It is increasingly apparent that sections of the Conservative government have a vision of a mixed economy of criminal justice which necessitates the state absolving itself of its traditional role as the natural provider of law and order.

McLaughlin and Muncie (1994)

It is clear that public and private domains relate to each other in a complex, dynamic, contradictory, and sometimes ambiguous way.

Johnston (1992)

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the involvement of the private security sector in crime control activities in Britain has been growing at such a pace there was even the suggestion that the Association of Chief Police Officers may copyright the name ‘police’ to prevent private security companies using the trademark. The Home Office talked of ‘an increasing interface’ between the public and private sector in a consultative document preceding its Review of Core and Ancillary Tasks in Policing. The Independent Committee of Inquiry into the Role and Responsibilities of the Police (1994) outlined the reform agenda of ‘a reformed public model’ of policing, potentially in competition with unsworn patrols or designated patrol officers. A special House of Commons Select Committee was set up to conduct a parliamentary Inquiry into the Private Security Industry, and the Report’s (1995) recommendations of registration and licensing of the contract guarding sector are currently being studied by the government. If we want proof that the dimensions of the public-private field of play are complex and fluid, we need look no further than the current developments in the area of policing and the reform agenda being laid out for a mixed economy of law and order for the twenty-first century.

On the beat we are also witnessing contradictory developments. Contrary to initial fore-
casts by the police staff associations, police authorities in England and Wales are budgeting for a net increase of officers and civilian staff despite Government-imposed budget restrictions (Police Review, 3 March 1995, p. 11). Yet at the same time, it is an almost commonplace argument that the public demand for policing greatly outstrips its supply (see, for instance, Jolowicz and Read, 1994; Audit Commission, 1993; Independent Committee of Inquiry into the Role and Responsibilities of the Police, 1994). In line with the official rhetoric that ‘we’re all in the business of tackling crime’ (Home Office, 1994, p. 2), local authorities, community self-help and private security firms have stepped in to fill the void. Whilst the increasing involvement of the private security sector in crime control activities has been condemned by some police staff association representatives as ‘policing on the cheap’, the relationship between the public police, the local authorities and the private sector is far from straight-forward. Indeed, many cash-strapped police force areas have yielded to the market forces, accepting commercial sponsorship and money from local authorities to fund extra officers under the Police and Magistrates Court Act 1994.2

What these developments perhaps demonstrate is a ‘policing division of labour’ that is ever-increasing in its complexity. As many commentators have pointed out (cf. South, 1984, 1987, 1994; Johnston, 1992; Hoogenboom, 1991), the division of policing labour in societies in North America, the United Kingdom and across Europe has always been and remains a mixed and changing one. In different historical periods, the form in which that labour is provided involves different combinations of public and private agents. Whilst what constitutes ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the policing complex is by no means straightforward, it is clear that the expansion of the so-called ‘payment-for-protection’ services has important international significance. Already, the major security companies which offer services in one part of Europe are often the same companies (or owned by the same parent company) as those offering services in other parts of Europe (South, 1994; Johnston, 1992). With the general developments of the post-Maastricht EU free-market policy and pan-European police intelligence and cooperation (Dorn, 1995), the opening of what will literally be a ‘Euromarket in policing’ may well become a reality. As South (1994, p. 229) has written,

Public police forces could seek to sell their particular areas of expertise to other forces across domestic borders, e.g. relating to terrorism, drugs, or fraud (Dorn, 1993). Private security companies will certainly seek to capitalise on such an open market. Of particular significance will be the question of whether the public-private divide persists in competition or whether the divide (already permeable) begins to dissolve in co-operative arrangements and initiatives.

In Britain one of the areas in which changes in the policing division of labour are currently gathering pace is in drug control at the retail level of the drug market, i.e., what some have termed ‘low level drug enforcement’ (Dorn and Murji, 1992; see also Lee, 1995). ‘Low level’ is taken to mean the suppliers and users at the retail level of the drug market, with police reorganization and intelligence development broadly mirroring the perceived hierarchy of the market (Dorn et al, 1991; Wright et al, 1993). Against a background of the Advisory

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2. Corby Borough Council, for instance, has become the first to pay for four extra police officers (‘wearing a borough coat-of-arms tie pin’) on specific beats under the new legislative arrangements (Police Review, 12 May 1995, p. 9).