

# REVIEWS

## Law and Order

### Law and Disorder

John Alderson, *Hamish Hamilton* £8.95

### What is to be Done About Law and Order?

J Lea & J Young, *Penguin Books* £2.95

### Police: Accountable To Whom?

*Merseyside Area Committee of the Communist Party* 75p

Traditionally the Left's response to 'law and order' has been one of two varieties. Either it is to accept without question conservative-defined concepts of the rule of law maintained by the police in their role as 'citizens in uniform' - an approach all too often seen in Labour-nominated magistrates, Labour members of provincial police authorities and the Labour leadership itself; alternatively, the area has been dismissed altogether by those who take a crude class position which sees all law in capitalist society as made in the interests of the ruling class and maintained by 'their' police. Both approaches have led to the same result: policing and the ideology of law and order have gone unchallenged and thus become the exclusive property of the Right.

But in recent years challenges have begun to be made. Such has been the growth of excessive, oppressive and partial policing that doubts have been raised even from within the establishment itself, John Alderson being a key exponent of the liberal concern. The inner city disturbances of 1981 and the Scarman Inquiry prompted many on the Left in those areas to take up the question of policing. Some Labour councils have begun to see policing as an appropriate issue for them to deal with and, in the process, discovered that working class constituents are as concerned with protection against crime as protection against excessive policing. Meanwhile there has been a modest development of ideas around the democratic transformation of the police.

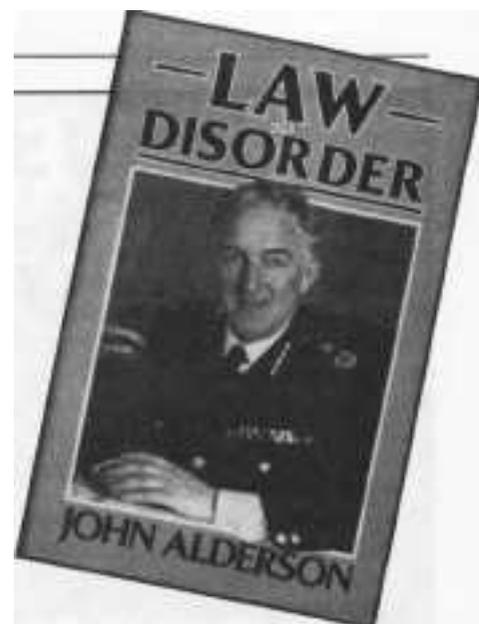
John Alderson, former Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall and now an active Liberal Party member, is probably best known for his views on 'community policing'. In the absence of socialist thinking on the matter, 'community policing' was grasped at by many on the Left as a progressive alternative to the heavy handed, insensitive and militaristic style policing which was emerging in the inner cities. His new book, where his ideas on ethics, policing and 'communitarianism' are amp-

ly expounded, shows however, the limitations of his approach.

Alderson's views are, in fact, quite simple. Social order is breaking down and social change is taking place fast; the police have assumed a central role to ensure social control and prevent social change; but instead we need to build democratic participation and ensure justice, to produce 'communitarianism' - 'a society where tendencies towards law and disorder give way to tendencies towards order'. His exposition is far from being a class analysis - Alderson does not mention inequality in the ownership of wealth, or deprivation, or institutionalised racism for example, and he suggests that the family is centrally important for 'social order'. But it is his anti-Thatcher standpoint which is so refreshingly progressive coming from a former police chief. Ideas which would appear moderate in a social worker - for example that social policies, not policing, are needed to cure social problems - put Alderson firmly on the extreme Left of police culture. This is particularly so in his prediction (currently being fulfilled in the miners' strike) that the police will be increasingly drawn into a major political role, as Thatcherism determines to rid Britain of socialism.

Although this analysis, coming from the source it does, is to be welcomed, other aspects of Alderson's views on policing should be scrutinised before he is greeted with completely outstretched arms by the Left. He argues, for example, that the Metropolitan Police commissioner is *more* accountable than police chiefs elsewhere as he has less security of tenure (McNee was forced to go after the Pagan incident). This view is not shared by many Londoners who feel that the commissioner should be brought to book openly for everyday breaches of police conduct, not only those affecting Buckingham Palace. Nowhere does Alderson criticise the Police Bill, or comment on the dangerous increase of powers which it gives the police.

