Vital battles that the Data Protection Committee lost
The secret security computers

The long awaited report of the government's Data Protection Committee – which has examined the safeguards necessary for computer databanks (NS 3 November) – is now said to be 'imminent'. Despite a delay at HMSO, substantial proportions have already been leaked. One story in the report's final draft which has not been told yet, however, is of the Committee's battle to discover any details of the computer systems used by MI5 and the Special Branch.

It is a battle the Committee, appointed by the Home Office itself, largely lost. The report ensures that this point is not missed by the reader: 'The observations we make are of value only to the extent that the information on which they are based is adequate; in the case of the Metropolitan Police we have not been able to satisfy ourselves that this is so . . . The (Met) seemed to assume that a wide exemption (from public scrutiny) would be granted for police applications.'

And so the Committee were forced to rely, in the case of the new project for computerising 1.5 million intelligence records (mostly Special Branch files), entirely on press cuttings from *The Times* and a few uninformative answers in *Hansard*. Witnesses to the Committee from the Met 'would not be drawn' but claimed that 'some of their information published was inaccurate.' One result, at least, of the police intransigence was a firm recommendation by the Committee that 'police records, including criminal intelligence records, having no bearing on national security, should not be exempted' from the scrutiny of the statutory Data Protection Authority which is intended to be set up following discussion of the report.

The report distinguishes two clear categories in the volumes of police information now being computerised: criminal information, or histories – 'hard, factual data, such as date of birth, physical description and convictions'; and criminal intelligence – 'speculative, suppositional, hearsay and unverified, such as details of associates, places frequented, suspected activities'. The committee reveals, essentially for the first time, that the enormous Police National Computer (PNC) is being used to store intelligence data as well as 'information'. The PNC holds files on all vehicles registered in Britain, criminal records, stolen and suspected vehicles, wanted and missing persons, and details

of fingerprints. In introducing the system, the Home Office gave assurances that it would deal only in fact, not intelligence, and would only be concerned with greatly improving the speed of police access to hard information and not for intelligence.

It now seems that several categories of speculative information have filtered in around the edges. The PNC can link details of any of the 3.8 million persons recorded to lists of 'known associates'. The stolen/suspect vehicles file contains details of vehicles 'suspected of being used in connection with a crime', and can include 'details of association with an organisation', political or otherwise, when a police officer judges this 'relevant'. From a 1976 report on the PNC, only made available to UK and foreign police organisations, it appears that only 25% of the 120,000 vehicles in the suspect Stolen Vehicle Index are actually stolen. There are no less than ten other reasons for inclusion in the files. The same report gave an example of the PNC being used in a rape investigation – it matched part of a registration of a Ford Cortina belonging to a man in a neighbouring district 'suspected of sexual offences and entered as a suspect'. The report notes that the man was later arrested, but says nothing of any conviction. Such a tale presupposes that police are regularly entering on the national computer their personal suspicions about individuals and their vehicles. The Committee commented that this practice of 'linking factual personal information about an identifiable individual with speculative data about criminal activity could pose a grave threat to the individual's interests'.

One similar police computer project which the DPC did not report on in depth is the now four-year-old project at Oxford to computerise the local intelligence records of the Thames Valley Police. Ever since the police unit beat system was introduced, police stations have had 'collators' – 'local intelligence officers', who record the minutiae of gossip and observation as well as hard fact. A full description of this system has never been released, but a paper in a 1976 Home Office private conference, *The Use of Computers in Police Operations*, gives a full picture. The system has a capacity for 150,000 personal records, 10 per cent of the entire Thames Valley population.

Almost every house and vehicle in the area will be entered in the system. At least half the records of the computerised collator will concern people who have committed no criminal offence – many of them stopped in the street because their age, race or appearance attracted attention. From the police officer's notebook, the collator will start a new computer record, and from then on, any scrap of information on that individual will be filed away for future reference. Each person can be linked to up to 100 'associates', as well as to vehicles, crimes (as a suspect or offender, or even as a victim) and 'occurrences' – non-criminal events which an officer has jotted down in his notebook. The Thames Valley computer will store 250,000 occurrences and only 120,000 crimes.

The extent of these information stores must have severe consequences for civil liberty, as the Data Protection Committee noted. The police will select for the permanent record those events which best match their particular prejudices and predispositions; their purview for attention now includes 'subversives' – very widely defined – as well as 'criminals'. On occasions when researchers have been allowed to see collators' offices, these predelictions have been apparent; one divisional office had a card index marked 'cows, queers, and flashers'. Cards for men stopped on street checks included notes that individuals were 'grossly obese' or had an 'effeminate appearance': hardly matters related to effective policing. Yet in Thames Valley, such information is the daily trade of anyone with access to the system's computer terminals. This summer, FBI visitors to the Centre were appalled to be presented with a printout from the system which, *inter alia*, noted that a policeman's wife had overheard gossip in the village shop about an individual's alleged taste for small boys. The story was untrue.

It is not impossible that the DPC report as a whole will be remembered as the ultimate in a series of important reforms neglected by the current Labour government. The DPC was appointed by Roy Jenkins and bears the stamp of earlier liberal minds, including the late Sir Kenneth Younger. Some of its recommendations are bold and helpful; it would be sad to see them follow other reforms into the pit below Merlyn Rees.