


Centre stage

 Waiting, probably fidgeting, in the shadow of Sir John Stevens, Sir Ian Blair always had his own ideas, but as he freely admits 'as a deputy you never out-commission the commissioner'. Now, after 30 years in the service he steps out from behind the shadows, into the glare of the spotlight that always shines on the role *The Sun* newspaper has dubbed 'Britain's top cop'.

As an aspiring actor in his younger years, it is not the first time he will have experienced his performance being scrutinised by those around him, but at 52, it was his birthday last month, he will definitely be taking the leading role.

Before speaking to Sir Ian, I ask a few police officers what they think of him: 'he is a politically correct copper; a Blairite; has his principles; he would not be where he is if he did not know how to play the politicians game; he is his own man and a man who has his own ideas about the future of the service.'

He first began his career as a police constable in Soho in 1975, then rose through the ranks and did not wait in the wings too long when it came to outlining his vision for the future of the police service. In 1998 he gave a speech at the Association of Chief Police Officers' annual conference, *The Governance of Security - Where do the Police fit into Policing?*, referring to the connection between public policing and the private security sector.

He said: 'The police service should give up its indefensible

claim to a monopoly on public patrol and, instead, position itself as the monitor and accreditor of a pluralist approach to patrol and, performed by a mixture of professional police officers, Special Constables, local authority employees and private security patrols.'

It would seem he has been paving the way for the reform of the police service for some time. He is seen as a 'moderniser', a big advocate of community support officers, who make up a substantial part of the Met's Safer Neighbourhood Teams, set up to patrol, provide reassurance and target anti-social behaviour.

He aims to boost numbers of police officers from the current 30,790 to 35,000 and the numbers of CSOs, which currently stands at 1,945.

The face of policing

The Federation has criticised the lack of training given to CSOs, which originally amounted to three weeks. Does he think this is adequate for those who are joining beat bobbies as the 'face of the service'?

'I feel very strongly that the level of attack on PCSOs is disproportionate; many have only been with us a short time. They need to be able to make adjustments to their role. I am happy to admit there was not enough training, three weeks is too little. I [also] think we do need more training on how officers supervise them,' he replies.

Does he believe a gap in training has led to more complaints against CSOs when deal-

ing with the public?

He says most are around 'minor disciplinary issues' and that this is not consistent across the board, on community teams, for example, there are almost none at all.

Sir Ian says that sickness and complaints in Westminster are higher, where CSOs are used for security reasons around buildings etc, particularly after September 11.

He adds that the reason for this is because it is a 'difficult job and it is boring', adding that he brought CSOs in to do the job because it is 'tedious, absolutely necessary and vital, but tedious'.

Neighbourhood policing

The Met is deploying mixed Safer Neighbourhood Teams, generally made up of a police sergeant, two police officers and three CSOs, which Sir Ian says will be the main link to communities and that the teams will always include fully trained and sworn police officers.

'The police officer brings intelligence-generating analysis, value-added skills. PCSOs bring ability to problem-solving, dealing with very minor issues. It's a long time since police officers wanted to deal with graffiti.'

The Government announced this month that they plan to provide every community in the country with its own dedicated neighbourhood policing team by 2008, which gives an indication of how far ahead Sir Ian seems to be when it comes to locking into the current political party's vision of the service - or perhaps he has

by Syreeta Lund

Sir Ian Blair talks to Syreeta Lund about life at the top and says why he believes community support officers have proved to be a success but should be given more training and no more powers.

helped to shape that vision.

'We are almost two and a half years after the introduction of PCSOs, frankly, it's the most substantial change in the type of workforce in over 175 years,' says Sir Ian.

Attracting ethnic minority recruits

The report by the Commission for Racial Equality following the findings of the BBC documentary, *The Secret Policeman*, published last month, pointed to the lack of ethnic minorities being recruited into the service, but also a concern that the role of CSOs, attracting more diverse applicants could lead to a second tier of policing.

However, Sir Ian, who was the lead on diversity at the Met as deputy commissioner, is positive about the effect increased representation will have on the Met and the potential for CSOs to then become fully-sworn police officers.

Sir Ian said that the CSOs are bringing a completely new vein of people into the organisation who would not necessarily have applied to be police officers.

'I group them into three parts,' he says, then explains that there are those 'who are really effectively coming to look at us, asking, "Is this service a service I think will be welcoming to us", adding "that is why 30 per cent are from minorities'.

