


When chiefs fall out

 A recent edition of the Home Office spin sheet *Police Briefing* reported on a gathering at which Home Secretary Charles Clarke and police minister Hazel Blears gave pep talks to chief constables and chairmen of police authorities, or as the headline writer preferred to describe them – “chiefs and chairs”. This created in my mind a picture of tribal chiefs addressing their thrones, but in reality the

only chairs that interest our current chief constables are musical ones.


Some chief officers are doing a passable imitation of Kilkenny cats fighting inside a sack in a river. Take the example supplied by Mr Alastair McWhirter, chief constable of Suffolk Constabulary, who is horrified by the thought of joining Cambridgeshire in a new East Anglia ‘superforce’. He told Ipswich Council that, whilst his

force and Norfolk were high performers, Cambridgeshire Police are the “Billy no mates” of the policing world, and no one wants to be linked with them. Following the appalling Soham murders, Cambridgeshire had to take a media bashing over its vetting procedures, and the then chief constable’s individual performance was open to question. Such public denigration of an entire force by the chief constable of another force is unacceptable. With commendable restraint, Cambridgeshire’s acting chief constable, Julie Spence, has reminded Mr McWhirter that the force’s overall performance has “dramatically improved” since then.


The incident underlines Jedd’s superb “Star Wars” cartoon in *Police* last month, depicting Charles Clarke dangling the carrot of becoming the new force supremo to a quartet of ACPO hopefuls. Chiefs are busy briefing their local politicians and advancing their claims to the top jobs. The same MPs who censured chief officers for lobbying for the




Tony Judge, founder of *Police* magazine in 1968


90-days limit for detaining suspected terrorists, are now happily quoting their local chief’s views on restructuring. Some forty years ago, in the first wave of force mergers, a very wise Police Federation general secretary, Arthur Evans, urged local branch boards to have nothing to do with parish pump politicking, and the same should apply in  the current situation.


One PC’s Boer War

 I wonder what Reading’s answer to Dirty Harry would make of another foreigner who has taken advantage of recent legislation to join the British police? In Nottingham, South African PC Diederik Coetzee has been awarded a citation for making – wait for it – 309 arrests in the first ten months of 2005. It works out at six a day. More, in


fact, if account is taken of weekly and annual leave. It would be fascinating to know how such a phenomenal achievement ties in with all the bureaucracy of arrest procedures, case preparation and court attendance. We are told that the 48-year-old Afrikaner pursues fleeing motorised criminals on his pushbike. When does he  pause for breath?

Gun law

 PC Ben Johnson of Thames Valley Police has informed the media that he is contemplating resigning after his chief constable, Peter Neyroud, rejected his request to be allowed to carry a gun on duty in Reading. Ben is an American who, when he served in a police force in Texas, had a Glock 22 pistol, a 12-bore shotgun and an AR15 semi-automatic rifle to bolster his confidence while performing street duty. He says he is tired of seeing his British colleagues die when, if they had been better trained and equipped, they would have a fighting chance of survival, and he claims that he has disarmed robbers in the US in precisely the

same circumstances that faced PC Sharon Beshenivsky in Bradford. He accepts that the US murder rate is 17 times that of Britain’s, and that far more police officers are killed by guns in America than in this country. Ben’s colleagues may find it strange that, holding such views, he still joined an English force, and then after three years asked for special dispensation. While he reflects on his future during his current career break, he might care to know that in the sixty years since World War II, just one police officer has been shot dead in the Reading area. What would be the corresponding figure for a comparable town in Texas? 

The female of the species

 In her recent Longford Lecture, Baroness Hale, the only female Law Lord, made some powerful points about the disturbing rise in the number of women in gaol. About 5,000 women are locked-up at this time, compared with less than 1,000 in 1960. The chance of a woman being gaoled by a Crown Court has doubled in the last 15 years. Stephen Shaw, of the Prison Reform Trust, claims that jailing women with drugs or mental problems is ineffective. Lady Hale is not the first senior judge to call attention to the problem of what society should do with female offenders, but is the increase in women in prison solely due to

inadequate alternatives, or, as she suggests, to bias in the system? Am I mistaken in thinking that women today are far more likely to be involved in serious and violent crime than they used to be? Only last month, a woman who blatantly and cunningly milked the social security system for nearly £200,000 while living in luxury, escaped with a suspended sentence because she had to care for her children. At what point in the cycle of multiple court appearances by a shoplifter, is a court left with no alternative to a custodial sentence? Would special treatment for female offenders amount to unfair discrimination against males? 