a speech made by Alan Wright, the chairman of the Police Federation branch in Northern Ireland. If anyone had expected a routine recitation of fraternal goodwill from across the water, they were in for a rude shock. Mr Wright took the rostrum to deliver a sermon against the sin of turning policemen into soldiers. He did it with such passion that his audience had no doubt that it came both from his heart and from his unarguable authority as an officer of the most heavily militarized force in the United Kingdom, the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

He began predictably enough, presenting the virtues of an unarmed police force and the reasons why Northern Ireland no longer enjoys such a civility. Then he went to the very heart of British policing in the eighties. He warned his colleagues on the mainland not to accept any measure which, in the long term, might corrupt the ideal of an unarmed service. His voice dropped for dramatic effect: 'Your police service, on this point alone, is admired the world over; you must keep it like that.'

He concluded by telling them that Britain still boasted the most respected police service in the world; but summarized the awful foreboding he felt that their future would follow a pattern he knew only too well from Northern Ireland. 'Do not let yourselves drift into a paramilitary role, and away from policing as you and I know it.' His warning may have come too late.

Since the introduction of the first Special Patrol Group in 1965, the police in mainland Britain have proceeded step by step down the very slope which alarmed Alan Wright. Since 1981, they have slipped towards the tactics of public order control which characterize the military. The 'drift into a paramilitary role' is already a fact of life. Three elements are discernable at each step down this slope: the police have edged themselves into acting like soldiers; there has been a shift of political control towards Whitehall and away from town halls; and public debate has been minimized, either by presenting these fundamental changes in a misleading light or by keeping them secret. In a democracy which maintains the tradition of policing by public consent, the public has not even been informed, much less asked, about the most far-reaching recent changes in police strategy.

The result is that almost every major city in Britain now has a police force armed with plastic bullets, CS gas and live firearms and trained to use them to put down disturbances. Its policemen and some policewomen have undergone a rigorous course of crowd control techniques modelled on the riot squads used throughout the British colonies. The men who walk our streets as community bobbies are equipped and ready to take them by force tomorrow. The important milestones and motives of this policing revolution have been inadequately reported.

There are some commentators whose general approach is critical of the police, who have written of public order policy in the eighties as if it were the product of a dark yearning for armed authoritarian control among British police officers. They analyse the drift of the past two decades in terms of illiberal and macho impulses beneath the blue serge uniform: a persistent push by, as it were, the Military Tendency within the police force, encouraged since 1979 by the government in Westminster. Police apologists, on the other hand, including the more vocal among the police themselves, have presented the paramilitary drift as an inevitable and reluctant response to increased violence by pickets, rioters and other ne'er-do-wells. Each riot shield, they claim, merely serves to protect an officer of the Queen's Peace who wants nothing more than to turn the clock back to the days when crowd control consisted of clipping boys' ears for scrumping apples. It is as if the police gunners reaching for their plastic bullet dischargers might wish to echo the words of the kindly headmaster: 'This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you'. The account in these pages is not intended as an exercise in psychology. But examination of the words and deeds of real policemen during the past few years suggest a more complex explanation than either of these. It is, however, no more comforting.

