

Whitelaw outlines new stop and search powers

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From Peter Evans, Home Affairs Correspondent, Scarborough

Mr William Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, and the leadership of the Police Federation began preparing the ground yesterday for an increase in police powers.

Mr Whitelaw told the federation's annual conference in Scarborough that he had accepted the case made out by the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure for some increase.

"This is a major report, the most comprehensive on this subject for over a century", he said. "The decisions which it calls for are likely to set a framework for the investigation and prosecution of offences well into the next century."

Although Mr Whitelaw did not say so, a new Police Bill is expected to be announced in the Queen's Speech in the autumn.

He told the conference he hoped to introduce legislation to rationalize the powers of stop and search for stolen goods. He wants new powers for police to stop and search people for offensive weapons and to search premises for evidence in difficult cases.

But he accepted the commission's insistence on the need to strike a balance between the interests of the community in bringing offenders to justice and the rights of individuals suspected of crime. Safeguards which apply to the exercise of such powers must be put on a stronger footing

"It is in the interests of both police and public to give greater clarity and certainty to the law", Mr Whitelaw said.

He was answering the call by Mr James Jardine, federation chairman to maintain the balance "by implementing those sensible proposals of the Royal commission which would give the police officer some greater power to do his job".

Mr Jardine said the usual nonsense was being talked about drastic increases in police powers.

"These proposals do not represent a sinister extension of police leading to a police state". They were he told Mr Whitelaw needed to help police officers to do their job out on the streets on the most difficult circumstances.

Mr Whitelaw added that he intended to press ahead with legislation on the handling of complaints against the police as soon as possible after the publication of findings by the Home Affairs Select Committee.

He also sought to allay police anxieties that punishments for violence were inadequate.

Mr Jardine told him: "I am not impressed when young thugs who batter elderly people to death for the sake of a few pounds receive sentences which mean they will be out on the streets again within a matter of two or three years."

"The rise in violent crime in general is something which should cause us all great concern. We are not at all satisfied that all judges and magistrates are taking the view that violent crime must be punished and that the main consideration must be the protection of the public."

About 15,000 police officers were assaulted every year. In only a handful of cases did their assailants go to prison. There was a time when the police felt they were protected by the courts. Mr Jardine added: "Sadly, I have to say that there are many areas of the country where that belief is no longer justified".

Mr Whitelaw was greeted with groans of dissent when he said the courts was greeted with groans of dissent when he said the courts made use of already stiff powers.

He said: "The public needs the protection which long sentences of imprisonment can give from serious and violent offenders". But much of crime was less serious and best dealt with by short sentences or other means.