



Tony Judge

Is Blair baiting a cruel sport?

Peter Smyth, the chairman of the Met constables' branch board, created a stir when he told the Constables' Conference that the majority of his rank had lost confidence in Sir Ian Blair. To paraphrase Cromwell's attack on his opponents in Parliament, Mr Smyth was saying to his Chief: "In the name of Plod, go!" In his pained and angry response to Mr Smyth, the commissioner claimed that the constables he meets on social occasions greet him with warmth.

Mr Smyth is the first Met Federation official that has spoken out in such a public way, but Sir Ian must have known that some of the elected representatives of the Federated ranks cannot be counted among his admirers. When he first came under sustained attack from sections of the media, his acolytes approached the branch boards for a declaration of support, such as the vote of confidence he had received from the Superintendents' Association, but they were politely rebuffed.

There have been occasions in the past when the Met Federation, or London Federation as it was known, has found itself at odds with commissioners. Between the wars, when Lord Trenchard, commissioner in the 1930s, was pushing his plans for the Hendon college and short-service constables, he threatened the Federation's officers with instant dismissal if they dared to oppose him in public. Open meetings of the Federation were banned by the Home Secretary, at Trenchard's request. More recently, rank and file anger over the handling of the Tottenham riot, in which PC Blakelock was murdered, led to bitter Federation criticism of the quality of top management. There were clashes between Sir Paul Condon, Met commissioner in the 1990s, and the Federation over such contentious issues as tenure of post. These events were part of the accepted cut and thrust between the Federation and authority. But this time it's personal, and Peter Smyth's attack may have more bearing on Sir Ian's future than all the votes of confidence he gets from the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.

Jock the Bruiser

When the brand new Home Secretary, John Reid, told the Police Federation Conference that "*Yes, Prime Minister*" is not so much a drama, more a documentary, he could not have known that within a week his hapless officials would force him into making an abject apology for misleading the Home Affairs Committee. Not even Sir Humphrey or Bernard managed to land Jim Hacker in quite such a mess in such a short time.

Dr Reid won the approval of conference for being so frank about the problems he faces. He distanced himself from his two immediate predecessors, which, considering what happened to them, is hardly surprising. Nor is he the kind of minister who is going to defend incompetent mandarins. On the contrary, he has demonstrated a willingness to hang them out to dry which has already caused outrage inside their trade union. He needs to rebuild shattered morale and confidence.

If he makes a point of getting to know the people in the lower echelons of the hierarchy, he will find that they are the victims, not the accomplices, of institutional inefficiency.

The question is, who will emerge on top from a real trial of strength, the here today, gone tomorrow minister, or the persistently permanent under-secretaries? Many political careers have come to a sudden halt in the face of Whitehall intransigence. Dr Reid has earned the reputation of a bruiser who takes no prisoners.

If Dr Reid becomes yet another example of Enoch Powell's dictum, that all political careers end in failure, at least he'll have enough material for a new series of *Yes, Prime Minister*.

Tony Judge has been involved with the Police Federation for 40 years. He was the youngest police officer on the Joint Central Committee and founded *Police* magazine in 1968.