The paramilitary drift has been a piecemeal response to deep-seated perceptions of increased threat among police officers. Some of these feelings have been well founded, especially following the sustained periods of battering and defeat suffered by many ill-trained men during the Bristol and Brixton riots of 1980-1 and worse still in Broadwater Farm in 1985. But policemen as a group are noticeably more conservative than the population as a whole, and frequently more deferential to authority. (In 1986 one Chief Constable concluded a discussion with some of his new recruits, who had proved close to the rightward edge of the political spectrum, with the observation that it seemed impossible to attract liberals into the force.) They can often convince themselves that social change and dislocation in our cities are merely fruits of concealed activity by radicals. It can be hard to find a police officer who dissents from Margaret Thatcher's declaration of war against the Enemy Within. So their view of the threat posed by dissidence in the form of a convoy of hippies or a student demonstration or a civil disobedience campaign may be coloured by suspicion and lack of sympathy. To hear a senior officer policing one of the most volatile and riot-prone areas of the country explain the wave of disturbances in 1981 as the creation of a left-wing group which wanted to start a national riot in order to discredit the police and attack the foundations of society, is to enter a world in which social explanation is exhausted with the discovery of a villain. There may also be some officers who enjoy a physical fight and relish the trappings of paramilitary force, though even among the front-line troops of the long coal dispute of 1984-5 there seemed to be few who fitted neatly into this stereotype. Far more seem genuinely dismayed at their new role as soldiers in blue uniforms. It is really not what they joined the police for. They will take it on, of course, and ensure that they do it well, because they are given their orders and, perhaps, because they want the Enemy Within to be beaten, but they seem not to enjoy the battle. This creates a tension which can make them suspicious of those who question their tactics and resistant to public disclosure or discussion of their policies. Like any group of people who cannot always be proud of what they do, they prefer to keep it secret and pretend that nothing really has changed since their good old days.

If this analysis is accurate, then British policing may not yet have slipped out of control down the paramilitary slope. It may not be too late, even now, to halt or even reverse the drift among men who wish to remain police officers even while acting like soldiers. But time is running out. There are serving officers who fear that when they retire they will be replaced by new men and women who expect police work to include occasional paramilitary street battles. They see that, politically, maintaining public order brings greater rewards than fighting crime, and they know that the new elite police corps consists of the riot squads rather than the CID. They look ahead with alarm to Britain in the next century, with a police service not only using paramilitary force but also staffed by people who believe in it. What chance then of maintaining the unarmed tradition? What chance of international admiration for the British police? Where will the drift take them next?

## Beneath the blue serge – police changes in the eighties

In 1980, with relatively few exceptions, the police looked much as they had in 1945. But their appearance was deceptive. For beneath the uniform familiar from Dock Green, there had already been literal and metaphorical transformation of the British bobby.

The physical changes below the surface were disclosed in a BBC *File On 4* radio documentary in September 1980, which followed officers of one Special Patrol Group to a football match in Coventry. Their commanding officer, Chief Inspector David Blick, was persuaded to describe the hidden changes in his men's clothing:

*Blick:* We start with the cricket box, which is the normal kind to protect the groin from kicks and missiles and similar sorts of aggravation to a police officer's body. Nothing sophisticated about that. Then we have got two sorts of shin-pads. One here will provide full cover to the lower shin while still remaining away from the public's gaze. The problem has been trying to find something that is efficient without being too visible – a hockey-pad would make the trousers bulge out and give an aggressive image, which is what we are trying to avoid.

*File On 4:* You have also got a visor on the helmet.

*Blick:* As you see here, it clips on to the top of the helmet to stop smaller missiles such as staples, small bricks, fluids of any description from affecting the officer's eyes. The visor can be carried in the pocket out of sight. The helmet has also been reinforced with a double layer of cork, and there is a mesh inside which supports it on the head so that if a house brick comes down on top of it the force of the blow is spread across the top of the head.

*File On 4:* The bobby who is geared up with all this may look like an ordinary British policeman, but he isn't really, is he?

*Blick:* No. That is something which the police force has tried to avoid, but it is a step we have had to take to protect our own members.

Chief Inspector Blick then produced the only visible sign of his officers' new preparedness for disorder – the then controversial full-length riot shield.

*Blick:* The protective shield – we don't like the term 'riot shield'. It is made of a polycarbonate substance and is clear so that officers can see through it as they move forward or back.

*File On 4:* Isn't there something provocative about a policeman behind his riot shield, though?

*Blick:* Yes. It has been found that people who would not normally throw anything at an unprotected policeman will certainly throw at a shield.

By 1980, there were Special Patrol Groups like David Blick's in twenty-seven British police forces, more than half the total. Every major city had already acquired and trained its own elite force of officers dressed like Chief Inspector Blick's men and equipped with long riot shields.

