

Political puppets?

As a General Election looms, Tony Judge traces the creeping politicisation of the British police service.

As, with barely concealed indifference, the nation awaits the imminent election, the three major parties are vying to be seen as The Bobby's Best Friend. Crime and disorder have been near the top of each party's agenda for months, with each claiming that it alone has the right solutions.

There was a time when policing had nothing to do with politics. An unspoken consensus

placed the police, along with judges, the armed forces and the civil service, above the party squabbles. Not any longer. Home Secretaries, and those eager to replace them, see themselves as Supreme Commanders, directing their blue legions in a total war against the forces of evil. A prime example of this assumption of political direction was the threat by David Blunkett in 2003, to fire Sir John Stevens unless he achieved an immediate reduction

of street crime in London.

The historic 1964 Police Act, which established the tripartite system of police control, was not the creation of the Conservative government. It enacted the proposals of the Royal Commission on the police service and it went through Parliament with the general consent of the Opposition.

This followed the precedents of all Police Bills since 1829.

Police pitted against public

The two most recent police "reforms": the Police and

Magistrates Courts Act 1994, and the current SOCA and Police Bill represent the partisan view of the party in power. This means, that when new governments take over, they are entitled to reshape policing to fit their views. Stability goes out of the window.

The politicisation of policing dates from the 1970s, when the



service became embroiled in events with strong political overtones. Nation-wide strikes, involving mass picketing, intimidation and rioting, brought the police into violent confrontations with pickets. The Tory government of the time, led by Edward Heath, was brought down by the miners. Social and racial tensions, fomented by extremists of the right and the left, erupted into pitched battles between rioters and police in the inner cities. With the arrival of Margaret Thatcher and her law and order agenda, the police who stood up to the flying pickets and petrol bombers, came to be known by the Left as Maggie's Boot Boys.

During the same era, the Federation found itself in direct conflict with a cornerstone of the Labour government's wages policy.

State of war

Its campaign to secure a pay increase in defiance of the government, led to the Federation walking out of the negotiating body and giving Home Secretary Merlyn Rees the silent treatment at its annual conference.

A furious James Callaghan, himself a former hero to the Federation, vowed that while he was Prime Minister no Labour minister would ever talk to the Federation in person. Following the Edmund Davies Report, the Tory opposition pledged to implement the large pay award recommended by the Inquiry in full, rather than phasing it, a pledge that must have persuaded thousands of police officers to vote Tory in 1979.

When Labour went into Opposition in 1979 its left-wingers gained control and the police were targeted, because they were "doing the Tories' dirty work". There is today a sizeable group of Labour personalities who would rather not be reminded of their attitudes towards the police in the early 1980s. All the police authorities of the provincial Metropolitan forces were Labour controlled, and during the bitter miners' strike in 1984 a state of war existed between chief constables and councillors, who sought

to veto the deployment of Police Support Units and the purchase of plastic bullets.

At this time, the Labour dominated Greater London Council, led by Ken Livingstone, went to town on the Metropolitan Police. Although it was not a police authority, the GLC's Police Committee, of which Paul Boateng was the chairman, issued a stream of allegations of police racism and other abuses. It took up every cause, such as the campaign to prove that the police were covering up the New Cross Fire, in which several young people died. It spent £250,000 of its ratepayers' money to oppose the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, because it increased police powers to deal with suspects.

Following the GLC's lead, many other left wing councils set up their Police Committees with identical agendas. Their efforts culminated in the 1984 Labour Conference adopting a motion that committed a future Labour government to abolishing the Special Branch and surveillance of trades unionists and others; the disbanding of the Special Patrol Group, and the promotion of senior officers by police authorities. The Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, promptly announced that these measures would not be in the programme of any administration led by him.

A bitter taste

During the miners' strike, the tactics of the Conservative government came closer to political interference with policing than ever before. The government declined to use its own legislation, designed to outlaw mass picketing and intimidation. The Energy Minister, Peter Walker, preferred to leave it to the police to make arrests and bring prosecutions, most of which collapsed. The



interception of pickets many miles away from coalfields, and committing large numbers of police to escort lone strikebreakers to work, raised questions about police impartiality. Several chief constables expressed their fears about police tactics and their possible effect on future relations between the police and the public in mining areas. Other chief officers were worried about the consequences of such a bitter experience on officers who would be expected to resume their normal community policing roles after the strike. The situation was not helped by a furious TV outburst by the late Sir

Charles MacLachlan, that year's ACPO President and, as such, the man in charge of the nationwide police operation. He said that his Nottinghamshire force was concerned only with the non-striking miners belonging to a rival union – "the only miners who matter".

