


THE WORST IN THE WORLD?

 With crime and disorder certain to be a hot election issue, a report from the Civitas think tank* has given critics of British policing plenty of ammunition. Headlines like: "The worst police in the developed world" make uncomfortable reading.

The authors of the report compare the performance of the British police with the USA, France and Germany. They praise the achievements of the New York police over the past ten years, and they say that Britain's crime problems will not be solved until the police adopt the New York model.

In his round of farewell media interviews, Sir John Stevens, retiring commissioner of the Met, rejected unfavourable comparisons between the Met and NYPD, stressing that London has around 10,000 fewer police. But this is not the sole reason why New York, which used to have five times as many street robberies as London, now has only two thirds as many. The police numbers argument, if overstated, looks more like an alibi than an explanation. The number of police officers is less significant than how they are deployed. To be fair, the Met has made imaginative use of the recent generous increase in resources, with the safer neighbourhood teams beginning to make an impact on crime and disorder.

However, no discussion of British police performance can ignore the influence of politicians and the great and the good. Lord Justice Scarman died recently. The obituaries praised his report on the Brixton riots. He put nearly all the blame on heavy handed policing. He condemned

"Operation Swamp", a police operation of the type that New York's police are praised for. Since then, other inquiries from Macpherson to Morris have covered the same ground. Over the past twenty years, inner city officers have become chary of exercising their legal powers in the streets, with predictable consequences. As Sir John Stevens admitted to the Morris Inquiry, senior police officers have shown the same reluctance to take decisive action in racially sensitive matters. Given this collective decline in self-confidence, it is hard to disagree with the Civitas report's contention that the service has often preferred conciliation to confrontation.

While our police in the inner cities were treading on eggshells, NYPD began a sustained and ultimately triumphant campaign to win back the streets. They too had conciliated and compromised, until huge swathes of the city became no-go areas. New York Mayor Giuliani, and police chief Bill Bratton changed all that.

Bratton inherited a demoralised and demotivated force. He made it pull itself together. They "took back the streets" and swept away the pimps and drug dealers and graffiti-daubers. They went after the armed street gangs. This was policing with attitude. When the liberals howled their protests, and when frustrated criminals rioted, the authorities didn't blame the police, they backed them. So did the courts. In America today, prison sentences mean what they say and three-time felons go down for life, literally. The plummeting crime rates in nearly every major US city are attributable to two factors: mas-



Tony Judge, founder of *Police* magazine in 1968

sive investment in policing, and keeping felons out of circulation. The American answer to a prison population above two millions and rising is not early release; they are building more prisons. In Britain, the same pundits who complain about overcrowded prisons lambast the police as incompetents.

Many British senior officers and leading politicians have made the pilgrimage to New York to see the police miracle at work. Giuliani and Bratton have been here to tell us how they did it. Chief officers admire the achievement, but most say the same methods are not suited to Britain. The service is quite capable of emulating NYPD but the prospects of getting the same level of support from the politicians and the criminal justice system are slight. The comparatively modest measures outlined in the Queen's Speech have run into fierce opposition from the judges

and the lawyers lobby in Parliament.

Even when Parliament passes a tough law, judges find a way round it. In 1977, the Criminal Sentencing Act included a clause that those convicted of domestic burglary on a third occasion would receive a mandatory sentence of three years. The Labour Opposition, backed by the Law Lords, sponsored a successful amendment to allow judges to pass a lesser sentence where they thought a mandatory sentence inappropriate. Since then, just fifteen burglars, out of the hundreds eligible, have received a mandatory sentence. If and when our Criminal Justice system embraces the same priorities that apply in New York, we can make comparisons on a level playing field.

* Culture and Crime Norman Dennis & George Erdos (Civitas) £14.50

