

# Police in parliament

Last month marked the celebration of Special Constables in the police service but what makes a member of the public want to volunteer for the role? Syreeta Lund speaks to Nicola Bates, a Special and a prospective parliamentary candidate



Nicola Bates: joins the Specials debate

Getting on a bus into Crouch End one evening, Nicola Bates was travelling back home from work, when she made the ‘mistake’ of choosing a seat on the top deck. The only other passengers were two teenage girls.

“The bus was very empty and I sat in the middle of the top deck. I think the girls saw a woman in a suit and thought they would have a bit of fun. They started screwing up bits of newspaper and throwing it at me,” she says. Not one to stay silent, Nicola challenged their behaviour and it ended in her getting a bottle pushed threateningly in her face and reporting the incident to the police.

It was this experience that prompted Nicola to become a Special Constable. “I wanted to understand the police response, there wasn’t an awful lot they could do, because the girls didn’t actually hit me they could not charge them with assault, there was no damage to property, my clothes weren’t ripped or anything.

“I just wanted an apology and it made me think about what they were doing out at that time, it was about 10.30pm and they must have been around 13-years-old,

why weren’t the parents more involved, I know the police response is only one element.”

The 29-year-old is also currently contesting Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg’s seat in Sheffield Hallam as the Conservative’s prospective parliamentary candidate, so has had to get special permission to put being a Special on hold while the campaign takes place. But hopefully her experiences on the frontline will inform her political views on policing, does she think there are



enough police officers on the beat and as forces feel the financial pinch is it right to put more reliance on voluntary Specials?

**“I do not think politics should ever impact at an operational level by telling the police to do x, y and z but it is important to have community voice to help determine those priorities. I mean the last thing we would want to see is police cars going down the street with Conservative, Labour or Lib Dem banners.”**

“Some people want to run around in a uniform being a ‘copper’, I don’t want to be a police officer, I’m a volunteer.” She adds: “You cannot rely on a voluntary force to police the country. Specials are a good, highly visible presence but you need to see police officers on the beat. You cannot call a Special in at a moment’s notice and they should be dealt with as volunteers. I would like to see more police on the beat. There is too much

bureaucracy and they should be more visible on the street than in the office. I did not believe how bad it was [bureaucracy] until I joined.”

She took the initial Police Recruitment Tests to become a Special and started training in January last year. She worked 18 Sundays in a year and said she found it interesting, ‘particularly getting sprayed with CS spray’ during her officer safety training.

“I was learning really interesting bits if legislation and even how to put a fire out as part of my training, how often would you get to do that. In theory I can save someone’s life, it’s made me a more valuable member of society.”

It’s at this point she mentions the whole ‘Broken Britain’ agenda. She says she felt she had seen things deteriorate and that it’s time for the community step in and more positive role models to engender more responsibility.

“There is a sense nowadays that kids do not have the same sort of sense of worth. They are drinking, there isn’t anything particularly new about it, but the level of violence is entirely new.”

So how did a woman in her 20s become a member of the Conservatives? Well, she credits her love of politics back to her dad, even though he would often present completely the opposite point of view, this would always



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lead to lively discussions round the dinner table.

She was brought up by her father, a tax inspector and, according to Ms Bates, 'a bit of a socialist'. Although she went to a 'normal' comprehensive school, she feels she was given some of the rungs on the ladder to success that perhaps others were not.

By the time she began at the University of York studying politics and economics, she had joined the Conservative Association and helped out in the 2001 election leadership campaign for Kenneth Clarke.

Being a Special and now aiming to become a politician may give a unique insight into the role of a constable but what does Ms Bates think about the direct mixing of politics in policing?

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Nicola Bates with Conservative leader David Cameron

“I think the BNP is abhorrent; it’s a worrying recent trend of their growth in the last few years. In working class areas where the level of immigration has increased people perceive that they may be getting a better deal, that’s not the case but it leads to strains on resources.”

She adds that with 1.8 million on the housing list waiting for a home and other conflicts it is not surprising groups like the BNP seek to take advantage but she says the Tories would aim to deal with the issues and lessen their popularity.

“It would worry me if a BNP candidate was elected and I hope that would not happen. We would try to change the circumstances for those voting BNP who feel they have been ignored.”

But no guarantee this could not happen.

In light of her experiences as a Special, does she think a Conservative government would look more favourably on recruiting more police officers or maintaining current levels?

“It’s impossible to say we would recruit x number of recruits within five years,” she says. But the Conservative’s pledge to “bring in measures to free officers up,” it’s not clear what this exhaustive list consists of yet. What about the mix of police officers and civilians?

“A police constable is the first port of call for the public, she says, adding that she carried out a survey in Sheffield Hallam with round 90 percent of those surveyed stating they would like to see more police on the beat.

As ACPO and the National Policing Improvement Agency discuss plans to potentially look at axing police numbers by 28,000, under a ten-year discussion paper being debated last month, what are her thoughts on what makes a police force work for the public?

“Do police officers need police staff working back in the office helping them? Yes, of course, but police officers should make up the heart of a police force.”



Police force mix: constables should be ‘at heart’

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But the worry around the idea of elected police commissioners, as championed by the Conservatives, is that there could be too much political influence at a local level, potentially allowing a BNP candidate to become elected; does she think that would be a problem?