



Tony Judge

## ‘Don’t panic’, cried Lance Corporal McNulty

Having marched 100,000 or so police officers half way to the mountain, that canny Scot, Dr John Reid, spotted the financial quagmire that Charles Clarke had bequeathed to him, and decided that when one is in a hole, the smart move is to stop digging. Like John Cleese’s famous parrot, the great mergers plan is as dead as the Dodo.

Tony McNulty, the new police minister, dismissed this latest humiliation for this beleaguered government as small beer. “No one needs to panic,” he told a conference of local government worthies last month. He began his attempt to explain the humiliating u-turn by saying, “Let me be absolutely honest...” Yeah, right. When a politician says he’s being absolutely honest, we don’t believe a word of what follows. McNulty says, that while compulsory mergers are off the agenda, the government keeps the power to introduce them sometime in the future (like, when Hell freezes over). True, this doesn’t rule out selective future mergers based on sound operational needs, but such powers have existed for decades. If previous Home Secretaries had grasped the nettle of failing under-resourced forces, today’s police service would be more fit for purpose than it is.

The “biggest shake-up in police history” has been scrapped because the government needed to head off a council tax revolt that would have made the poll tax demonstrations look like strolls in the park. Incredibly, the government did not realise that it would have to find hundreds of extra millions to meet the costs of paying off superfluous senior officers and redundant police staff. Such extra costs were not an issue in the 1960s, when the number of forces were cut from 125 to 49, or when this total was further reduced in the 1970s to 43. Could this be explained by the growth of bureaucratic

empires in every force since then? It would be interesting to compare the current Police Almanac with, say, the 1976 edition, in order to appreciate just how the legion of little empires has proliferated. True police reform would be to put a couple of ruthless captains of industry to work examining the *raison d’etre* of each one of these esoteric creations, and ask whether they are justified by operational policing needs. Alan Sugar would have a field day.

I very much doubt that rank and file police officers have been plunged into despondency by the shelving of the restructuring project. It is, of course, a bit of a blow to ACPO hopefuls who saw big opportunities looming, or handsome pay offs for those made redundant. I was intrigued by the reaction of Tim Brain, the chairman of ACPO’s finance and business resources area. He turns out not to have been a fan of the project, although ACPO claimed to be “overwhelmingly in favour” back in May. Dr Brain’s view is that: “Restructuring would have made sure we missed the opportunities to do those things (protective services) better because we would have engaged intellectual energy quite to the contrary.” Having read and re-read that quotation several times, I remain completely baffled as to what he meant to say. But then, he has a doctorate in history and I failed School Certificate.

Judgement

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.