

Every name to be on file

The feeling is growing – it was articulated again on Monday by Michael Meacher MP in the *Guardian* – that the police force is on the way to becoming an independent power in the land. Organisational changes have loosened the police from traditional social links, and from old and informal means of democratic supervision. The logic of technology, most of which remains unknown and undiscussed, is what is changing the nature of British police work, leading the police to supervise society from a distance, rather than regulate it from within. Here, in an extract from a new study, *Policing the Police**. DUNCAN CAMPBELL describes the increasing role of electronic information-retrieval in police intelligence gathering, and its resemblance to military procedures. The irony, as the experience of Northern Ireland shows, is that such massive surveillance operations have no obvious pay-off in terms of social and political harmony. If the British police continue towards dependence upon computerised information-technology, the results are not likely to be beneficial for anybody except computer manufacturers.

**Policing the Police, Vol. 2, Peter Hain (ed), Martin Kettle, Duncan Campbell and Joanna Rollo. John Calder, 27 March, £4.50.*

DURING the last twenty years, police forces in the UK have gone through a remarkable series of reforms. A collection of separate county and borough constabularies, with a loose centre at Scotland Yard, has been reformed into just 52 forces, with a high degree of integration and co-operation. Each force now operates sophisticated communications systems for deploying police resources, and participates in the collection of considerable quantities of information for local and national records. The nature of police operations has changed considerably, diminishing local autonomy and accountability in favour of precise and rapid central control. The emphasis in investigation has changed from evidence gathering after the commission of crime to intelligence gathering in advance of any particular crime being committed. In this 'pre-emptive' view, any citizen, certainly any socially uncharacteristic citizen, is a target for suspicion and observation. This quite explicit development in police planning has virtually put the whole of society under surveillance.

In one sense, this has always been the case. The local constables and detectives who, before the introduction of Unit Beat policing, were rigidly attached to particular areas would normally make it their business to be as well informed as possible. But they themselves were a part of the community they policed: the forces for which they worked were smaller and, potentially, at least, more responsive to local control and accountability through the Watch Committees of local councils.

But the changes instituted by central government have eroded this accountability, and created police forces which instead place society at arm's length – and under observation. Substantial evidence of this development can be found by examining the role of police information and intelligence gathering. The advent of major new computer systems for storing police information and intelligence has rightly aroused widespread concern. The best known of these systems is the Police National Computer (PNC) in London, which is one of the most advanced systems for disseminating police information in the world.

But a variety of other major and minor projects has grown up in the wake of the PNC, including a project to place on computer the records of the Special Branch and other police national intelligence units. This

development has received a major boost from the conflict in Northern Ireland, where the army's campaign against the IRA has provided political support for the instigation of extraordinary systems of surveillance and control over the entire population. The army's records are now on computer too.

Traditional military doctrines on the importance of good prior intelligence – acceptable, perhaps, when aimed for brief periods at wartime enemies, but now turned inwards on much of the British population – have encouraged police units like the Special Branch to make advances in the same direction. One local force, the Thames Valley, has already placed its local intelligence records on a computer.

The most important change from the local point of view was the introduction of Unit Beat policing and it is the impact of new information technologies on this system which needs to be understood.

In Unit Beat policing, the domain of a police force is divided up into areas under the control of a team of detectives and uniformed officers. A less publicised aspect of the reform is the new arrangements for reporting and record-keeping. At the centre of the system is a new post, a collator, who receives the daily reports of patrol officers and detectives, together with copies of all other communications to and from his police station, and from these builds up comprehensive indexes of people, addresses, vehicles, incidents and crimes which had come to the attention of the police. No statutory power existed for this (nor indeed for many other police information gathering activities): it was merely not prohibited.

THE COLLATOR is, however, better called a local intelligence officer. He represents at the local level the same type of prior intelligence gathering and surveillance as is carried out by major squads such as the National Drugs Intelligence Unit, the Fraud Squad and the Special Branch. The late Sixties reforms of police organisation put collators to work in every local divisional and sub-divisional police station. Their resources and methods do vary from place to place, as does the responsibility placed on them or the frequency with which they are consulted. Nonetheless, the collators have now created a coordinated nationwide network of basic intelligence records.

There is clear evidence that the basic motive behind the collator system was to collect information on as many people as possible who cross police paths. This will include not just persons suspected or convicted of criminal offences as well as their families, friends and 'associates', but also politically active people, and even those who are the victims of crime, or people who have complained to the police.

