



Tony Judge

## If you want to know the time - ask a cso!

The old music hall song; 'Ask a policeman!' has entered folklore as a tribute to the helpful Victorian bobby on the beat. It came to my mind when I read about the unfortunate CSOs in Manchester who were accused of not going to the assistance of a drowning child because, as the force explained, it would have contravened health and safety instructions. I was also reminded of a plaque on the sea front at Blackpool, which commemorates the heroism of three young constables who were drowned whilst rescuing a man who had jumped into the raging sea to save his dog. But that was before the Health and Safety Executive dragged self-sacrifice into the realms of criminality.

I sympathise with these CSOs, but the outcry following the tragedy underlines a growing suspicion that the public's honeymoon with CSOs is nearing its end. Several newspapers have drawn attention to basic tasks that they do not undertake, asking the obvious question; "What purpose do they serve?"

When 'Blunkett's Bobbies' first took to the streets, there was a general welcome amongst the law-abiding public for what was perceived to be an increased visible police presence. They wore all the trappings of the modern constable except batons and helmets. On the streets where a lone patrolling PC had not been seen for years, suddenly there were two uniformed representatives of law and order, and with time to chat. During the daylight hours, at least, they would, with measured tread, spread the gospel of public reassurance.

Doubtless the CSOs get on well with that part of the public that still regards the police as their friends and protectors, but what do they actually do? Let us remember that two CSOs working in tandem are far more costly than a fully empowered and trained constable. Are they an effective crime prevention tool, in comparison, say, with CCTV? How often do they exercise

their limited powers to detain suspects until the arrival of a constable? After the novelty of having any kind of police presence, are they calming the trouble spots in urban areas?

On a value for money basis, is this the most effective use of resources that will be sharply reduced over the coming years? Nationally, the target numbers for CSOs have been reduced drastically, no doubt because central government largesse is running out, but should the public be happy to know that cash-strapped chief officers, at the bidding of their police authorities, are going slow on recruiting constables, and even cutting their numbers, whilst advertising for more CSOs? If the government's new found eagerness to listen to the people is genuine, will these forums be asked whether they want their local police to spend money on CSOs or fully-fledged constables?

I think it's time that ACPO came clean with the public, and the service, as to the relationship between CSOs and police numbers. The thread that runs all through the current police reform project is the steady erosion of the Office of Constable. From the outset, the architects of this new police edifice have written off the career constable. There is, I acknowledge, a small number of chief officers who deplore this wholesale destruction of tried and trusted principles of policing. One or two have spoken out. We need more to join in a chorus of disapproval.

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.