

News from Somewhere

Miles Kelly

Crimewatch

Another wacky libertarian idea which is now becoming common sense is private policing. Actually non-state law enforcement has a long and noble history of which we were recently reminded by the annual gathering of about thirty voluntary crime prevention associations in Meriden, Warwickshire. The old private police were replaced (under a Tory government lest we forget) by Peelers and eventually prussians, pigs and the SPG. In Winchester a private anti-crime force has taken to the streets. Called the Yeomen, these stout hearted fellows aim to patrol Winchester, deter crime by their mere presence and, er ... call the police if they see a wrong being committed. Such a service costs local shops and firms £1 per night. Obviously they need a bit of free market competition to keep the price down. After all, New York's subway-patrolling Guardian Angels come free of charge.

Where the Police are the Problem

Anything has to be better than Mexico, however. A report in the *Times* (5.8.85) describes the state's monopoly police force as Public Enemy No 1, since they have become the country's principal law-breakers, with a criminal repertory including rape, burglary, mugging, torture and organised crime.

The Pursuit of Happiness

A recent survey carried out by Gallup (*Times* 11.7.85) suggests that Britain is one of the happiest nations in the world (7 out of 10 describe themselves as happy). Is this because of our firm and resolute government, the continuity of our political traditions, our much admired public broadcasting system, or even our compassionate National Health Service? Not really. What matters more for the average British family is eating an immigrant-produced Chinese or Indian takeaway meal on a Saturday night while watching a video (which is usually nasty or

indecent, sniffs Alan Watkins in the *Observer* 11.8.85) on their cheap imported video player - in other words happiness is all the things which politicians are trying to make it harder to get hold of.

Hayekisms

There is a need to give "a rational justification for an anti-rationalist attitude". Furthermore, "we owe civilisation to superstitions". Such were the words of enlightenment from Professor Hayek which intrigued Brian Inglis of the Koestler Foundation in an article in the *Guardian* (28.8.85) headed "Psychic appeal". Inglis went on to cite the "fraud" of rationalism and the "collapse of one of its supports: materialism" due to which "we are reluctantly compelled to be anti-rationalist". After bringing in Socrates' daemon, people 'hearing voices' and "meaningful coincidences", Inglis, rather less reluctantly, suggests that "there really are forces keeping an eye on us". Spontaneous forces, I hope.

Health and Safety Dept

Latest on the Health and Safety front - the Department of the Environment has had to revise its leaflet Asbestos in Housing after expert suggestions that the risk from asbestos in buildings is very low provided that a few "potential" hazards are recognised (*Times* 21.8.85). The question now is how many people has the Dept of the Environment brought to harm with their technophobic regulations against this life-saving, fire-resistant, substance?

Health and Safety Dept II

Meanwhile local councils in urban areas will have to spend up to £2 billion in order to eliminate the health risk of asbestos in buildings, according to a report in the *Times* (10.9.85). Asbestos was used in the construction of 87.5% of council housing according to 14 local government surveys. The Association of Metropolitan Authorities recommends prohibiting the use of asbestos and its progressive removal or containment in existing buildings. On present resources this could take "90 to 100 years" to

complete. And this is all because the Health and Safety Executive says there is "no safe level" of exposure to asbestos.

Lost Post

The National Youth Theatre faced a financial catastrophe due to the Post Office's spectacular loss of 5,000 letters mailed to schools throughout the country, whose pupils provide the bulk of the theatre's audience (*Sunday Times* 15.9.85). A recent survey in *Which?* (reported in the *Economist* 8.6.85) provides more detail about the less spectacular day to day inefficiencies of one of our great monopolies. The Post Office aims to deliver 90% of first-class letters by the first working day after posting and claims to achieve just less than that. *Which?* reports that 42% of first-class letters sent to a non-adjacent postal region failed to arrive the next day. 96% of second-class letters should arrive by the third working day after posting. Again, they don't. Despite the adverts, and widespread public belief, postcoded letters arrive no faster than non-postcoded letters. Students of unintended regularities will be fascinated by one fact uncovered by *Which?* The survey showed that first-class letters posted on a Tuesday stand the best chance of arriving the next day (83% do so). Don't ask why - the Post Office couldn't tell you any more than it could tell you what happened to the NYT's 5,000.

Eat the Sheep Now - Save the Whales for Later

What's the best way of protecting an endangered species? - put them on a menu. This is the solution devised by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust for the seaweed-eating North Ronaldsway (in the Orkneys) sheep (*Times* 21.9.85). The sheep were in some danger of extinction until a number of them were baked into pies for members of the Scottish Gourmet Organisation. They went like hot cakes. Now this rare breed is in demand, and the sheep have a good chance of remaining an integral breed: Survival of the Meatiest.

In Private Hands

The first private clinic specialising in venereal disease has been given dispensation

by the Department of Health and Social Security to advertise (*Times* 16.10.85). Such specialist private practices are forbidden to advertise by a 1917 law but the DHSS can make exceptions.

"Government Undermining the State" - official

Is the government at last shifting the balance of power from the state to the people? Very likely, judging from recent comments by Enoch Powell MP. In a speech to Cambridge University Conservative Association Powell criticised proposed Home Office schemes for mediation between criminals and their victims to agree reparation (*Times* 21.10.85). "Commitment to these new notions," Powell said, could be dangerous and have "the most far-reaching implications for our approach to crime, society and the criminal law". Powell's point is that "the essence of crime is a wrong done not to an individual but to the community as represented and personified by the sovereign authority". Thus any attempt to circumvent the state by strengthening the position of the victim (the real victim - not the "sovereign authority") in the criminal justice procedure is "of great destructive potential" - to the state. Let's hope he's right.

Bad Taste is Not Enough

Should bad taste be banned? That seems to be the issue in recent minor controversy over a dwarf-throwing contest in London (*New Society* 30.8.85). Six contestants each attempt to throw Lenny the Giant (a seven-stone dwarf) as far as they can. Pam Rutt of the Association for Research into Restricted Growth describes the contest as "both physically dangerous and morally degrading" and wants it banned. Lenny is a karate and judo expert who has spent some months in training for the event and is confident no harm will come to him. Why depriving Lenny and everyone else of their powers of choice and responsible action is so morally uplifting is not made clear. The event's organiser adds, "They are just trying to stop me earning a living. If I called it 'throw a person with restricted growth' instead of 'throw a dwarf' no one would be interested, would they?"

The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.

In a similar vein, a recent proposal by Sheffield Council to ban goldfish at fairs met the opposition of Council Leader and one time proud owner of such a pet, David Blunkett. When the motion was passed Blunkett walked out of the Council Chamber muttering "sentimental twaddle".

If it's Social it's Socialist?

In Havana, a chronic accommodation shortage has forced the Cuban government to abandon its monopoly of housing (*Times* 21.8.85). A sweeping recent reform law transfers home ownership from the state to its tenants, and allows individuals to rent out accommodation for the first time since the revolution. Before the reform, finding the sort of house you wanted could be a tortuous process. People living outside the city who wanted to move into Havana had to find someone who was prepared to swap, and the result was often a series of multiple swaps as a variety of individuals and groups bargained together. This common situation inspired a successful comedy film, *Permutations*, but the resulting enforced separations in the early years of marriage were also blamed for a high divorce rate.

In the words of Rudolfo Davalo of the Housing Institute: "Some people think it's a step backwards to authorise profit from housing, but the aim of the law is social. It doesn't endanger socialist principles."

Free Life