



THE WRONG TUNE

Rave parties and criminal justice

The Criminal Justice & Public Order Bill, which will probably be law by July, affords police sweeping new discretionary powers to stop unlicensed events where 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats' are being played, and are 'likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality' (The equivalent phrase in the 1986 Public Order Act is 'serious disruption to the life of the community.') Provided a police officer of the rank of superintendent or above 'reasonably believes' that ten or more people are on land attending a gathering, waiting for it or preparing for it; his officers can order everyone to leave and stop vehicles and passengers from coming within 5 miles of the site. Nothing needs actually to have happened. The officer need have no

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evidence. Another repressive Bill designed for a minority will become law which could affect many more people if the police choose to interpret it so. So, you could be planning a Tory Party dinner dance and disco for invited guests in your back garden. If your neighbours dislike disco, or vote Labour, they could inform the local police of their imminent 'serious distress'. Depending on his tastes in music and politics, the local police superintendant could issue a directive stopping your party. His officers could turn away everyone wearing blue badges within a 5 mile radius. Police officers could enter your property without warrant and order all your guests to leave, photographing them on the way out for intelligence records. They could seize any sound equipment found there, as well as vehicles, and hold them until the conclusion of proceedings against your guests, which could take months or years. Property owners could be charged fees for the storage of their property. If they were unable to pay the fees, the property could be sold. Your only protection as landowner would be that your own property could not be seized. Apart from this single concession, the fact that it was your dinner dance disco on your land

would be irrelevant

Police action

For Tory Party badges read 'unconventional dress' and for 'disco' read 'dance'. On 30th April there was a birthday dance for some 300 people at a farm in Dorset. The landowner had given his permission. Police arrived, without warrant, stopped the party, photographed as many people as possible, told everyone to leave and confiscated all the sound equipment. Approximately £7000 worth of PA equipment was seized from Jake Eyre. No charges were made. Eyre immediately admitted the equipment was his and demanded a proper receipt. Dorchester Police held onto his property for two weeks because it was alleged to be evidence in a possible prosecution concerning breach of public entertainments license regulations. Eyre lost some £500 in booking fees as a result of the seizure. 'They're hardly going to carry a lorry-load of speaker boxes into court,' he commented. This was all done using existing legislation. In another incident at the end of May a group of travellers were stopped on the public highway in a double-decker bus. Police entered the bus and seized sound equipment, firstly to prevent a breach of the peace, later changed to suspicion of being stolen property. Nobody was charged. The equipment was returned 3 days later. 'The police are stretching the law as it stands,' commented solicitor Peter Silver who has advised Jake Eyre. 'They're being very dishonest.'

'Operation snapshot'

Some police forces already have a 'no rave' policy, legal or illegal, which they are enforcing by a variety of means, including Operation Snapshot, collecting details including photographs of known ravers and travellers. One Midlands police force which cannot be named to protect sources called a meeting of all District Councils in its area and suggested they should not issue any Public Entertainment Licenses (PEL) for dance parties. Without a PEL any music gathering open to the public is illegal. To their credit councils replied that this was a matter for their discretion. PC Alder from Surrey Constabulary revealed 'his force policy' in a set of confidential, recently leaked minutes: 'Raves will not happen, illegal or otherwise.' 2 major commercial parties, scheduled for the end of May Bank Holiday were refused their licenses. And the Vale of White Horse District Council recently

demanding £5000 as application fee from a dance promoter wishing to organise an all-night charity party this Summer for five thousand people in aid of war victims in Bosnia. 'In the event of the application being refused, the fee would be non-returnable,' Ian Charles, Assistant Head of Food & Safety wrote. For the same event both Thames Valley and Wiltshire Constabulary wanted £50,000 in advance to police outside the event. All internal security would be undertaken by a private firm. Chief Supt. Alan Marlowe, until recently in charge of Luton police, thinks 'reasonable charges' should be levied if police are required. 'If you're using police charges to stop the event happening in the first place, then I think there's a little bit of folly in that.'

Counting the cost

He should know. Over the last two years Exodus, the Luton dance collective operating on his patch has put on some 38 unlicensed raves. Glenn Jenkins is their spokesperson. 'It wasn't the intention to do them unlicensed, the intention was to do them licensed, but it just wasn't possible. We spoke to the licensing officer, we spoke to the police, and although there was a general, 'oh yeah, sure, go ahead', there was then telephone number size bills put in front of us and obviously it was well beyond us being unemployed local youth.'

