

AT THE PRESS OF A BUTTON

Stephen Martin

THERE is no doubt that advances made in the design and production of computers and electronic devices for the collection and assessment of social data do conjure up a vision of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Even the most sanguine amongst us must have some fear of the consequences arising from the ease with which material relating to our private lives can be collected and stored by the civil authorities. But there is more to it than this, for equally disturbing is the vast degree of State control over industry, employment, housing land, national income, and social amenities.

In his book *Big Brother in Britain Today*,* Antony Thompson lays bare the hold which the State authorities have gained over the lives of citizens. As a preliminary, he instances the number of non-industrial civil servants which in 1900 was 150,000, today is half a million, and if we add armed forces, doctors, postmen and other services, is almost four million. With the inclusion of the employees of the nationalised industries, the total number of jobs provided by local and central governments he says, amounts to almost one in four of the entire national labour force. Industrial assets under direct State ownership and control are worth £10,500 million. Furthermore as the Government is a major customer and supplier of funds for development projects, privately owned firms are at the mercy of authoritarian policies. Control over housing and land has increased to the point where the State is one of the biggest landlords. In 1900 Government spending amounted to 15 per cent of national output, by 1968 it had risen to over 50 per cent.

In the chapter headed "The Rise of the Executive Coalition," Mr. Thompson gives many examples of the lack of parliamentary control over legislative decisions, and offers as an excuse the excessive burden of work falling on M.P.s, overlooking the fact that much of this work results from involvement in economic and social projects which should be outside the scope of Parliament.

As an example of devious executive action he quotes expenditure on nuclear deterrents of over £1,000 million from 1948 to 1963 "without Parliament being consulted in any way." In some respects the Civil Service has of necessity always been a "Big Brother" institution, but ministerial responsibility and the power therein is of far greater consequence. "Parliament has delegated enormous powers to ministers, they in turn delegate them to

civil servants, and all manner of councils, boards and officers." Furthermore this power "allows those receiving it to alter not only the original Act, but any other Act having a bearing upon it." Many of the bodies receiving such powers become law-making bodies in their own right. "In 1952 for every piece of legislation created within the House of Commons, nine were created outside."

Regarding secrecy, Mr. Thompson rightly claims that "of all the weapons in the armoury of totalitarianism, secrecy is one of the most powerful." The process of

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government is shrouded in secrecy and heavy penalties are imposed upon government servants who dare to throw any light on its workings. A rigid press censorship is imposed. Furthermore, ramifications of the Official Secrets Act are such that "if every occasion when this Act is broken were to be the subject of court proceedings, a tenth of the working population might find itself in gaol." Particularly worrying, says Mr. Thompson, is the prohibition on reportage of the proceedings, because "the principle that justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done can find true expression only when details of court proceedings are made available to a far wider public than can be physically present in the courtroom." The threat of Contempt of Court can be and is used as a weapon of secrecy. Although all documentary evidence eventually ends up in the Public Records Office, this does not mean that it is freely available to the public for certain restrictions are placed on publication. Furthermore, many records are destroyed.

Approximately a quarter of the entire cost of British administration is taken up in gathering and storing records of the personal life of the citizen. Until the advent of the computer, the multiplicity of the records and their fragmentation in departmental hands limited their use. Now arrangements are in hand for setting up a "data bank" which at the press of a button will give all the information required to plan and direct the lives of us all. Antony Thompson reports that in the State of California, so much personal information is available in computerised form, that the scheme has led to the demand for a new Bill of Rights. In Great Britain spokesmen for both major political parties have given their blessing to the idea of a government "Data Bank."

Legislation under which the police and security forces operate gives cause for criticism and for anxiety, particularly where political ideological conflict is involved. The number of indictable offences has greatly increased, the capital gains tax has provided the Inland Revenue with Big Brother inquisitional powers and, if the proposed Wealth Tax or Expenditure Tax is introduced, personal privacy will be further eroded. This and other revealing facets of the activities of the taxman are explored.

Freedom of speech and assembly has been undermined to a considerable extent. Recent legislation such as the Public Order Act and the Race Relations Act have given the police wide powers of action. Before 1934 they could

not readily intervene at public meetings, but "today they can quite openly turn up at a public meeting, even when held on private premises and remain when asked to leave. They can justify their presence on the grounds that *in their opinion* a breach of the peace was probable." Today, officials of the Post Office, Treasury or Ministry of Defence, and 10,677 others have the right *without warrant* to enter and search people's houses: moreover, contrary to popular belief, the police also possess this power. The Dangerous Drugs Act 1967, has provided almost unrestrained opportunity to search the home of anyone from "peer to pop star." As *The Times* said in March 1968, "No recent statute has opened the way to the abuse of civil liberties as widely as those concerning dangerous drugs. Only God and the police know how far that abuse has gone already. It is high time that somebody

else was let in on the secret."

Instances of telephone tapping and the use of hidden microphones, tracers, locators, miniature TV cameras, tape recorders and other electronic devices are dealt with in some detail in the book. There are also examples of the Post Office's equally objectionable practice of intercepting and opening mail, much of which is carried out on the authority of the Home Office and the Customs. All overseas telegrams are vetted, and private individuals are forbidden the use of unofficial coding of messages.

The private detective agency is today a thriving industry employed in industrial espionage and in personnel character assessment.

It is difficult to accept all Antony Thompson's prognostications in his glimpse into the future—indeed, he seems to finish up in the realms of science fiction, but, as he says: "The question is whether state planning can become an organic whole wherein everyone and everything can be quantified, evaluated and reduced to streams of electrons for the computers to handle."

The essence of humanity is self-respect and self-reliance, which will at some point in time rebel against any arbitrary and spurious order of society, but we do need to fear the present drift towards a corporate society if only because its inevitable overthrow will result in bloodshed and misery. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.