



Tony Judge

## Beware the Ides of Autumn

Here we go again. The 2008 so-called pay talks at the Police Negotiating Board were the shortest on record. Despite Jacqui Smith's assurance that police pay would be viewed "more favourably" this time round, the Official Side's offer was exactly the product of its preferred formula, far short of the Staff Side's claim for 3.5 per cent. So it's off again to the Police Arbitration Tribunal, more in hope than expectation.

There is an air of unreality about this year's pay battle. Police officers, in common with the rest of the nation, are seeing living standards plummet with each succeeding day. Even if the arbiters award the Staff Side claim in full, there will be no jubilation among the troops. They know that a pay rise nearing double figures is required to restore the living standards of just two years ago.

One sure sign that a government has lost the plot is its concentration on the minutiae – even when the tumbrils are at the gates. MPs this year appear to have been most focused on their own pay and perks, and their free access to the John Lewis catalogue. Many police officers contacted the media to contrast the gluttony of politicians with their contempt for police pay negotiations.

This beleaguered and discredited Government isn't worried about discontent in the police. It is threatened with Armageddon by its own legions, the angry and frightened multitudes; the unions, the low-paid, the jobless, the pensioners, debt-harried homeowners and all those for whom rampant inflation spells disaster. Ministers might shrug off another Police Federation massed march on London; what they dread is an autumn of discontent that would make 1978 look like a tea party.

The sense of hopelessness is made worse by a general understanding that salvation is not within the means of this Government, or any other. This is a worldwide problem that calls for worldwide solutions when there is no worldwide machinery for putting things right.

So where does all this leave police officers and their dependants? Some have channelled their anxieties by calling for more positive action by their elected representatives. The

recent referendum of Federation members produced a majority in favour of campaigning for "full industrial rights" should the Government fail to introduce binding arbitration. The vast majority of those who favoured such a move would not, even now, contemplate withdrawing their services from the public. They know it, and the Government knows it.

But what if, when confronted by union pay demands in the public sector, backed by the certainty of strike action if these are refused, the Government makes concessions to buy peace? Would those police officers conclude that their continued devotion to the Office of Constable is a millstone rather than a bulwark? Has anyone given serious consideration to what a police service staffed by officers with "full industrial rights" would be like? For instance, it was reported last month that union members in Hampshire Police's control room had voted to strike in protest against changes in their work-pattern. Would unionised police officers fill their places during the dispute, or would they refuse to cross picket lines? Until now, this question has been treated as an academic exercise, and a convenient way of reminding the Government and the public of the loyalty and commitment of police officers.

Like it or not, the time may come when those who call for radical change will have to put up or shut up. If this happens, the shameless duplicity of Jacqui Smith and her Ministerial colleagues will bear the lion's share of responsibility.

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.