Unable to afford licenses Exodus undertook what they called 'a demonstration of the need' for rave parties. Within 6 months attendance at their unlicensed events reached ten thousand. When police seized PA equipment and arrested 36 members of the collective four thousand people surrounded Luton police station. Further major police operations ensued, at enormous cost, so Exodus tried again for licenses. Initially the police opposed licenses on principle because of alleged drug use, public disruption, and 'the exposure of young children who attend such events to moral danger'. The police threatened to charge Luton Borough Council for heavy policing costs if licenses were granted, but the Council refused to back down and granted licenses after a split down party lines, Tories against, Labour in favour. The Council also waived their licence fee because Exodus puts the proceeds from the parties into community projects - they've rehoused twenty nine people so far, have a licensed community farm, open to local schools from 6th June, and plan to start a community centre. Chief Supt. Marlowe,

who is taking early retirement, has supported the license application for the centre. 'You have to recognise the fact that there is a demand for such events. And if you can have people express that demand in a way which is going to cause the least possible problems, then let them do it.'

The dance culture

The dance culture has re-ignited glimmers of hope for a better society in many people's eyes, old and young alike. It's not a culture whose heart will be satisfied with large licensed commercial events and licensed clubs, which may be the main venues to survive present pressures unless Exodus' ideas catch fire. It is a culture allied to travellers and squatters and other direct action demonstrators. No dancer I know loves anything more than the party put on for free or a few quid to cover costs, on land rented from a friendly farmer. Different groups show up with different bits of the jigsaw that becomes a party, PA, lights, DJ's, a marquee, travellers' buses and trucks parked in circles, maybe even a tepee. Everyone knows someone. 'Dance culture gives people a sense of community, a sense of togetherness that's lacking in our society,' commented singer Billy Bragg recently. But the government is not only repressing a culture and specific style of music. It's also doing its best to destroy a large and remarkable alternative industry which has seen many a joy-rider, ram raider or dope dealer turn their talents to music. The crime rate dropped by 6% in Luton when Exodus started its parties. Would some enterprising criminologist please ask why?

'Dance music is moving people, it's firing people up,' concludes Billy Bragg. 'People are making this music in their bedrooms, it's not being given to them by a multi-national corporation. This is coming from the bottom up, and that's why it's so interesting. The government is making these people outlaws by trying to ban their raves, their gigs, their gatherings. And there's no surer way to politicise people than to suggest they are the enemy within. It's the same when they tried to stop people walking on the hillsides in the nineteen thirties. That was overcome by mass trespass. I'm sure we can come up with something similar to that for the nineteen nineties.'

Tim Malyon is a freelance journalist.

COMMENT

'It's about time the politicians got honest, stopped talking bollocks about green shoots in the economy and told the people the truth about work. There's no future for a lot of people in the present set-up, no chance of decent work. So people need something else, a new existence. The system needs to assist us to diversify. Politicians should support this diversification because it'll have positive effects on their world. We're on a mission. We're at the cutting edge of a way, an answer. It could even be a solution to the decay of Britain PLC.'

Glenn Jenkins from the rave collective Exodus.

'I was horrified by the reactions of officers to ravers. I've seen officers quivering with rage. If they talked to people more, we wouldn't have such rigid battlelines. I'd have expressed the same opinion about the miners' strike.'

Chief Inspector Mike Brown, Bedfordshire Police.

'Licensed premises were experiencing a fair amount of loss of trade, loss of customers. People might pop into the pub for a quick drink around ten, but then they'd be off for the rest of the night. Some licensees were starting to get into real financial trouble. As a consequence there was a lessening of alcohol-related offences, gratuitous assaults, bottle throwing, the random public disorder that generally goes with town centres and drink.'

Chief Inspector Brown, describing the effects on Dunstable/Luton town centres on nights when the group Exodus were holding large rave parties.

'The Criminal Justice & Public Order Bill is the most draconian act this government has put through. Adolf started with the gypsies. After this Bill becomes law we will have no effective right to assemble. It's at the discretion of police officers. And all we'll be allowed to do to protest is stay at home and write letters. The democratic right to demonstrate in this country is going down the chute.'

Michael Mansfield QC