

Brother is watching you



In his classic novel 1984, George Orwell wrote of an era of the future - an era of total elimination of private life, when everyone's every action would be under the careful surveillance of "the Party", personified by the legendary leader "Big Brother". Hidden microphones and television screens would record people's words and movements, so every word and action had to be a carefully guarded one.

All this, of course, would be done in the name of protection of the very human rights it was denying. The state would be acting in "the best interests of the people". Surveillance of subversives would prevent any opposition to the state. Even thinking in any way opposed to the state policies, would be a crime. All this in the year 1984.

And 1984, says Philip West, is approaching on schedule. Sound ridiculous? Read on. And if you say, "That's the United States, not Canada", remember what close neighbours we are. Remember the War Measures Act of 1970 when citizens could be arrested without charge and when the press was stifled. Recall discussions at the federal government level of the idea of having identification cards that all citizens would be required to carry at all times.

It's all very frightening.

ained in 264 million police records, 323 million mental case histories, 279 million psychiatric dossiers, and 100 million credit files. The justice department is now attempting to pass a law enabling federal law enforcement officers to check identification of "suspects" by "fingerprints, palmprints, footprints, measurements, blood specimens, urine specimens, saliva samples, photographs, and line-ups."

And, according to Washington Post, the FBI maintains an "agitator index" containing the names of at least 10 thousand so-called "potential subversives" to be used as a basis for "federal arrest in the event of a war or an "internal security emergency". A new computer intelligence system, planned for full operation in 1975, will give law enforcement officers the capacity to determine instantly the suspects subversive rating during an "internal security emergency".

American citizens are checked in any case by the utterly necessary Social Security number, without which the resident is not a proper citizen. No bank account can be opened without one, no employment can be taken, and even infants leaving off their parents' welfare payments are required to wear one.

Television surveillance

"With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen could be kept for 24 hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda." - 1984

systems have been installed in a number of US cities to televise "suspicious persons". In St Jose, California; Hoboken, New Jersey; and Mount Vernon, New York television cameras located in the cities' business centres can discern a man sized object in extreme darkness from more than half a mile away.

Illegal telephone tapping is widespread and undertaken by private concerns (such as Bell Telephone itself) as well as government departments (as proven by the many charges dismissed because of illegal wiretaps). Grocery stores fingerprint customers to ensure their cheques won't bounce.

Except for the latter, none of these practices is more openly chilling than the sight of three or four helicopters in the night sky, their spotlights sweeping the streets. Airborne surveillance has undergone national proliferation since the success of a trial project in Los Angeles in 1966.

Seventeen police departments in the area now use helicopters equipped with spotlights and public address systems, and the latest ones ordered by the nearby San Fernando sheriff will also be armed with submachine guns.

The environment suffers as well as the people. In Huntington Beach, near Los Angeles, where the cops use straight winged aircraft, a long line of palm trees have been chopped on top to permit adequate airborne surveillance.

The helicopters are supported in Los Angeles by ground police armed with machine guns and automatic rifles. And part of their psychology includes what is unassumingly titled the Basic Car Plan.

Simply explained, it ali-

enates one strata of society and uses it as informants against another lifestyle. Police interpretation: "If someone disturbs you in your neighbourhood, chances are he's disturbing everyone else too, and is therefore breaking the law."

In Indiana, this develops into a plan for a neighbourhood spy network. This proposal calls for hiring "rumour monitors" to report "possible dangerous situations" to "city officials". Said the director of the agency proposing the scheme: "We might not be able to trust our neighbours after a while. But as long as we're not doing anything wrong, we shouldn't have to worry, I don't suppose."

"It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children. And with good reason, for hardly a week passed in which The Times did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak - 'child hero' was the phrase generally used - had overheard some compromising remark and denounced its parents to the Thought Police." - 1984

Helicopter use is not confined to cities. In many states, speeding drivers on the nationwide network of defense department interstate freeways, are clocked from the air over marked distances and highway patrol cars are dispatched to ticket the offending drivers.

The cops are happy with the results of helicopter use. Sergeant Danny Shea of the Los Angeles Police Department says the aircraft have allowed elimination of decoy squads (to encourage and then trap victims) while

still reducing the number of muggings and rapings.

"If we spot something going on, we just flash the light on and take a look. Some of the guys don't like that too much, but the girls always smile and wave so we'll know everything's all right."

A more intellectual colleague extolled airborne surveillance as "a tremendous psychological tool - a sort of silent persuader."

"A party member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police. Even when he is alone, he can never be sure that he is alone. Wherever he may be, asleep or awake, working or resting, in his bath or in bed, he can be inspected without warning and without knowing that he is being inspected." - 1984

But the silencer is none too effective and the noise of the choppers is still a problem.

Helicopter manufacturers Bell and Hughes have promised police quieter aircraft within a few months to eliminate protests like the one from more than 1000 residents in Newport Beach, complaining about the noise. (In response, the city council promised to consider use of higher altitudes.)

At the same time, police in Los Angeles and in cities like Washington DC and San Diego, California are issuing propaganda to sell residents on helicopter noise as "the sound of security".

Sergeant Shea has a much more simple defense: "Just think," he says, "if the good people don't like the noise a police helicopter makes, imagine how it scares the hell out of the bad guys."