

Scale of car-bugging must stay secret, says Brittan

THE SCALE of police bugging and electronic surveillance operations in Britain should remain secret, the Home Office insisted last week. This claim follows our revelations of the planting of several police car tracking bugs on Londoners (*NS* 21 June). The government has also repeated its refusal to investigate unauthorised bugging or other 'improper activities' by MI5, the Security Service.

A top level official investigation, conducted by Lord Bridge, head of the Security Commission, has uncovered the useful fact that all authorised tapping activities carried out by MI5 are, indeed, authorised. A letter from Home Secretary Leon Brittan to TUC General Secretary Norman Willis, just released by the TUC, reports that Bridge carefully checked to see 'whether the authorisation of interceptions . . . were sought and given in accordance with the relevant criteria.' They were, it seems.

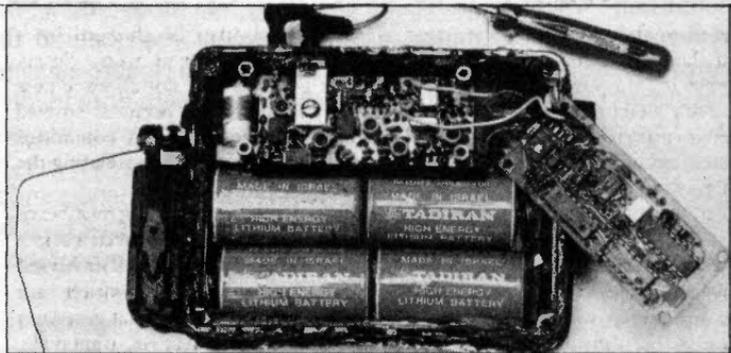
This was the startling conclusion of

m'Lord's inquiry, conducted in response to TV revelations by ex-MI5 officer Cathy Massiter that trade unionists had been put under improper political surveillance. Unfortunately, Brittan explained, m'Lord had not been able to check on 'allegations that the Security Service has undertaken unauthorised interception or otherwise engaged in improper activities' because 'such allegations relate to the operation of the Security Services as a whole' — and m'Lord was not, helpfully from the government point of view, asked to look at *that* sort of thing.

Baffles on Commons

A similarly forthcoming attitude distinguished last week's Parliamentary answers to London Labour MP Harry Cohen about police car surveillance bugs. Cohen asked the Home Office how widely such bugs were used — and asked for the names of the officers who had authorised the planting of the two car bugs that had been discovered by their targets, and passed to the *NS*.

Home Office minister Giles Shaw



'Fender-sender', innards exposed — attached by magnets

refused to give details of how many bugs the police are now using — even though the numbers of telephone tap and mail opening warrants issued are now published regularly. Shaw stated that he was 'assured by the Commissioner that the use of surveillance devices is authorised strictly in accordance with the relevant guidelines'. But it would not be 'in the interests of the prevention or detection of crime for detailed information to be made public on the scale of use of particular kinds of surveillance devices in criminal investigations.'

The Home Secretary's guidelines on bugging, Shaw claimed, say that 'the use of tracking equipment requires, in the Metropolitan Police,

the authority of an Assistant Commissioner.' This assertion is in flat contradiction to a statement made to the *NS* three weeks ago by the Home Office press office.

Officials then quoted from the guidelines to explain that the car tracking bug was in fact covered by a section which authorises 'observation or recording of particular individuals in a public place'. In these cases, the Home Office said, 'authority may be given by a Chief Superintendent'.

So who did authorise the planting of the bugs we saw? The Home Office remains characteristically forthcoming: 'it would not be appropriate' to answer.

Duncan Campbell