

# View from the vice-chair

With the general election just months away, Simon Reed, vice-chairman of the Police Federation, questions the political motives of those jockeying for power



Photography: Anderson Photography

Simon Reed, vice-chairman of the Police Federation

Lately we've all been feeling the wrath of the bitter cold winter. Unfortunately police officers throughout England and Wales have also been experiencing another cold front from certain members of the cabinet. I am of course referring to the bite of our Justice Secretary Jack Straw, when, during a New Year's interview with Radio 4, he said we preferred to stay in the warmth instead of getting out on the beat. He also said that he was sceptical about police claims that we were stretched and that we have to spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with bureaucracy.

Such ill-informed and ignorant remarks alarmingly illustrate the distance between the policy makers and those actually delivering frontline services. Is now the right time for the policy makers to criticise those who enforce the laws they make?

It wasn't police officers who brought in 3,000 new laws. It wasn't police officers who brought in a 30-page prosecution file and it wasn't police officers who brought in multiple forms and authorities to use a pair of binoculars for surveillance.

Mr Straw was also quoted in the Radio 4 interview as saying that the police service has not been subject to any fundamental reform for well over 40 years. We have long been calling for a Royal Commission; in fact, we have been asking for this for more than ten years.

Whilst Mr Straw's judgement is questionable, perhaps his timing is less so. With the General Election potentially only a matter of weeks away, this is no doubt the tip of the iceberg as we see politicians of all parties distance themselves from policies they introduced that are failing.

Look at health and safety policy for example. A contentious area some might say, given recent comments made by the Conservative Party, that the legislation creates 'risk averse' policing. That is certainly not the case; the legislation exists to protect everyone. Perhaps any criticism should be directed towards often risk averse management practices.

It would therefore seem that there is more common ground between the political parties than they think. The commonality being an apparent detachment from reality. Not in my opinion a way to win police officer votes.

Then there is the ongoing issue of prison places and whether or not more money should be spent on rehabilitation and prevention. The Justice Select Committee say new programmes to increase the number of prison places to almost 100,000 is a 'costly mistake'. Whichever party forms the next government needs to radically overhaul the entire criminal justice system – again something we have long been campaigning for.

Then there is the ongoing debate over the retention of DNA data; with the Conservatives now proactively campaigning for the records of innocent people to be destroyed. This is another example of misguided criticism, whereby the police take the flack for policies that were set by parliament, and in this case, legislation that was set in 2003.

Many policies are indeed under fire in the midst of the battle for victory. But what about the casualties of this war? A lot has been lost of late, least of all public confidence in politicians. Throw-away comments, based on nothing but hearsay will do little to instil the faith that has been lost.

It will take a strong, united, realistic and informed government to take us out of decline. Public expectation is quite rightly high; after all, there is a lot at stake. Any political pledge needs to be based on promises with substance to win over the electorate.

When it comes to policing, we will continue to give professional, factually based consultation from the frontline to influence future policy.