What could not be reported in the official files?

The Scandinavian countries are much admired all over the world for their enlightened social policies.

Sweden has evolved an excellent system for protecting the individual citizen from high-handed or incompetent public officers.

The system has worked so well that it has been adopted in other countries too.

The Swedes were the first to recognize that public officials like civil servants, police officers, health inspectors, or tax collectors can make mistakes or act overzealously in the belief that they are serving the public.

As long ago as 1809, the Swedish Parliament introduced a scheme to safeguard the interests of the individual.

A parliamentary committee representing all political parties appoints a person who is suitably qualified to investigate private grievances against the State.

The official title of the person is 'Justitieombudsman', but the Swedes commonly refer to him as the 'J.O.' or 'Ombudsman'.

The Ombudsman is not subject to political pressure.

He investigates complaints large and small that come to him from all levels of society.

As complaints must be made in writing, the Ombudsman receives an average of 1,200 letters a year.

He has eight lawyer assistants to help him and he examines every single letter in detail.

There is nothing secretive about the Ombudsman's work, for his correspondence is open to public inspection.

If a citizen's complaint is justified, the Ombudsman will act on his behalf.

The action he takes varies according to the nature of the complaint.

He may gently reprimand an official or even suggest to parliament that a law be altered.

The following case is a typical example of the Ombudsman's work.

A foreigner living in a Swedish village wrote to the Ombudsman complaining that he had been ill-treated by the police, simply because he was a foreigner.

The Ombudsman immediately wrote to the Chief of Police in the district asking him to send a record of the case.

There was nothing in the record to show that the foreigner's complaint was justified and the Chief of Police strongly denied the accusation.

It was impossible for the Ombudsman to take action, but when he received a similar complaint from another foreigner in the same village, he immediately sent one of his lawyers to investigate the matter.

The lawyer ascertained that a policeman had indeed dealt roughly with foreigners on several occasions.

The fact that the policeman was prejudiced against foreigners could not be recorded in the official files.

It was only possible for the Ombudsman to find this out by sending one of his representatives to check the facts.

The policeman in question was severely reprimanded and was informed that if any further complaints were lodged against him, he would be prosecuted.

The Ombudsman's prompt action at once put an end to an unpleasant practice which might have gone unnoticed.

On receiving a complaint from a foreigner about police ill-treatment, the Ombudsman wrote to the Chief of Police asking for a record of the case.

As there was no official record and the Chief denied the accusation, no action was possible.

But when there was another similar complaint, the Ombudsman sent a lawyer to investigate.

He ascertained the truth of the accusations, the policeman was severely reprimanded and warned that if there were further complaints, he would be prosecuted.

In Britain, people have different attitudes to the police.

Most people generally appreciate them and the job they do, although there are certain people (including criminals, of course) who do not believe that the police should have the power that they do.

What does a policeman actually do?

It is not an easy job to describe.

After all, a policeman has a number of jobs in one.

A policeman often has to control traffic, either on foot in the centre of a town, or in a police car on the roads.

Indeed, in Britain, he might be in the Traffic Police and spend all, or a lot of, his time driving up and down main roads and motorways.

A traffic policeman has to help keep the traffic moving, stop speeding motorists, and help when there is an accident.

A policeman has to help keep the peace, too.

If there is a fight or some other disturbance, we expect the police to come and assess the situation and restore order.

And they often have to deal with situations at great risk to themselves and their own safety.

We expect the police to solve crimes, of course, so an ordinary policeman, even if he is not a detective, will often have to help look for and arrest criminals.

And who do we call when there is an emergency air crash, a fire, a road accident, or a burglary?

We call the police.

So, a policeman has to be prepared to face any unpleasant emergency that may happen in the modern world.

The police do an absolutely necessary job, they do it extremely well and I support them, but I do not envy policemen.

I do not think that I could ever do the job of a policeman.

In what respect does the institution of Ombudsman reflect enlightened social policy? It admits the possibility of official oppression and guards against it.

The authority exercised by the Ombudsman is impartial in that his decisions are not influenced by any one political party.

What happened to the policeman in the case? He was officially rebuked.

The case taken as an example of the Ombudsman's work shows that the Ombudsman cannot take action if he lacks supporting evidence.

It was the Swedes who first recognized that public officials, like civil servants, can make mistakes.

If a citizen has a justified complaint, the Ombudsman will act on his behalf.

If the Ombudsman hadn't acted promptly, this unpleasant practice might have continued.

The action he takes depends on the nature of the complaint.

The Chief of Police in the district firmly denied the accusation.