The British police are yet a long way from possessing or exercising the undisciplined and repressive excesses which are common in totalitarian regimes. But the demands of police spokesmen, at public forums and to official bodies, indicate an underlying intent – witting or not – to go in that direction.

The new aggregated police forces have become remote from public control – often, indeed, physically remote, setting up operational headquarters away from major towns. For them, the PNC at present provides a basic and very rapid check on up to 4 million people, and 19 million vehicles and their owners. As well as providing basic factual information, such checks will reveal if the person concerned has a criminal record – however old, however trivial – and will also indicate if some policeman or unit has an interest in the person or vehicle.

This aspect of the PNC project helps to draw what amounts to a net across society. The activity of stop-checks, for which no statutory legal power exists unless the police officer suspects a specific crime, now constitutes a basic part of the surveillance system. These checks are not only encouraged by official police doctrine, but in some forces at least are carried out as a minimum duty if no crime is being dealt with. An officer who does not carry out a sufficient number of checks is under-performing.

The information passed in response to a police inquiry, whether from the PNC or local intelligence, is intended to assist and help determine the policeman's course of action. If the message is that someone is to be arrested for an offence, then the course of action taken is obvious, and the fact of passing the information is wholly unobjectionable. But where

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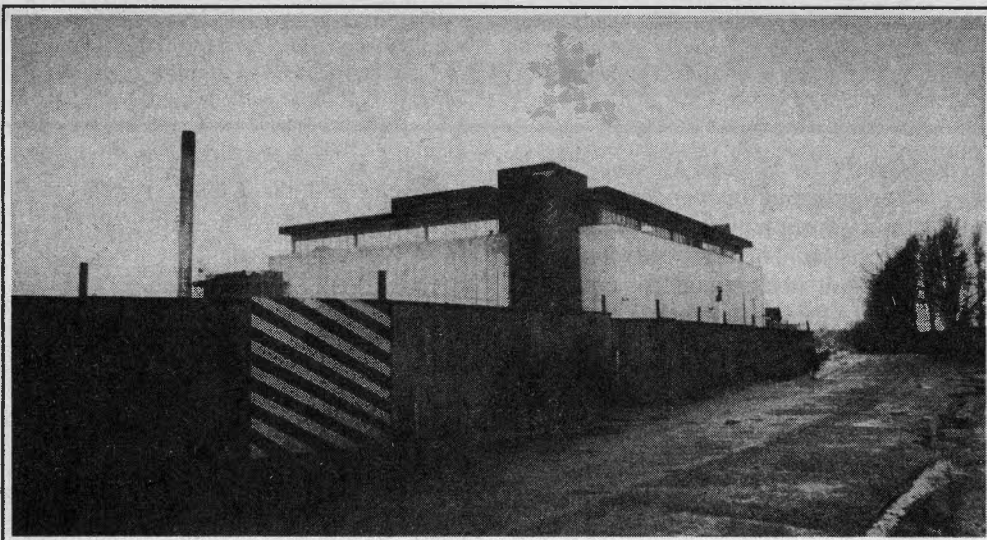
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The Police National Computer centre at Hendon in North London, guarded by several types of security alarm and crash barriers. The designers of this secure centre were clearly aware of the PNC's political significance.

Michael Abrahams

a previous conviction or, say, a record of political or industrial campaigning is indicated, while no offence is currently being committed, it is both offensive and unnecessary that such information should so readily be available.

A few leaks of information held in police files have more than substantiated the case for concern about the information held. There is no denial from the police that both local and national files will and do already hold records on people who have never been convicted of any offence. Files which have been leaked have shown that, apart from this, it is certainly the practice of local collators to record on an individual's files details of every type of policing activity concerning that person. This will include stop-checks, hearsay and gossip, charges resulting in a caution or an acquittal, simple cautions, policemen's and others' suspicions, and even such things as notes about the person standing bail for a third party.

It is offensive to individual privacy that such files should be allowed to be maintained at all in the haphazard way in which they have been created. Equally offensive is the practice of opening files willy-nilly on anyone whose name has appeared on a police record of any sort, and then continually cross-referencing and up-dating the file with any new information. It is manifestly a threat to the liberty of the subject when police behaviour and attitudes towards an individual are determined by the contents of remote files of unknown reliability and accuracy – but extremely rapid electronic access – rather than by a policeman's own judgment and obedience to his task under the law.