But to the public, their uniforms looked indistinguishable from any other officer's. That was how the police themselves wanted it. Senior officers made a point of claiming that nothing had changed about either the bobby or the British policing tradition he embodied.

Chief Inspector Blick's force was led by an articulate Chief Constable, Sir Philip Knights, who gave this official line:

*Knights:* Grosvenor Square in 1968 persuaded us that we had got to rethink the way we handle crowds. The choice was to go the Continental way and look for water-cannon, riot gear and all that kind of thing, or to use ordinary flesh and blood policemen in a more controlled and disciplined way. We decided on the latter course.

A Government Green Paper reviewing the Public Order Act was published in the same year repeating the point:

The British police do not have sophisticated riot equipment – such as tear gas or water cannon – to handle demonstrations. Their traditional approach is to deploy large numbers of officers in ordinary uniform in the passive containment of a crowd. Neither the Government nor the police wish to see this approach abandoned in favour of more aggressive methods.

But there were other voices calling for a military approach to be introduced into the police force. A small handbook, *Public Order and the Police*, was published by *Police Review*, with an introduction by the [soon-to-be] Home Secretary, William Whitelaw. It was written by a training officer of the Greater Manchester Police, Kenneth Sloan, who criticized the traditional tactics of crowd control as primitive and said there was an obvious requirement for something different. Since police officers would be called upon to do battle, he argued, they should be able to learn from the experience of the Army in controlling civil disorder and adapt military methods for their own use.

Training methods require some fresh thought ... One obvious requirement for all officers who may be called upon to do battle is that they should be physically fit and practised in working as a team. Great experience in controlling civil disorder has been obtained by the Army in recent years and their methods could doubtless be adopted for police use.

Other hidden changes had also taken place. By 1980, the police national computer was ten years old and providing a secret pool of intelligence for the fifty-two theoretically independent forces in Britain. Rapid deployment of large numbers of officers from neighbouring forces during a crisis could be organized at national level, through the National Reporting Centre which had been established at New Scotland Yard after the defeat the police suffered at Saltley Coke Depot during the dispute of 1972. There were also significant numbers of officers in each force trained in the use of firearms, an average of one in ten throughout the country.

But the Home Office and the police themselves could still claim with justification that the British police did not have sophisticated riot equipment and that crowds would continue to be contained in the traditional British way.

They were not to know it, but these assurances would be rendered invalid within eighteen months. Events were about to unfold which would precipitate the greatest escalation of police fighting power in British history.

## The 1980-1 riots

Just after 3 p.m. on Wednesday 2 April 1980, twenty officers of the Avon and Somerset police raided the Black and White Café on Grosvenor Road, in the dilapidated St Paul's area of Bristol. A crowd formed in response to the raid and turned on the police, who by 5 p.m. were heavily outnumbered and decided to exercise discretion as the better part of valour. They left the scene. An enormous crowd gathered during the next two hours in Grosvenor Road, City Road and Ashley Road. It was reported to be 2000 strong, and composed of many

races, united in hostility to the police. One local cleric said later that it was notable for being the first genuinely multiracial event St Paul's had seen. The Chief Constable gave the order to retake the area shortly before 7 p.m., with a mere 100 officers equipped with riot shields. They were beaten back so fiercely that by 7.15 p.m. the Chief Constable ordered them to retreat, leaving the streets unpoliced. He said later that he had been faced with Hobson's choice. For four hours the police waited for help to arrive from neighbouring forces. It was past 11 p.m. when they moved back into the area to quell the looting and arson which dominated the evening.

The next day, the Chief Constable, Brian Weigh, found himself on the defensive. He told reporters that the decision to withdraw his men had been agonizing, but he had to take it. 'It offends every tenet I believe in as a police officer of some experience.' Spokesmen for other big city forces – the Metropolitan, Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, Strathclyde – held unattributable briefings to emphasize their concern at the way police had behaved in Avon and Somerset. Their own Chief Constables, they said, would undoubtedly have ordered their men to stay put even at the risk of death. Mr Weigh also had to answer the charge that his men had been inadequately equipped, in particular, that they should have had water hoses to turn on the rioters. An anonymous 'senior officer' in his force was quoted as saying that this tactic would merely have worsened the situation and was never even considered.

