

SPECIAL BRANCHES

1905

In suggesting an inquiry into the actions of "The Special Branch" in infiltrating trade unions, Mr. Prescott, Mr. Atkinson and Mr. Skinner are doubtless influenced by a campaign which has been running for some time in the Morning Star and some other papers. It is a pity in that particular context that there has been some ill-founded publicity about a Hampshire firm named Strachans and also that other aspects of Special Branch or allied activity happened to be much in the public eye - the Littlejohn and Lennon cases and maybe, as you know from a separate note, another case. There is obviously every likelihood of an attempt being made to broaden the discussion on 30th April into a discussion of "dirty tricks" in general.

On the assumption that you will wish to keep the appointment which has been made (and I would not advise against this in view of the volume of comment, e.g. in this week's New Statesman), Sir Arthur Peterson and I had a general talk yesterday with Sir Michael Hauley and one of his staff. You will have the opportunity, when you visit the Security Service on Monday, to follow up particular points but meanwhile I set out below -

- A - the main points affecting the functions of Special Branches and the relationship between them and the Security Service, particularly in the industrial field; and
- B - suggestions about the line you might take on Tuesday.

A. Special Branches and the Security Service

(i) The business of the Security Service is to deal with subversion and they have a duty to seek it out wherever it may be found, even if this leads to enquiries being made in peculiarly sensitive areas (e.g. the activities of people who may be university students or members of trade unions).

(ii) The work of Special Branches is governed by the fact that they are staffed by police officers who are responsible to their chief officers. Their primary duty, therefore, is to assist the chief officer in the preservation of public order and the prevention and detection of criminal activity. The Metropolitan Special Branch was originally established in order to deal with the threat to public order from Ireland and this remains a principal part of that Branch's business.

(iii) Naturally, however, both the Security Service and Special Branches are often interested in the same target: a man or a body which represents a subversive threat may often (whether in pursuance of the same objective or not) be a threat to public order through the conduct of unruly demonstrations or transgressions of the law in other ways. The natural approach of the Security Service is to concern itself with long-term threats and assessments as well as with short-term threats; the Security Service, therefore, is particularly interested in the policy and membership of subversive bodies and the immediate police interest tends to lie in obtaining forewarning about disruptive action which may be planned on the streets. But the interests of the two generally lead them to complement rather than duplicate one another's activities.

[REDACTED]

(iv) The Security Service has to rely heavily on information obtained from Special Branches, since it has no effective local organisation of its own. When this results in action by Special Branch officers in the interests of the Security Service, the rough-and-ready working definition of subversive people or organisations is those whose purpose is the undermining or overthrow of the established democratic order. Any enquiries by Special Branch officers in connection with members of trade unions or the background to particular industrial disputes are undertaken in pursuance of this general definition.

(v) This sort of activity in the industrial field may mean the use by Special Branches of agents who may be paid from Security Service funds. (You may care to ask about the scale of this on Monday.)

(vi) But in no circumstances do Special Branch officers infiltrate trade unions, either directly or indirectly: their aim is to inform themselves about threats to public order by individuals or organisations and, where they are acting for the Security Service, to obtain information to assist that Service in its counter-subversion work.

(vii) Special Branch officers often get into a position of some embarrassment with industrial managements. A case in point is the affair at Strachans where -

- (a) the firm was anyway in touch with local CID officers about pilfering;
- (b) the firm apparently had reasons of its own for wishing to put public blame for their financial difficulties on action by militant work people;

[REDACTED]

(c) the firm did not scruple to put the Sunday Times to work for that purpose, even at the expense of Mr. [Privacy] their accountant;

(d) the Security Service appear not to have been involved at all; and

(e) the stories first put about by the Sunday Times and picked up in various other papers are likely to be found to have very little truth in them. (We have asked the chief constable of Hampshire for an account of what his officers were doing and I hope we shall receive this on Monday.)

B. The line you might take with Mr. Prescott and others

(i) Special Branch officers are police officers, answerable to their own chief officers. Their main business is to help in enforcing the law, putting down crime and maintaining public order. The Metropolitan Special Branch was established in the first place to deal with Irish threats to public order and they (and other Special Branches) are now kept pretty busy with terrorists of all kinds.

(ii) The people who may take criminal action or threaten public order and whose plans are therefore of interest to Special Branches are sometimes also of interest to the Security Service, whose duty it is to deal with subversive activity, wherever it may be found. Special Branches therefore work closely with the Security Service, but it is important to distinguish their functions. Neither the Security Service nor the Special Branches are in any sense "political police"; and it is important not to give currency to emotive phrases of that kind.

[REDACTED]

(iii) In the industrial field, just as elsewhere in society, there are to be found people whose aims are criminal or subversive, and they have to be pursued and frustrated. But there is no foundation for any suggestion about "infiltration" of trade unions. There is nothing there to inquire into.

(iv) Not surprisingly, Special Branch officers who are in contact with industry sometimes find themselves in an awkward position. Over Strachans, for example, it seems plain [subject to anything more the Chief Constable can tell us] that they were in the first place used by part of the management in order to suggest that militant action by work-people would account for the poor financial showing of the firm, and that the original newspaper story is now being exploited by people at the other end of the industrial spectrum to suggest that trade unionists were being spied upon. The policeman's lot is not, therefore, very happy - though it is easy enough to understand that in a sensitive field like this he is bound to be criticised, whatever he does. But it would be a grave mistake to conclude that he ought not to be in the field at all.

(v) There really is nothing here to be inquired into. Demands for investigation of other aspects of so-called Special Branch activity are another matter and each should be looked at on its own merits. Littlejohn is not a Special Branch responsibility. Lennon is, but the issues raised there are being dealt with separately.

(Signed) J. G. Wainwright

26th April, 1974.

Copy: Sir Arthur Peterson