

Greenham Road.

It was on this footpath that my constituent was surprised by the gun-toting American policewoman. But our own authorities are known to stretch the bounds of law on carrying weapons. Watching an eviction at a peace camp recently I asked the chief commons warden why he kept a fearsome wooden club in the cab of his waste-muncher. 'To hold the accelerator down' was his first answer. When I cast doubt on this he added it was for use against the peace women's dogs. 'He threatens us with it' said the women who were standing by.

And this is all in the name of defending our democracy and our sovereignty. □

*Trevor Brown is a Liberal County Councillor in Berkshire.*

GREENHAM

*W Plans*

## FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WIRE

### TREVOR BROWN on the threat to residents around the US air base

WE NOW KNOW what plans the government has for who will be in charge during a war-time emergency. What I have found it much harder to establish, as a Liberal county councillor for the Greenham Common area, is who exercises authority during peace-time, and what the limits on USAF powers are.

My most recent case, where I still haven't had satisfactory answers from the County Secretary or RAF Commander at Greenham, was raised by a constituent when I was walking with her down a public footpath which comes out at Greenham Lodge Lake. The path is some distance from the Greenham perimeter fence. But it was being patrolled by a USAF policewoman carrying a gun. To my constituent's query about the gun, the policewoman replied 'Gee, it's only a 38.'

The County Secretary for Berkshire is investigating. Wing Commander Marsh of the RAF assures me that the path is on MoD property, as is the Bishop's Green housing estate where USAF personnel live, the publicly dedicated Bury's Bank Road along the North of the base and even New Road, the main access road from Newbury through the large private estate to the North.

I had assumed that while the USAF law enforcement officers had authority inside the fence, that authority did not extend to land outside, which British civilians use. But, according to the Commander, they derive such authority from the Visiting Forces Act which allows any one of 33 named foreign armed forces to act as if 'the force or headquarters formed part of the home forces.'

Quite apart from the tendentious issues of authority over land used by the public, we would not expect our home forces to patrol outside bases carrying sidearms. Nor would we expect members of any of the other 32 forces covered by the act, including Luxembourg, Australia, Trinidad and Tobago and Sierra Leone, to patrol outside a base carrying guns.

Confusion over who exercises authority in the area, over whom and how goes back at least ten years. In 1975, while drawing up the first Berkshire Structure Plans, there were so many central government restrictions around Greenham and the munitions base at Welford that I suggested setting up a Liaison Committee to bring together central and local government. My motion received all-party support, but the committee was born a weak and frail thing because Whitehall mandarins refused to take part.

So although the local committee worked hard, central government decided, for instance, to base squadrons of F-111 bombers at Greenham in 1977 without being confused by local knowledge. Important training programmes then had to be reduced by 80 per cent to avoid disrupting the schools they belatedly discovered lay under the flightpaths.

The 1981 announcement that Greenham was to be a cruise missile base was also made without the benefit of local authority comment on the effects on housing, highways, and policing. It took a year to convince the colonel-studded Thames Valley Police Authority that an important military base would be better protected by an adequate perimeter fence than by a police officer every ten yards. It took another year to convince the Home Office and MoD. When a better fence was at last erected the policing bill dropped from £3½m a year to a figure not identifiable in the accounts.

Perhaps the delay may have been related to

the story told me by a Tory voter that his complaints to the MP about peace women had eventually produced the reply that 'Michael preferred them to stay' as they were an electoral asset. Support for this view came when the military authorities opened up the previously unused Pyle Hill Gate in late 1983. The peace women promptly established their 'Blue Gate' camp, which for the first time brought a camp close to residential houses. My suggestion at the Liaison Committee that closure of this gate would probably remove this annoyance to local residents drew a 'Good idea' reply from both the RAF and USAF commanders. But we were later told it had been vetoed 'at the highest level.' My comment that this could only mean Downing Street was received in glum silence by the officers.

The 1985 county election campaign was ferocious, with my Tory opponents making mis-statements on a scale that revealed their anxiety about critical voices on local democracy. My reminder to the electorate that the Tory Structure Plan proposals included an additional 500 houses at Greenham with no hope of adequate road access led to a Conservative press release claiming a reduction to 200. This figure was then denied by the Berkshire County Secretary. Earlier my Tory opponent had supported my suggestion that a possible compromise on the peace camps was to provide a 'dissent area' where the women would pay their way, not annoy local residents, and be able to keep clean and tidy. It was therefore a shock when Conservative election literature alleged that the Liberals wanted to give women a free camp on the rates. But it did give me the opportunity in my thank-you speech after the result to congratulate the Labour candidate on a clean and honest campaign.

BUT REPRESENTING the ratepayers of Greenham was made very difficult when the County Chairman, now supported by a larger Conservative majority than before, replaced me on the Greenham Liaison Committee by a Conservative councillor, hitherto mainly known for his support for NATO and for being the nephew of ex-cabinet minister James Prior. The Chairman defended his choice by saying we both had constituencies 'adjacent to the airbase.' A simple check with the County Secretariat would have told him that the other councillor's constituency was 'nowhere near.'

However, attending the Greenham Parish Council as their county councillor was an eye-opener about what they saw as the main nuisances in the parish. The media-fed national view is of hundreds of peace women depositing faeces and sanitary towels in citizens' gardens. But a priority order of nuisances would probably put USAF staff at the top of the list for playing giant stereos at 3 am for some years. 'If they can't find the volume controls on those, can they find the right buttons on those other things?' said one irate parish councillor.

Traffic problems caused by the base on ancient country roads distress both the police and the County Surveyor. Not that there's a shortage of money in the area, with \$250m being spent on leisure and amenity facilities. The parish council has complained that a USAF water-tower and children's playground have been built across a public footpath. But we cannot afford a much needed lay-by in