Commentators began to write menacing feature articles about the fear of similar violence breaking out in other parts of the country. There were, after all, plenty of inner city areas with social decay far worse than that found in Bristol.

The Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, announced a review of the disturbances and the police response to them. It produced an eloquent statement of the unarmed British policing tradition, favouring containment techniques based on large numbers of officers in ordinary uniforms linking arms and forming human wedges to break up crowds. It explicitly rejected the use of sophisticated riot equipment as liable to alienate the public, and stressed that the police themselves would not welcome the development of paramilitary riot squads. This statement to Parliament was to be the swan song of the British police tradition in public order. (It is reprinted in full as Appendix A.)

The Home Secretary presented the review to Parliament, with the conclusion that it would be desirable neither in principle nor in practice to depart from the broad approach adopted by the police for dealing with disorder. He stressed that the successful maintenance of public order depends on the consent of those policed.

For the rest of the summer of 1980, nothing further happened to test the arrangements set out in this review. Then, in 1981, urban rioting broke out in city after city, and with a ferocity far beyond anything Bristol had suffered.

In April 1981 another police operation (code-named 'Swamp 81') set off a weekend of rioting in Brixton. Lord Scarman's report later called the operation 'a serious mistake, given the tension which existed between the police and the local community'. In early July, the most serious disorders to date broke out in Liverpool's inner city for three consecutive nights. Two days later, Moss Side in Manchester was ablaze, and by the end of the following week, rioting had been reported in a further twenty-seven towns and cities. It may be a reflection of journalistic enthusiasm that the reported lists of casualties included four in Cirencester and eleven in Tunbridge Wells. But the total effect was undeniable.

By the middle of July, it looked quite possible to police officers throughout the country that mass violence on an unprecedented scale might break out in almost any conurbation week after week, and even year after year. If the prospect was alarming to the constabulary, it must have seemed positively terrifying to the Government. Lord Knights, who as Sir Philip Knights was the Chief Constable of the West Midlands at the time, has described the concern of both police and Government to show that they were doing something about it. 'There is no doubt that from June 1981 through to the summer of 1982 people were biting their nails as to

whether it was going to happen again. If we had done nothing there would have been a furore. You have got to be seen to be doing things – and that is not just true of police officers, it is true of politicians.’ What the police did, with the explicit approval of the Government, was to depart from the British tradition of policing by consent. They decided to equip and train their officers secretly as paramilitary units, prepared to fight like soldiers in the streets and to kill if they had to.

## ACPO changes course

In September 1981, a new approach was adopted by members of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) at their private annual conference in Preston. The rise of ACPO to from, in effect, a national leadership for the fifty-two separate police forces in Britain has been one of the more remarkable developments of the past decade.

As a professional association its membership is small, numbering only a few hundred. They are apparently unhampered by its informal standing in law, which gives ACPO, unlike the police trades unions, no basis whatsoever in statute. For their influence in practice has become decisive. ACPO consists of Chief Constables, Deputy Chief Constables and Assistant Chief Constables. They meet together to agree policies, and hold regular meetings with officials and ministers of the Home Office. The Home Secretary himself attends their annual conference.

When they met on 3 and 4 September 1981, an emergency session was held to discuss public order. Three forces with particular expertise were invited to address it. Two of them were familiar from previous years. The Metropolitan Police reviewed the events of the summer of 1981 and gave a candid assessment of the inadequacy of police preparations to contain the disorders. Then the Royal Ulster Constabulary gave a presentation of crowd control techniques they had adopted and refined for use in Northern Ireland.