He also flags up a group of 'mid-life changers', who 'always fancied the police, were slightly too old to join as a constable, but who bring a fantastic set of life experiences'.

Finally, he cites those who

'come from professions like teaching and nursing and are interested in people. They want to do this job'.

Will the Safer Neighbourhood Teams always be the same mix of police officers and CSOs? 'Yes', he

says, here in London we will not have any CSO supervisors. The mistake of the traffic service is that we had a completely different supervisory range that was utterly disconnected from policing.

'Every evaluation has proved they [CSOs] are successful,' he comments, which is true of the Met and of the Government's assessment of CSOs across the country, and generally reflects their role as the 'eyes and ears' of the service.

But this is not totally true of other studies, such as that carried out last year by Adam Crawford and Stuart Lister at the University of Leeds.

The study, research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, found that there was public confusion over the roles of CSOs and what could be expected of them when it comes to tackling crime.

The Skills for Justice organisation, who draw up skills profiles, have only just completed one for CSOs and the Government's evaluation was carried out after their initial rollout and does not cover any possible expansion of their role.

Enabling clauses within the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill, making its way through the Lords as *Police* went to press, also allow the Home Secretary to increase powers for CSOs should he choose to do so.



No more powers

Does Sir Ian think the powers for CSOs, which now include the ability to detain for 30-minutes, should be extended further, taking them deeper into the realm of a police officer's role?

'No', he says, he would not want to see their powers increased beyond those already outlined in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill, adding that if the powers were extended it would add weight to the argument that they are 'policing on the cheap'.

Back in 2001, Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary tried to initiate plans for private security guards to fill the gap left by plummeting police numbers, suggesting forces should collaborate with accredited security firms, local council wardens and nightclub bouncers.

Sir Ian believes the police service is pulling back control of patrol and other key elements by using CSOs.

'I am not a great believer in outsourcing core functions,' he says, and adds that the argument of giving over the patrol function to the private sector is nearly a decade old.

'We are looking at a partnership with security, where the police are in charge. The police are the senior partners. Police uniforms and police badges are the interface with the public.'

He talks about the public as

'customers', which gives an insight into the man and his thinking of the police service in more corporate terms.

Police boards

In a speech back in 2003 on the subject of the future of policing, he made reference to his preference for local police boards, with a mixture of elected and appointed individuals. At this time he referred to police authorities as 'distant'.

I wonder what he thinks of Tory leader Michael Howard's plans for an elected police commissioner to scrutinise local police chiefs.

'The only worry I have is that I think the police authorities do an enormously important job. I was here in the Met when there wasn't one, I found it much more supportive to have a police authority.'

'But how those people are appointed is a political matter. The only worry I have about the current proposal is that we could have two power centres.'

He says that you could end up with 'one individual who was elected coming from one particular point of view, such as extremists'.

Sir Ian steers away from getting too embroiled in political debates, and although he obviously feels fairly comfortable in the company of ministers, he seems to think that if they do their bit and let him get on with his, that's all well and dandy.

SOCA

When it comes to the Serious and Organised Crime Agency, I wonder how he walks the line between policing and politics, as officers who transfer to the Agency will lose their status as constables and will come under the direction of the Home Secretary.

'I am a great protector of the office of constable. I do think the issue for SOCA is a complex one. I am very proud of the fact I am a cop and no one of any political persuasion tells me what to do operationally.'

On the subject of whether he believes SOCA will be effective in dealing with crime, keeping contact with regional forces and the fact that it is not staffed by police officers, he comments: 'I do not see it affecting the Met. My only concern is that there remains a famous gap at level two [crime which crosses regional boundaries]. I do not want the assumption that they can use Met resources to police the rest of the UK.'

Sir Ian has been in office as Met commissioner since February. How does he view his own leadership abilities and what does he think police officers on the ground think of him? At this point I can't help but smile, as he says something slightly reminiscent of Ricky Gervais in the comedy series, *The Office*.

'Someone once asked me, "What does transformational leadership look like?" It's about whether people can see any values through any action. He adds: 'I have a saying: 'there is no 'I' in team'.'

Sir Ian is talking about those he works with who keep The Met ticking over: 'I see the management board as a team of professionals leading a gigantic organisation.'

When it comes to the front line, where Sir Ian has found himself, by some, being branded a PC [politically correct] PC, he says of his officers: 'There are a number of years to go before they know who I am.'

