



PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?

Current developments in private policing

When the Conservative Government came into office in 1979 its commitment to law and order politics resulted in a steady increase in expenditure on the police. Such was the level of this commitment that in the following ten years spending rose by almost 50%. That expansion was, however, only part of the picture. The publication of Home Office Circular 114 in 1983 ('Manpower, Effectiveness and Efficiency in the Police Service') gave an early indication that future Government financial support for the police was contingent upon their adoption of private sector management practices and upon their increased subjection to market forces. The upshot of this was that the police were exposed to the same processes of financial scrutiny as other public services had been. During the following decade that process of scrutiny became more and more severe, culminating in the avalanche of reviews and legislative proposals of 1993-4: the Sheehy Inquiry into Police Responsibilities and Rewards, the White Paper on Police Reform, the Police and Magistrates' Courts Bill and the Home Office Review of Police Core and Ancillary Tasks, (the 'Posen Inquiry'). The effect of these developments has been significant. At the operational level the police are obliged to function as service providers whose 'customers' - given the expansion of the private security industry - are, increasingly, able to exercise choice. At the organisational level police forces are run, more and more, like private sector companies with flattened management structures and Boards of Directors.

Structural factors

Despite the immediate political context of privatisation, however, it is important to recognise that the process is more than the mere product of Conservatism. Two long-term structural factors also have to be taken into account. First, the post-war period has seen an expansion in so-called 'mass private property' - property which although privately owned is subject to mass public occupancy. The existence of such property, in the form of shopping malls and the like, inevitably gives rise to the 'private' policing of 'public' space. Second, there has been the impact of 'postmodernism' - a term used to describe a complex pattern of social change in which the social structure fragments along lines of class, race, region, gender and religion. A further feature of postmodern change is the tendency of structures to undergo a simultaneous process of centralisation and decentralisation. This pattern is particularly evident in police organisations where, at one level,

supranational and national bodies flourish and the amalgamation of individual forces is mooted; whilst, elsewhere, the service devolves operational and financial responsibility to local commanders. The critical point here is that either of these processes is compatible with increased privatisation. Thus, at the supranational level private security - whose major international companies are far more 'Europeanised' than the police - plays an increasing role in the control of international terrorism, organised crime and immigration. Similarly, at the local level, the industry participates alongside public police forces and others in an increasingly complex and heterogeneous mix of policing forms.

Everyday change

Already, at local levels, there is clear evidence that 'everyday' policing is undergoing a complex process of restructuring. Consider the variety of policing agencies which are already proliferating in our towns and cities.

1. **Private security patrols:** in circumstances where police resources are limited there is growing evidence that private security companies - many of them from the 'cowboy' end of the market - are securing contracts with residents for street patrols and the protection of residential property.
2. **Private security employed by a municipal authority:** at least one local authority (Dundee) has contracted a private security company to undertake street patrols and to protect municipal property on its behalf.
3. **Private security companies run by the police:** several police forces (including West Yorkshire and South Wales Police), faced with the prospect of increased competition from an unregulated private security sector, have proposed the establishment of police-run commercial security companies. Such companies would probably be set up as trusts, all revenue being ploughed back into the force. If their employees were to be sworn in as Special Constables, thereby ensuring high standards of service and accountability, the company would be in a strong position to compete for business.
4. **Municipal security:** many local authorities, such as those on Merseyside and in London, have long-established security organisations. Generally these bodies consist of unsworn, uniformed personnel whose function is to protect council property (houses, schools, markets and the like). In a recent innovation at Sedgefield, County Durham, a similar body has been established to undertake general patrol of streets and other public places, duties traditionally the prerogative of public police.

5. **Municipal constabularies:** some local authorities have, for many years, employed bodies of sworn constables whose powers are limited to a given jurisdiction - typically parks and other public spaces. Such officers enjoy powers of arrest, though invariably rely on local constabularies for the processing of detainees. In recent years a number of London boroughs have established constabularies of this sort and there has been some dispute between them and the Metropolitan Police regarding powers and jurisdiction. In August 1994 Wandsworth Borough Council sought the Home Secretary's approval to have the jurisdiction of its Constabulary extended to enable officers to undertake 14 hour foot patrols of council estates.

6. **Activated Neighbourhood Watch:** though Neighbourhood Watch is a comparatively passive mode of crime prevention, some groups have engaged in active anti-burglary patrols. In December 1993 the Home Secretary indicated his support for the establishment of Neighbourhood Watch street patrols under strictly controlled conditions. Though nothing has yet come of this proposal the initiative is, no doubt, seen by Government as a means of encouraging active citizenship without encouraging vigilantism.

7. **Vigilantism:** vigilante action is, of course, the ultimate expression of private - albeit non-commercial - justice. Again, there is growing evidence that UK citizens are more and more willing to 'take the law into their own hands', under conditions of increased social fragmentation.

Faced with these changes, policy-makers are increasingly obliged to consider how the boundaries between public and private policing should be constituted. Currently, there are three alternative answers to this question. The first - a view proposed by the Adam Smith Institute amongst others - maintains that policing like any other commodity, should be bought and sold in the market place. A second approach argues that the boundary problem is, first and foremost, an economic one. The Posen Inquiry, currently being undertaken by the Home Office, is a product of the Treasury's fundamental review of public spending. Early indications are that the Inquiry has realised the potential for saving up to £200 million per year on policing by hiving off 'non-essential' duties. Finally, there is the attempt to establish some principled basis for dealing with the plurality of policing systems.

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