Then came the turning point. A new force, outside the United Kingdom, was asked to describe measures it had perfected to contain public disorder. It brought to ACPO more than twenty years’ experience of suppressing riots and uprisings, and was expert in coping with far greater levels of street violence than had occurred in Britain. Its methods were often harsh and sometimes lethal. The force in question was the Royal Hong Kong Police. Their Commissioner, Roy Henry, was asked to send one of his top officers to teach British police a new method of crowd control, based on the Hong Kong model. Mr Henry defines the Hong Kong approach to policing public order as ‘paramilitary’. He instructed his Director of Operations, Richard Quine, to fly to London, to attend ACPO in Preston and to tell them all they wanted to know.

Richard Quine presented to them the full range of Hong Kong’s public order and internal security arrangements – the distillation of British Colonial policing as practised in the most important remaining outpost of the empire. It was a paramilitary blueprint for suppressing rebellions by Chinese communists, indigenous trades unions or anybody else who had the nerve to take on the colonial power of the British abroad. He gave a detailed briefing accompanied by a slide show.

It set out the computerized system of communications which provides a minute-by-minute command and control network; the ‘riot suppression unit’ consisting of platoons of men in unit with specific tasks such as wielding batons (truncheons), firing CS gas, making arrests and shooting firearms; the ‘light striking force’ which could strike with the same power but with greater flexibility; the column patrols to enforce curfews and show the flag once fighting was over. He itemized the armoury of police equipment regarded as standard in Hong Kong, and the training which was the key to the whole process: ‘I underlined the need for a very complete programme of training, which is given a great deal of attention with all our recruits in Hong Kong.’

Then he recommended the formation of an elite squad of police officers who would be committed to continuous training over a period of ten weeks, in a concentrated burst of tactical exercises covering all kinds of disorder, crowd control and riot suppression. In Hong Kong the squad is called the Police Tactical Unit, and is used as a ready reserve in the event of natural disasters or major crowd control problems such as racedays and riots.

He showed the British police a handbook containing all Hong Kong's expertise in the arts of suppression of public disorder. It was its manual of internal security instructions. He gave a most thorough lesson, and ACPO took it eagerly to heart. Those at the meeting showed considerable interest in the colonial police manual and the anti-riot equipment on which it relied. There was special interest in the technique of transforming a peacetime force into a dedicated paramilitary fighting unit with highly trained and disciplined officers. Richard Quine's impression as he spoke was that his audience was very attentive and anxious to bring the Hong Kong model to Britain. Their only reservations, he thought, concerned its acceptability to public opinion and their political masters.

The ACPO conference spent a whole morning talking about public order, and then made an important decision. With hindsight, it can be seen as their most influential decision of the decade. They set up a working group to review British riot control tactics in the light of experience of other countries and come up with a programme of action. Its title was to be the Community Disorder Tactical Options Inter-Force Working Group. One of the Chief Constables who was present at the meeting in Preston has given an account of the thinking behind it:

We had learned some hard lessons about the training of police officers. Forces in the main urban centres were already pretty well trained in the use of Police Support Units, the tactics of crowd control, the use of shields to form cordons and so on. But the forces that came to our aid from rural areas were not as well trained and it had become obvious that in order to respond to emergencies, everyone had to be trained to the same standard, with the same orders, the same formations and the same tactics. Otherwise it was just confusion.

That meant we had to have a national training package, a national manual on which to work. So ACPO set about devising one.

The working group consisted of half a dozen senior officers from different forces. Three of the key figures were Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Radley of the Metropolitan Police, Chief Constable David Hall of Humberside and Superintendent Jim Chalmers of the West Midlands. They reported to the ACPO sub-committee on public order chaired by Christopher Payne, the Chief Constable of Cleveland. In two years they prepared a massive volume of paramilitary and other manoeuvres called the *Public Order Manual of Tactical Options and Related Matters*. Another working group, chaired by an Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Geoffrey Dear, produced a range of training materials based on the manual for officers of different ranks, from frontline constables up to commanders and senior policy makers in force headquarters. The whole project was encouraged by the Home Office. When the *Public Order Manual* was in its final draft, the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, read and approved it.

