

# Whitelaw rides out the storm to clinch victory for the doves

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by John Shirley and Michael Bilton

IN THE House of Commons last November, the home secretary, William Whitelaw, firmly chided a young Labour MP for apparently suggesting that unemployment among young blacks could excuse the Brixton riots. When the exchange was over, the two men met quietly in the members' lobby. Whitelaw placed a friendly arm around his opponent's shoulder. "Sorry about that," he confided. "Hope you understand. Knives at my back, knives at my back."

Last week, in the wake of the unprecedented public outcry over law and order, rising violent crime and the political chestnut of capital punishment, the home secretary might have been forgiven for reflecting on the insight of his own remarks. Certainly, it seemed the political knives were out for him.

The Police Federation launched a £30,000 campaign urging the reintroduction of the death penalty for murder. More than 80 Tory MPs signed an Early Day motion supporting it. Labour's shadow cabinet announced its intention to use this Thursday's Supply Day debate to discuss law and order, thus maximising Whitelaw's embarrassment.

And, adding insult to injury, the Daily Mail, one of the Tory Party's most loyal supporters, christened him "Mr Wetlaw" and suggested it might be time he was packed off to the House of Lords.

The furore followed the release 10 days ago of the annual crime figures by the Metropolitan Police. Serious offences recorded in London rose last year by eight per cent to the highest-ever total of 631,328. The rising trend was confirmed nationally by the Home Office, whose statistics showed that serious offences throughout the country had jumped 10 per cent to a record 2,964,000.

Which made it all the more surprising that by this weekend close observers of the political scene were seriously suggesting that Whitelaw's own position was stronger than for many months. Crucially, he had won the grudging support of the prime minister and the public admission from her that—despite her personal preference to the contrary—it was unlikely that parliament would reintroduce the death penalty.

As one senior politician put it: "He's not under any serious threat. He represents the old-style Tory Party—landed gentry, Brigade of Guards, honour and dignity. She needs him about."

Equally important, Whitelaw had secured the appointment of his favoured candidate, Sir Kenneth Newman, as the new commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in succession to Sir David McNee. It was a victory achieved with the crucial backing of the two leading police "doves," John Alderson, the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall, and Sir Philip Knights, chief constable of the West Midlands.

Newman's appointment will be vital to Whitelaw's continued survival. Despite his

firmness against terrorism in Northern Ireland (see left) Newman remains deeply committed to the principles of "community policing" and the participation, at some level, of elected representatives.

And in essence, this has been what the last week's struggle has been about. Behind the rhetoric concerning the growth of violent crime has been a dispute about what kind of police forces Britain should have in the Eighties, how they should be run and how they can best fight crime.

Last Tuesday, Manchester's chief constable, James Alderson, called for the abolition of local police committees. Implicit in his proposals was the idea that the police should be given tough new powers and protective equipment to fight violent crime on the streets.



Allies: Whitelaw, Alderson

Against this, John Alderson, of Devon and Cornwall, plugged his theory of "community policing." For Alderson, this means much more than simply putting more bobbies on the beat. It involves creating an elaborate structure of statutory liaison committees.

Alderson rejects the notion that violent street crime can be checked by re-equipping the police with water cannon, CS gas and the range of paraphernalia now on offer from the Home Office (see right).

In an interview in the April edition of the magazine, Marxism Today, due out this week, he explains why: "We would get a quasi-military police armed with weapons for shooting at people. Even though they're called rubber bullets, they're capable of killing people. That would give hostages to fortune. So would other equipment, particularly the gas, which is indiscriminate in its effects on people."

This division of opinion is reflected at Westminster and within the police service. Tory right-wingers, an old guard of senior officers at Scotland Yard and the Police Federation support the "get tough" line. The Labour Party, Whitelaw himself and a small but influential band of police "wets" favour the community approach.

Ironically, the system that both groups are now grappling with was developed by Roy Jenkins, regarded by many as the most liberal home secretary since the war. Jenkins went for "cost effectiveness" in the police. Essentially, this meant putting "beat" officers in panda cars and developing more specialised squads to attack the key crimes of the decade. "It meant we did not have 'a people's police force' anymore," said one observer.

From the start, this philosophy was opposed by Kenneth Newman. As a chief superintendent in the unfashionable community liaison branch at Scotland Yard—then regarded as a token department for police no-hopers—he pressed for greater emphasis on police-community relations.

It would, however, be unfair to suggest that the Jenkins system of informal police committees has completely broken down. Despite the Manchester crisis (see below) the liaison between local police chiefs and their police committees in general works well.

Comprised of elected councillors and lay magistrates the committees keep a watching brief on police affairs, but lack the power to do anything about operational matters. In reality, they have a single, draconian and rarely-used sanction: they can sack a chief constable for "inefficiency". And that needs the Home Secretary's approval.

In Sheffield, for example, relationships are positively cosy, despite the left-wing local council's popular nickname as "the People's Republic of South Yorkshire." Last summer the chief constable, James Brownlow, received immediate permission to spend £180,000 to re-equip his force for public order duties.

George Moors, chairman of South Yorkshire police committee, said: "We have the best chief constable in the country. We work as a team."

Ironically, Labour's success in Sheffield may give some comfort to the home secretary as he presses his "community policing" policy forward. But to succeed, he has to win another vital battle—to recoup police morale. As one police officer put it last week: "The police are walking on eggshells. Everyone is looking over his shoulder at the consequences of his actions."