



Tony Judge

Modernisation means officer cuts

When *The Times*, of all newspapers, runs a front page headline, Thousands of police to lose jobs as forces feel the pinch, with a sub-heading, Chief constables fear crime wave as recession bites, we have to take notice. The article claimed that forces are about to cut thousands of officers.

According to the chief officers who spoke to *The Times*, this crisis has arisen because the three-year government funding of the service has left forces with huge financial deficits. The chief constable of South Wales, Barbara Wilding, said that she faced a black hole of £14 million and warned that the force might be unable to police major events in Cardiff. Tim Brain of Gloucestershire Constabulary claimed that the grant system was creating a two-tier service, with most of the money going to forces with “dense and diverse populations”, at the expense of the mainly rural forces.

The Home Office, as it would, retorted that there is no funding crisis. It pointed out that spending on the police under Labour has risen by 60 per cent, with 14,000 more sworn officers. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith insisted that there was no reason why police strengths should be reduced. Although police officer numbers rose by 0.6 per cent last year, this disguised the fact that 19 forces saw their numbers of sworn officers reduced, and the situation will worsen this year.

We are not going to see constables queuing up for their P45s, but there will be a very sharp decline in recruiting over the next few years. It is conceivable that soon there will be more PCSOs than constables. This policy is driven in the main by chief officers hell bent on “modernisation”. There is a whiff of hypocrisy in the chorus of criticism from chief officers, who blame the decline in recruiting on inadequate government funding, but step-up recruiting of unsworn officers. What endears

the PCSOs to the government and most chief officers, is that they don’t come with security of tenure and comparable pensions benefits.

However, the way in which PCSOs are deployed in twos and threes could prove to be more expensive than old fashioned and costly constables.

Although chief officers and the government will deny it, the Holy Grail of the police reform project is to get rid of the omniscient constable, and ultimately, to consign the Office of Constable to a relic of a bygone age. The constable of the near future could become just another police employee who happens to possess statutory powers that other employees will not require. This will make it easier for police management to bring conditions of service for sworn officers into line with other employees. They will no longer be Officers of the Crown.

If disillusioned police officers are looking expectantly, as they did in 1997, to an imminent change of government, they should remember that David Cameron was a political adviser to Kenneth Clarke, of Sheehy fame, and Michael Howard. When he won the party leadership, he spoke of modernising Britain, and singled out the police for special attention. “Why,” he asked, “is it so hard to sack a police officer?” I see no reason to believe that the Tory approach to police reform will differ from the current regime. Unless something drastic is done to rein-in the so-called modernisers, the service will sleepwalk to disaster.

Tony Judge has been involved with the Police Federation for 50 years. He was the youngest police officer on the Joint Central Committee and founded *Police* magazine in 1968.