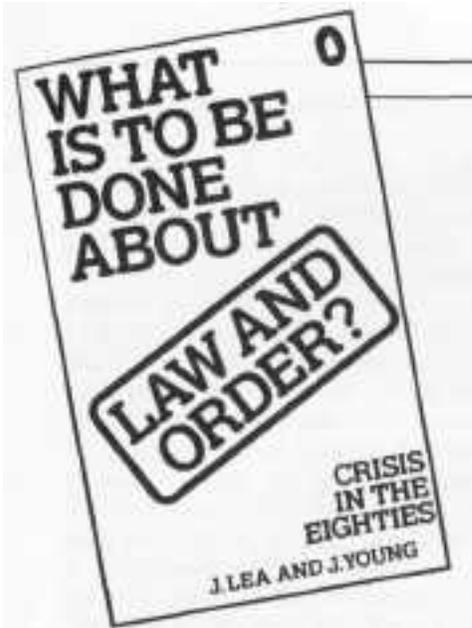
Alderson's book gives interesting insights into the role of the non-accountable Association of Chief Police Officers, (ACPO), as well as the development of his own thinking on policing, independently of the ACPO (and the Police Federation) - on preventive policing, street patrols, community crime prevention schemes and community policing as an essence of policing not as a specialist function. He concludes that in a 'liberal democracy' pursuit of order through the police is a mistake;



the containment of crime should be a concern for the body politic with the police operating on the margins. This is where his 'communitarianism' is developed: to release the 'people potential' in the 'primary cells' of society ie, the neighbourhoods. Here he proposes community forums to deal with all aspects of local government, including links with police-community consultative groups.

Alderson's proposals provide some interesting ideas for the Left, although ones which need to be worked into a wider perspective of the state and how to transform it. This *could* have been the role of Lea and Young's book which unfortunately fails to provide answers to the cogent question which its title raises.

The authors posit a 'new left realism' about crime which does not fall into the trap of either conservative (by which they mean academic criminology) or 'left idealist' thinking. This latter, which is the object of a polemic which occupies much of the book, is defined by what can only be a caricature. 'Left idealism' sees the criminal as proto-revolutionary, the state as impossible to reform and the working class as being distracted by the moral panic about crime engendered by the ruling class. This certainly might be the view of a few diehards, but it bears no relationship to the development of debate and thinking in this area which has taken place in the last few years - within the Communist Party, sections of the Labour Party and elsewhere; in these debates the perspective has been put forward of transforming the state in a way which Lea and Young nowhere propose. The recent pamphlet from the Merseyside area of the Communist Party, for example, raises such questions as legal limitations on the role of the police, restructuring local police authorities, changes in police recruitment policy, public scru-



tiny of the activities of the ACPO and trade union rights for the Police Federation.

There are alternative viewpoints to the ones which Lea and Young so simplistically caricature and indeed there are glaring gaps in their own approach. For example, they portray developments in police methods and tactics primarily as *reactions* to the growth of crime, street crime in particular. Yet the very use of stop and search against those the police stereotype as criminals, and saturation policing of police-defined 'high crime' areas actually 'creates' crime (such as obstruction of the police, police assault etc.) without necessarily clearing up or stopping street crime or burglary. They have less understanding of police culture than the centrist Policy Studies Institute, whose report on the Metropolitan Police, for example, detailed how police stereotyping affected not only black youth but also 'slag' - sections of the white underclass, hippies, political activists, etc.

Their most visible omission is their failure to refer to Thatcherism (at least recognised by Alderson) and how it transforms issues of social justice, inequalities, racism and industrial relations into questions of law and order; this has happened in the miners' strike as it happened in the inner cities. In both cases the Government has chosen to use the police to impose its social or industrial policy, with the result that the main problem identified in the inner cities is high crime - not mass unemployment or poverty or institutionalised racism; and the main problem which is portrayed in the miners' strike is the violence on the picket lines - not the desire to save jobs and communities.

Lea and Young are so busy denouncing their academic critics - that they fail to answer the question in the title of the book. They do talk about the politics of crime

control as part of grassroots politics and a need to recreate a sense of community (as does Alderson). But this is precisely the wide-sweeping 'answer' which has been a failure of the Left on this issue. Now is the time to begin to discuss the specifics of the strategy which socialists should have on law and order.

At the end of the book the authors do begin to talk about local democratic-accountability of the police and raise some of the contradictions involved, such as the danger of unrepresentative local interest groups taking control, or the technicalities of policing being interfered with. But what form would such accountability take and how would it operate? What about *national* accountability of the police, controlling the political police chiefs and the ACPO? Repressive laws which need to be repealed? Decriminalisation of some offences? Demilitarisation of the police? Reordering police priorities? Transferring some current policing functions (such as crime prevention, dealing with drunks and prostitutes) to local authorities bolstered by appropriate funding? These are some of the wider aspects of policing which need to be included in an alternative socialist strategy on law and order.

**Brenda Kirsch**

