



Tony Judge

SOS – Save SOCA!

The Serious Organised Crime Agency, launched two years ago as the Labour government's British FBI, has run into deep trouble. *The Times* says it has scrapped its original hit-list of 130 so-called crime barons who were said to control drugs, human trafficking and racketeering. The list was compiled from existing police intelligence, but none of these "Mr Bigs" has been prosecuted, and SOCA's powers to strike plea bargains with supergrasses have been used just seven times. When the penny dropped, SOCA took a closer look at the names, and found that many were small-fry criminals, and some were dead. SOCA is now focussing on more than 500 criminal organisations and 15,000 individuals, names culled largely from police sources. One anonymous insider has said to *The Times*: "We've wasted two years. If we could not cope with 130 targets, how the hell are we going to cope with 15,000?"

When Tony Blair launched SOCA in Downing Street, he promised that it was going to "make life hell" for the criminals behind an estimated £40 billion organised crime industry in Britain. It would use sophisticated intelligence gathering techniques from MI5, and employ counter-terrorism techniques to seek out and destroy criminal networks, without having to go through the courts. Its financial and accountancy experts would go after the money in off-shore accounts, and seize other assets. It appears that the racketeers are still laughing all the way to their off-shore investments.

Scores of detectives who left the police to join SOCA, expecting to get to grips with major criminals, have returned to proper policing, disillusioned by an organisation top-heavy with senior management. SOCA has been criticised by the National Audit Office for serious financial mismanagement. The Home Office has slashed its £400 million budget whilst setting new targets and increasing its workload (so what's new?). It is also claimed, surprise, surprise, that the IT systems are not fit for purpose.

Naturally, SOCA's director-general, Bill Hughes, one-time head of the National Crime Squad, remains upbeat. He denies that there is a morale problem. He claims that

there have been successes thanks to co-operation between SOCA and "our partners", by which he means the old fashioned plodding police. The public has yet to hear of a specific success that can be attributed entirely to SOCA. Hughes says that, thanks to the introduction of European arrest warrants, the Costa del Sol is no longer a haven for expatriate British crooks. He tells the Home Office's upbeat police magazine *The Sharp End* "They are now enjoying a different lifestyle, in Her Majesty's prisons."

Meanwhile, Crimestoppers, in co-operation with SOCA, is running "Operation Captura", which asks British police officers on holiday in Spain to keep their eyes peeled for wanted ex-pats. So far, they have bagged ten. Every little helps.

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.