



Tony Judge

Must it all end in tears?

One of the longest love affairs in history is heading for the rocks. I refer to Middle England's affection for the police, something that has endured for nearly two hundred years. In recent weeks, two scathing reports by think-tanks have underlined the public's disenchantment with current police performance. First, the right-leaning Civitas reported that the middle classes have lost faith because of the current obsession with targets that bring law-abiding citizens into conflict with "sanction"-chasing Bobbies.

Next, the Institute of Public Policy Research, with close links to the Left, reported that citizens are unhappy with the response they receive, or do not receive, when they need assistance. The report claims that British officers each arrest a mere nine suspects a year, compared with US counterparts who feel 21 collars a year (how do they acquire these weird and wonderful statistics?). The IPPR concludes that the targets regime has made police less responsive to local needs. It dismisses local police authorities as "weak and remote" and backs David Cameron's proposals for directly-elected police commissioners and police boards. Ahead of the publication of the Policing Gree Paper, the government said it was considering introducing elected police-overseers.

Far from being innovative, the idea of increasing local control by elected officials is a return to parish-pump policing. "Support your local sheriff" might strike a chord with disgruntled voters, but our politicians should be aware of the extent of patronage and nepotism that is inseparable from the US experience. Some of the old watch committees were responsible for a series of petty scandals, and in some cases, more serious ones. The county police authorities had fewer powers and were largely ineffective. Bumbledon and petty corruption were the main reasons for appointing the 1960 Royal Commission on the Police. I served in a small borough force in the fifties. The chairman of the watch committee and the chief constable went on holiday together.

Ambitious officers found that it paid to be "well in" with members of the watch committee, who enjoyed immunity for parking and other minor offences. When the ruling party was turfed out by the electorate and replaced by the party that included a group of disgruntled ex-police officers, the most significant change in headquarters was that the garage mechanics had a different private car to service for free.

I do not believe that adding more layers of democratic surveillance is the answer to the police performance crisis. What is needed is clear vision and professionalism from ACPO downwards, concentrating on the basics of policing, with less regard for the latest academic theories. It is refreshing to note that a few chief officers have, at long last, put their braided caps over the parapet, not only to blame the Government's obsession with targets for poor performance, but to say resoundingly that enough is enough, and that in future they will concentrate on the things that matter to the public, not the agenda set by their Whitehall masters. This might have something to do with the recent dramatic change in the political climate and a prudent desire to be distanced from New Labour in apparent meltdown, but still, there is always more joy in Heaven.

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.