What could be termed the creeping politicisation of the police has not been a one-way street. The Federation realised that it could not give voice to the views of the rank and file without getting involved in the political process, notably when it has called on several occasions for the restoration of capital punishment



for the murderers of police officers. When in the mid-1950s the Federation invited Jim Callaghan to be their first consultant, the chief officers complained to the Home Secretary, Rab Butler, that this was getting too close to involvement in politics. Butler was quite happy with the arrangement, because the Federation wanted Callaghan for his skills as a former trade union negotiator, and he rarely spoke in the House on police related matters. His successor, the Tory MP Eldon Griffiths, had no such inhibitions and relished attacking the Labour opposition for its "anti-police" stance. A

Federation statement on crime, published just before the 1979 election, was written by Griffiths and closely echoed the Tory manifesto. This caused a rift between the Federation and the Labour leadership that took years to heal. Today, whilst carefully keeping the parties at arms length, the Federation contributes its views on current issues, such as the recent row over licensing hours, without worrying about the political implications.

A single voice

ACPO in recent years, has deliberately turned itself into a far more

political, and therefore more influential, organisation. Its members came late to the realisation that they needed a single voice to speak on their behalf. Before that, the attitude of too many chief officers was that they were not going to have their policies decided by ACPO. It is no coincidence that the new approach followed the significant changes in the constitutional position of chief officers brought about by the Police and Magistrates Courts Act. They are now more accountable and less job-protected than they were, as several unfortunate chiefs have discovered.

Allowing for the odd maverick who chooses to stand outside the consensus, as in the case of speed cameras, the chiefs are now content to enjoy the advantages of speaking with one voice.

All ACPO has to learn now is how to be more subtle in its dealings with Government. A case in point is the row over licensing hours, where it was the complaints of individual chief officers about the problems of rowdiness at "chucking out time" that persuaded the Government to propose greater flexibility, only to find the same chiefs lining up to condemn the changes.

Chief officers have been willing to contribute to current political and social controversies. In the 1980s, Sir James Anderton, chief constable of Greater Manchester Police and John Alderson, chief constable of Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, speaking from diametrically opposed political viewpoints, plunged into the debate with dramatic effect. Mr Alderson, who saw himself as the father of community policing, carefully planned intervention in the Scarman Inquiry into the Brixton riots, timed for the same day that

Sir David Macnee, the Met commissioner, gave evidence to the inquiry, a coup that caused huge resentment in the Metropolitan Police. He indicated that it was a lack of community policing in the Met that helped fuel the fire of violence in Brixton.

However, Sir Anderton's pronouncements, on the other hand, in relation to public morality, especially in relation to Aids and gays, brought furious demands for his dismissal. Sir Anderton and his Merseyside neighbour, the late Sir Ken Oxford, fought bitter public battles with their left-dominated police authorities, although it was the local Tories who, when they were in power, wanted Willie Whitelaw to sack Oxford.

Future political control

Today, there are chief constables who have plenty to say on every social issue involving crime or policing. Some have to face accusations of being over politically correct. While it is refreshing to hear them speaking out, this is tempered by the thought that chief officers who take an opposing view might feel inhibited about voicing their more conservative opinions.

How much further politicisation faces the service? The current Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill is unlikely to be the end of the story. The service awaits the outcome of a series of inquiries, and the fall out from the Richard and Morris Inquiries. There is a distinct probability that this Government will seize on these to justify even more drastic changes than those presently in train. Last month saw the publication of a damning report on what went wrong in Soham. The future of smaller police forces is likely to be revealed later this year. All the trends point to more, not less, government intervention, with much tighter controls over the freedom of chief officers to run their forces according to their wishes, not those laid down by Whitehall. The more that Home Secretaries seek to command, rather than advise, the less self-confident and effective will policing become.