The stage was set for the most significant shift in police strategy Britain had known for a century and a half, but nothing was made public. The preparations were carried out in total secrecy. The ACPO spokesman at the end of the 1981 conference told reporters only that it had concentrated on spontaneous public disorder and that 'although there have been no positive decisions or recommendations, the conference has drawn together a lot of information about the right way of dealing with this subject. One thing we have had as a theme is the need to retain traditional policing methods and what our policemen look like.'

The visit from the Royal Hong Kong Police was never made public; the decision to adopt a national approach to crowd control and the paramilitary trend of the chosen route were

known only to the higher ranks of the police themselves, and the Home Office. At one stroke, two central traditions of British policing were thrown into question: the selection of paramilitary tactics raised doubts about the doctrine of minimum force, and the strict code of secrecy surrounding the decision drove a coach and horses through the concept of policing by public consent. ACPO, a body with no statutory basis, made up its own mind without informing, let alone consulting, the constitutional representatives of the public either in Parliament or in the local police authorities.

By the summer of 1983, the Community Disorder Tactical Option Inter-Force Working Group had done its work. Each police force was issued with a thick ring binder containing a detailed analysis of the stages of a riot and the police responses appropriate to them. A total of 238 tactics and manoeuvres are set out in its thirty sections, arranged in order of escalating force, from normal policing up to plastic bullets, CS gas and live firearms. ACPO had produced its national manual of public order tactics for the eighties.

An introduction signed by the President of ACPO, Kenneth Oxford, the Chief Constable of Merseyside, set the scene.

Since the street disorders of the summer of 1981, there has been intense activity within forces to ensure that their arrangements for the prevention of public disorder are adequate. Relatedly, above force level, the Association of Chief Police Officers has given full and urgent consideration to preparing guidance in relation to the perceived operational need taking account of related developments in training, equipment and organization. The objective is to provide for an integrated approach, under which common patterns and standards should enable forces to combine more effectively and enhance the success of mutual aid arrangements.

All Chief Officers of Police wish to preserve the philosophy of policing by consent, in the policing of public order as in that of other areas of activity, and wherever possible to respond to public disorder by the deployment of officers retaining the traditional image of the constable. There is equally no doubt of the need for the police service to have the capacity and professional skills required to maintain and, where necessary, to restore public order, making the most efficient use and deployment of the manpower and resources available.

To achieve these aims, all ranks should receive appropriate training both in the prevention of disorder and providing mutual understanding of the expectations and responses which may be made of them if violent disorder occurs. In turn, that requires full consideration to have been given to the use of particular tactics which are capable of dealing swiftly and effectively with large-scale street disorder, and which at the same time are clearly appropriate responses to the levels of violence experienced involving the use of no more than the necessary minimum force. And that can only be possible if all the officers deployed on a particular occasion are familiar with the execution of the 'tactics' chosen.

This manual defines and develops an extensive range of tactical options. The compilation of the manual is a further part of the Association's initial response to the recent experience of public disorder, and follows the publication of the Notes of Guidance booklet in January 1982. The final part of the Association's response is the development of comprehensive public order training packages, work on which is in hand.

This manual has been developed and produced by the Community Disorder Tactical Options Inter-Force Working Group. The Association is indebted to the group for the tremendous work which was done, and that within the short space of a few months.

K. Oxford, President.

The preface following these remarks emphasized that the manual had been produced with Home Office support and repeated the objective of obtaining common minimum standards of public order training for all forces. In plain English, it was announcing to its restricted readership that the *Public Order Manual* set out a detailed national response to riots, a response which carried the explicit approval of the Government.

It also apologized for the cumbersome presentation in a heavy binder, necessitated by the many amendments which would be made in the future. It was not, the preface whimsically observed, intended as a pocket edition. Nor was it intended for general publication, even



within the police service. The restriction to officers of ACPO rank means that nobody below Assistant Chief Constable is authorized to read it.