THE STOLEN VEHICLE INDEX is perhaps the most revealing example of the actual nature of the PNC. The idea of centrally recording stolen vehicles is clearly unobjectionable in principle, and the related attributes of the PNC's fast communication systems are an obvious boon. It therefore comes as a surprise to discover that only one quarter of the PNC's 'stolen vehicles' entries are actually stolen. Information on this comes from a 1976 Home Office Conference, attended by foreign police officers and computer specialists: the Home Office wanted to set up 'firm links between (police) research groups . . . and make possible scientific co-operation between them'.

A paper at the conference by J. R. Cubberley and D. Blakey of the PNCU reported that an average of 120,000 entries on the Suspect/Stolen Vehicles file were recorded for one of eleven reasons. These ranged from 'having been stolen (about 30,000) to being owned by an active criminal or having been impounded by the police . . . for obstruction.'

The other reasons for being listed have not been explicitly published, although some details are available. Stolen and impounded vehicles account for two reasons; additional reasons include vehicles in use for police purposes, vehicles which are, or whose owners are, suspected of having committed an offence, and vehicles of 'long term interest' to the police. Two larger sections of this file are therefore concerned with stolen vehicles and vehicles used by the police – these perhaps amount to just over half the file at that time, say 65,000 entries. Most of the rest are either the 'SUS' categories or the 'INT' categories, denoting suspicion or 'long term interest'. One senior police officer has confirmed that in his (provincial) force, about 500 vehicles would have been recorded as of interest. Since there are 52 police forces in Britain, this figure would seem to confirm the estimate that at least one-third of the 'Stolen' Vehicles file is in fact concerned with vehicles which are under surveillance; whose whereabouts are to be reported but whose drivers are not necessarily to be made aware that surveillance has taken place.

Another unusual, and secret mechanism for surveillance, was described to me by a former PNC programmer. Additional information can be inserted into the record of a vehicle in either the Stolen Vehicle or the Vehicle Owner's index to indicate that the Special Branch have an interest in the vehicle. If an inquiry is made on its record, a message concerning the inquiry is sent to the Special Branch at New Scotland Yard at the same time as the inquiry is answered. The local police force making the inquiry is given no indication that it has been flagged to Special Branch in this way. A bell is rung in the Special Branch duty office to ensure that the message receives attention. This system was justified to programmers as being intended to protect the SB's own vehicles from police interference if they were behaving unusually; but this was clearly not the true reason for the facility. It has been suggested by police

sources that similar warning facilities are now available to other major police units such as the Regional Crime Squads and the National Drugs Intelligence Unit.

The computers originally provided for the PNC apparently proved inadequate to meet demand, and new, more powerful machines were put in two years ago.

The new computers were claimed to be needed because the 'limit for the amount of information it could hold had been reached'. An alternative explanation was given to me by the Home Office in September 1979: 'the (existing) processors were incapable of dealing with the sheer weight of numbers of inquiries being received'. They suggested that the PNC had already become overloaded with inquiries by early 1977, claimed that this had been predicted some time before, and said that a new order had been put in hand over a year before it was announced. The newer processors would keep the average response time per inquiry down to 5 seconds.

Whichever version is accurate, the PNC's capacity for storing information does in any case seem to have been underutilised in comparison with early estimates of capacity. The number of records held in 1979 was considerably less than the 40 million anticipated in 1972; the actual level was about 30.2 million. A large part of the shortfall was caused by the reduction in the growth of vehicle ownership in the mid-Seventies.

The 1978 announcement also revealed that the Wanted/Missing Persons Index and the Disqualified Driver Index could not then go on the PNC because of the alleged under-capacity.

Why is the PNC 'full up'? Certainly, the present rate of transactions is staggering. The latest published figure is 160,000 messages a day, or about 58.4 million messages a year. The same scale of use is indicated in a letter from the Assistant Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police to the *Police Review* in which he stated that, 'in excess of 100,000 PNC transactions were made by (my) force during April 1979 alone'. The number of inquiries made each year in Birmingham alone (1.2 million), or those made in Britain as a whole, is comparable to the total size of the population. These figures dramatically indicate the extent to which the PNC has put much of society under surveillance.

