

"Morning Star" 26-11-68

Copper with a banner

IT IS LUCKY for our precarious liberties that Mr. Peter Jackson, Labour MP for High Peak, wears a beard and drives a mini, or he might not have been able to ask in the Commons what authority the police had to search cars on the M1 on the day of the big Vietnam war demonstration.

Had he not fitted so neatly into a policeman's idea of a demonstrator he would probably not have been stopped.

Unfortunately, no such police gaffe has so far led to questioning the obnoxious practice of policemen posing as demonstrators and taking part in the march.

While most of us acknowledge the restraint the majority of the police showed on this occasion (which was perhaps not unconnected with the very large number demonstrating), the idea of a slogan-shouting policeman dressed up as a student, is very alarming.

Acting role

Students are blamed for all sorts of hooliganism, and Fleet Street laps it up. But how can we be sure that some rowdy incident is not the result of an enthusiastic policeman being carried away by the acting role he is playing?

While most of the Press was discreet about such bogus students, one or two newspapers did let the cat out of the bag.

The Daily Mail, after quoting the alleged £250,000 spent by the police on the demonstration, said on October 29; "Marked out for particular commendation are members of the Special Branch who, disguised in the paraphernalia of protest groups, mingled with the marchers. Sporting lapel badges and shouting slogans with the rest, they kept a close watch on recognised ringleaders.

"Then, when the demonstrators dispersed, they picked up their bogus banners and walked – to Scotland Yard."

The Mail may smack its fevered lips with the satisfaction of a capitalist ringleader, but this kind of police activity ought not to be allowed to pass without question.

Perhaps Mail readers, always conscious of their pockets, might agree. Just think of the extra cost of all those fake banners.

The use of police spies and provocateurs to infiltrate working-class and democratic groups in Britain goes back centuries. How much longer will it go on, Mr Callaghan?

"MORNING STAR" 29-11-68

Oct 27 – use of plain-clothes men ‘disquieting’

From JOHN GRITTEN

THE USE of plain-clothes police in crowd control was “one of the most disquieting features” of the October 27 Vietnam demonstration according to an observer from the National Council for Civil Liberties.

In a report to the Home Secretary, he says: “If these men were involved in scuffles with demonstrators, other demonstrators might well intervene to try to break up the fight.

“They could presumably be charged with obstructing the police, although they had no idea that police were involved.

“Those plain-clothes men have no numbers of course, and seem to be under much less control.”

Credit shared

On October 27 “one man was very noticeable. On two occasions I saw him jump on demonstrators from behind.

“Once, uniformed officers rushed forward under the impression that a fight had broken out between two members of the public, but retired sheepishly after finding out who was involved.”

But in a covering letter to Mr Callaghan, NCCL general secretary Tony Smythe says: “Clearly the police and, as our report shows, the demonstrators and their organisers share the credit for the absence of serious disorder.”

From reports sent in by 50 of the council’s observers at the demonstration – there were 200 in all – Mr. Smythe says: “The behaviour of individual police officers was with very few exceptions exemplary.”

The change of police tactics from the use of cordons, horses and truncheons on previous, similar demonstrations, “was wholly successful, as far as the main march was concerned.”

Mr. Smythe charges that “much of the tension which arose before the demonstration can be attributed to the Press in general and to two newspapers in particular.”

Yard source?

Where imagination takes over from journalistic objectivity, the consequences may be serious both for the freedom to demonstrate and for public order, he says.

Mr. Smythe says he has already asked for an inquiry into specific allegations in newspapers of September 4 and 5 concerning the storing of weapons and the preparations to take over buildings.

Commander Lawlor's deputy at Scotland Yard denied that those appearing in the first report had any substance, says Mr. Smythe.

"It is important to know whether these rumours were the figments of journalistic imagination or, if they had substance, where they came from.

"It has even been suggested that the source could have been individuals within Scotland Yard acting without authorisation."

Mr. Smythe claims that "indiscriminate and widespread searches" of vehicles in and around London, including motorways, on October 26 and 27, "appear to us to represent the major defect in the police handling of the situation."