



Tony Judge

Policing from the same hymn sheet

Sir Hugh Orde, the chief constable of the Police Service of North Ireland, called for a more “chaotic” form of policing, in the pages of *Police Review* magazine, as the only way to increase community confidence in the forces of law and order.

My Oxford English Dictionary defines “chaotic” as: “pertaining to, or resembling chaos, utterly confused or disordered”. To me, this is a fairly accurate description of the current condition of British policing, which has been brought about by the countless “new initiatives” that have been introduced, by well intentioned politicians, HM Inspectors and chief officers, all hoping to stem the tide of lawlessness that, according to the *Daily Mail*, threatens to overwhelm our society.

We could take a starting point for this progressive decline somewhere around the mid-1970s when opinion polls were still recording public approval of the police in the region of 80 percent. Crime was increasing, but citizens felt safe in a society where violent crime did not figure high in the criminal statistics. The biggest problem confronting the police was a chronic shortage of officers, due to inadequate pay, something that was easily remedied by the Edmund-Davies report. Then along came one big new idea after another. Remember PBO – Policing by Objectives, the “Plus” Programme in the Met, Sector Policing and a host of initiatives with catchy titles designed to fit their initials? I recall fondly the reaction of a group of unreconstructed federationists in Devon and Cornwall, who called for a Campaign to Return to Actual Policing.

Now along comes Sir Hugh Orde, who wants officers to take more risks and ‘push the edges’ by being creative. He wants to re-examine the ‘too rigid’ rule books, with police managers making it clear that they will back officers who make honest mistakes. These rigid rule books, he claims, encourage ‘cops’ to hide behind them

instead of taking a chance and “going out on a limb”. Sir Hugh must have a musical bent, because he says, “I am very happy with having an orchestra of officers, but I do not want everyone playing the same instrument”.

This is brave ‘out of the box’ thinking by a chief constable, but rank and file officers will take some convincing that unconventional initiatives will find favour among today’s middle managers, who are only too aware of the dangers that lurk in every complaint against police, and whose instinct is to cover themselves at the first opportunity. There was a time when constables had sufficient confidence in their own judgements, and those of their supervisors’ to do precisely what Sir Hugh is calling for. They brought experience and common sense to dealing with incidents and were not constrained by targets or policing by rote at the behest of statistics-driven strategies. But that was before the days of the compensation culture and the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

So I am afraid that few operational officers will be queuing up to join Sir Hugh’s orchestra of individualist musicians. He might bear in mind what the late Eric Morecambe said to Andre Previn, “I am playing the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.”

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.