A NEW 'cross reference' system was added to the main PNC facilities in 1977. It is designed to cross-reference numbers of criminal records at Scotland Yard with the corresponding dossiers at regional CROs and Force headquarters. So far as is known, the work of cross-referencing (The 'RX' inquiry system) has not been completed. The Home Office denies that this will involve linkage of pointers to collator records: the description of the 'RX' system given in a 1978 PNC booklet is, however, more ambiguous:

This facility permits reference numbers of criminal records held centrally to be cross-referenced to local and regional police records, thus indicating additional sources of detailed information.

The relevant references will be built up in 'several years'.

The PNC is certainly stocked with features which are very far removed from the anodyne descriptions of the system supplied to Parliament, press or public. There is no mention of the warning bells to Special Branch, of the 'cross-linking' of associates, or of the small

proportion of stolen cars on the so-called Stolen Vehicles Index. Even since the 1976 figures showing that only 25 per cent of vehicles on the file were stolen, that file has more than doubled in size, to over 250,000 entries. This suggests that a far greater proportion of suspect and other vehicles under surveillance are now on the file. Besides this, public relations for the PNC stresses that the information now on the computer has always been available to the police, and emphasise the (undoubted) success of the PNC in detecting greater numbers of stolen cars. *But no previous police system generated 58 million inquiries every year on more than 20 million people, their vehicles and personal records.* The PNC has created a qualitatively different situation for the individual from that which existed a decade before. The Home Office itself, wearing a different hat, pointed out the precise dangers of this happening in their first white paper on *Computers and Privacy*. Computer personal data systems have the following 'practical implications for privacy' in that they:

- (1) facilitate the maintenance of extensive record systems and the retention of data in those systems;
- (2) can make data easily and quickly accessible from many distant points;
- (3) make it possible for data to be transferred quickly from one information system to another;
- (4) make it possible for data to be combined in ways which might not otherwise be practicable;
- (5) because the data is stored, processed and often transmitted in a form which is not directly intelligible, few people may know what is in the records, and what is happening to them.

Parkinson's Law-like, the use of the PNC has

now apparently expanded to fill all its available capacity ahead of time, a phenomenon police often refer to rather whimsically as 'suppressed demand'.

THE POLICE NATIONAL COMPUTER may have been developed and put into operation in conditions of considerable secrecy. But compared with the information available on the 'C' Department computer of the Metropolitan Police, it has positively been bathed in floodlights ('C' is responsible for all the Yard's criminal investigation and related work, including the Special Branch).

In Autumn 1973 the Management Services Department of the Metropolitan Police started to assess the possibility of computerising all the main records of the units in 'C' Department. This study led directly to the computer now in operation, which will store over 1.3 million names by 1985: the vast majority having been entered on the computer by the Special Branch.

The specification document for the 'C' Department computer is one of the few sources of public information about it. It provides remarkable evidence of the way in which the police see their new intelligence gathering role. In describing the existing manual filing systems which have to be put on computer, there is scarcely a mention of the word 'criminal' or 'crimes'. The Immigration, Special Branch and Fraud Squad files do not mention 'criminals' at all; the Drugs Intelligence Unit refers only to a small section of 1,000 out of its 75,000 files - under two per cent of the files held. And, it is clear, the situation will become worse, not better.

The total number of files in all five sections would, by 1985, cover an estimated 2.03 million people (1.343 million in 1974). That figure is quite separate from the 3.8 million *bona fide* criminal records of the CRO, though in some cases there would be a sizeable overlap.

These records are quite separate again from those held in London divisional and sub-divisional police stations by collators - the 'local intelligence' records. These must number between 200,000 and 600,000. All told, the Metropolitan Police alone must have between 3.5 and 5.5 million people on its various files.

It is small wonder that the drafters of the document, in projecting police file holdings forward from January 1974 chose an unusual 11 year period on which to base their predictions. It is tempting to wonder if they were privately aware of how closely a ten-year plan to January 1984 would have paralleled George Orwell's fears.

The system was brought into service in 1979, under the joint supervision of the Metropolitan Police Management Services Department, JADPU, and the government's Central Computer Agency. In order to meet the project timing, provincial Special Branch officers who regularly spend three-month tours of duty in Scotland Yard at the SB's 'National Joint Unit', were employed during much of 1978 solely in coding personal dossiers ready for the computer. Although development and the loading of files continues, there is little doubt that the 'C' Department computer will indeed be working well and on time by January 1984.

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