

# The Age of Big Brother

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Restriction on space permits only a brief description of the ways in which Britain is becoming an authoritarian State. It is a pity that so many complacent media reviews of the year 1984 came to the opposite conclusion.

George Orwell's description of a future totalitarian Britain was meant as a warning about the way things were developing. That warning was unheeded. The year he chose to describe has just elapsed and during its course Britain became increasingly authoritarian.

This was both physical and mental. A few examples will illustrate. Despite its condemnation in the European Court of Human Rights, the beating of British schoolchildren, designed to induce a Pavlovian conditioned reflex of obedience to authority, continued unabated at the rate of a quarter of a million recorded beatings per year i.e. one every nineteen seconds. (The United Kingdom is the only country in the whole continent of Europe where it is lawful.) Over 80 per cent of British schools practise corporal punishment, including many administered by Labour-controlled Local Education Authorities which have decided to retain it. On the 13 November 1984, Mrs Thatcher told the House of Commons: "We do not intend to abolish corporal punishment in schools". Accordingly the Education (Corporal Punishment) Bill will not do so: it is merely a regulatory measure.

Similarly the use of plastic bullets on unarmed demonstrators continued, despite its condemnation on 11 October 1984 for the fifth time by the European Parliament. (The United Kingdom is the only country in Europe which uses this form of "crowd control".) In August 1984 the bullets took another life. An estimated 70,000 plastic bullets have been used in Northern Ireland resulting in thirteen fatalities, six of them children. The bullets were introduced by the last Labour Government. In answer to a question in Parliament on 22 February 1984, the Minister of State, Home Office, revealed that 20,000 plastic bullets have been purchased or ordered by police forces in England and Wales. So what happens in Northern Ireland today may be repeated in Britain tomorrow.

The powers of the Police were significantly increased by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. It gives them wide rights of arrest, detention and search. Persons can be kept for up to 96 hours in custody without charge (Section 44), without anyone being informed (Section 56), without access to legal advice (Section 58) and subjected to intimate body searches (Section 55). When shown the draft Bill, a professor of law at the University of London described it as "worthy of Nazi Germany". That

Bill (as only slightly amended during its passage through Parliament) is now law, though not yet fully in force.

In any event, the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1984 allows five days detention without charge (Section 12). The Act renews the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1976, which renewed the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974. Hardly "temporary": they have been in force for over ten years.

More worrying is the Orwellian "Thought Police". National state censorship for adults was introduced by the Video Recordings Act 1984 which had all-party support. On 14 February 1984 the Greater London Council unanimously approved the Report of its Cinema Policy Working Party which supported the continuation of local authority film censorship. By virtue of the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act 1982 this censorship extends to cinema clubs. Meanwhile in Argentina all film censorship was abolished in 1984 at the instigation of the new civilian Government. (Even the previous military Government had not introduced video censorship.)

On the morning of 10 April 1984 Customs Officers raided Gay's the Word Bookshop in London and took away 2,000 publications. The eight Directors and one manager have since been charged with possession of imported "indecent" literature. This is a criminal offence by virtue of Section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979. The literature in question includes *Gai Pied*, France's main gay newspaper. There were similar raids by HM Customs on other British booksellers such as Lavender Menace and the Adelaide Bookshop. The latter has been forced to close. In addition Customs seized consignments of American books destined for the Balham Food and Book Co-operative, Essentially Gay, Giovanni's and Housmans London Peace bookshop.

While officers of HM Customs and Excise raided some shops, the police did likewise to others, including Atomage Leather Couture and Zipper, the only licensed gay shop in Britain: unlicensed "sex establishments" are illegal in England by virtue of The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982. It was revealed on 21 March 1984 that the Metropolitan Police had seized over two million publications in Greater London during the previous year (*R v Snaresbrook Crown Court ex parte Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*).

On 27 July 1984 Beth Grossmann and Donald Skirving, partners in Airlift Books, were convicted of possessing an obscene publication for gain. The book in question had no erotic nor violent content. (It was about drug-abuse.) The verdict means that the



application of the Obscene Publications Act has been widened to include descriptions of "anti-social" activity.

Orwell was also right about the Anti-Sex League. On 7 February 1985 the Metropolitan Police raided "nude encounter parlours" in London with a view to prosecutions for the old common law crime of "keeping a disorderly house". On 14 February 1985, St Valentine's Day, in an operation code-named "Sweetheart", the Obscene Publications Squad of the Metropolitan Police, in conjunction with ten other police forces, raided forty shops, offices and warehouses, seizing 500,000 items.

The Thought Police are active in other ways as well. Giving evidence to the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee in January 1985, John Alderson, former Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall, revealed that the Special Branch keep under surveillance individuals and groups which criticise the established order.

In August 1984 the European Court of Human Rights condemned legally unrestricted British telephone tapping (*Malone v United Kingdom*). In December 1984 the Post Office, in response to a complaint, set up an investigation regarding the tampering with mail addressed to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In January 1985, however, letters to CND had still been opened and resealed in transit. On 7 February the Home Secretary admitted to Parliament that official letter opening and telephone tapping were widespread but not more so than under the last Labour Government. He announced that a Bill would be introduced to prohibit unauthorised interception of mail and telephone calls. Official interception will thus continue as before.

And so it goes on. What is depressing for British freethinkers is the support and/or lack of opposition by non-Conservative politicians for the erosion of Britain's civil liberty. In the unlikely event of a change of Government, it is extremely doubtful whether the United Kingdom would become a more liberal country. Even the most cursory examination of the record of the last Labour Government endorses that view. It seems Orwell was right about Ingsoc (English socialism) as well.

Also depressing for British freethinkers is the fact that the trend is home-grown. Other European States are becoming more, not less, liberal. No other country in the Common Market has video censorship. Only two (Ireland and Italy) still have film censorship, and one of those, Italy, is in the process of abolishing it. The three States attempting to join the Market (Portugal, Spain and Turkey) have ended film censorship. A law is being passed by the Dutch Parliament, with all-party support, formally removing the remaining nominal legal restraints on publications about adults for adults. Similar laws have been passed by most other Western countries. Greece and Switzerland being the latest so to do (in 1983).