

Back to the future!

Tony Judge offers a personal opinion on Sir Ronnie's plans to tackle bureaucracy.

I am an admirer of Sir Ronnie Flanagan, whose career achievements, notably in Northern Ireland, speak for themselves. If I am less than impressed by his initial proposals to free the police service from the Gordian knot of bureaucracy that stifles its ability to fight crime and protect the public, this is no personal criticism. It is simply that I fear his cure might worsen, rather than alleviate, the paper mountain that threatens to overwhelm the service.

I say this because I remain to be convinced that the road to effective policing is to increase the already substantial reliance on 'partnerships' with other public services, local and national, rather than boldly striking out to pursue policing priorities, with more concern for the immediate needs of the public at large.

If there is a genuine desire to attack bureaucracy head on, the starting point should be to ask; "How did we get here?" It is not as if the current situation arose overnight. It is the result of factors that may well have been outside the control of chief officers of the day. One obvious culprit is the enthusiasm of Tory and Labour governments for slavishly following the popular dictum; 'There should be a law against it'. I read recently that this government has enacted in excess of 3000 new criminal offences.

The BBC programme, *Life on Mars*, caught the public imagination with a time-travelling copper, Sergeant Sam Tyler, who found himself tackling crime in 1973 Manchester when policing was virtually uncomplicated, albeit some of the methods would give the IPCC an institutional nervous breakdown. Amongst the biggest fans of the series were many of today's harassed and overworked rank and file officers. Was this just nostalgia for a bygone era? Policing was certainly simpler in those days, before the advent of the CPS, PACE and human rights legislation. Before, also, universal criminal legal aid and the army of lawyers and social workers who are responsible for the greater part of the log jam in today's courts. Tyler wasn't nailed to his desk, filling in forms. He was out on the streets, confronting crime and making arrests. Rough and ready? Yes, but it got results and earned public approval.



Police officers of all ranks will share my doubts that yet another investigation into bureaucracy will find a miraculous remedy. They will be grateful that Sir Ronnie Flanagan has been so frank about the devastating effect of constant criticism on the morale of the service. Officers on the streets are short on self-confidence because they are bewildered by the failure to spell out what exactly is expected of them.

Basic leadership is lacking. I have never carried a torch for chief constables, but the treatment by Secretaries of State of individual chief officers deemed to have made a mistake has been more akin to kangaroo courts than considered examination of all the circumstances. Successive Home Secretaries have found it expedient to dismiss a chief constable 'to encourage the others'.

Successive surveys by the Police Federation have uncovered the conditions that Sir Ronnie now admits to be the case. Isn't it time for the staff associations to come together to face these issues head on, and say to their political masters, "Up with this we will not put"?