

### **More feet on the beat in London?**

Capital cities attract capital crime. Gangs from around the world congregate on London, whether Yardies from Jamaica, Triad creeps from China, Mafiosi majors from Sicily, or Columbian cartel kings; and many more besides. But still, as has always been so, the main crooks infesting the Great Wen are Londoners born and bred.

The answer to the social problems this causes is policing. The annual House of Commons debate on London's policing took place on June 23. The Home Secretary, Mr Jack Straw, told the House that the Met, as it is now popularly known (at the expense of its authority and dignity, but who now cares about that?) was established by the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 as the nation's first police force.

The 1829 Act's progenitor, and Straw's distinguished predecessor as Home Secretary, was Sir Robert Peel. He showed a sort of genius in setting up the Metropolitan police force (now feebly renamed a "service"), but that was not immediately appreciated at the time. The so-called Peelers were also known because of the colour of their uniforms as "raw lobsters" or "blue devils", and public hostility to them was immediate and universal. Nonetheless by the end of the 1850s they had gained the public's approval (Mr Straw dubiously said "affection") and, by the latter half of the 19th century, their activities had led to a steady fall in the capital's crime rates.

Not everything went smoothly with the new police force. In 1872, 180 officers mutinied over pay. Pay and appalling living quarters were major causes of the 1918 and 1919 police strikes, in which more than 1,000 officers were dismissed. The collapse of the 1919 strike led to the outlawing of industrial action by the police and the formation of the Police Federation. This was designed to represent police officers while withholding the strike weapon from them. It proved a success, and flourishes to this day.

Throughout its history until now, the Met has been the responsibility of the Home Secretary, who has acted as its police authority. The ever-modernising Mr Blair has put a stop to that useful piece of history, as to so many others. Mr Straw dishonestly said it was an impertinence for one man to seek to represent London on policing matters. The truth is of course that the "one man" has had all the resources of the Home Office behind him. This long-standing and successful arrangement ends on July 2, when the newly constituted Metropolitan Police Authority or MPA (yet another Quango) takes over.

Sir Robert Peel showed foresight by establishing geographical boundaries for the Met that were far wider than those of the then City of London. They still encompassed three times the area administered by the London County Council on its establishment in 1888, and even extended well beyond the boundaries of the Greater London Council in 1964.

The Government took the opportunity of the creation of the new MPA to realign the Met's boundaries to make them correspond to those of the MPA and the new Greater London Authority. That will ensure that there can be borough policing in each of the 32 London boroughs, which, in turn, means a reduction in the number of local operational command units from 60 to 32.

Despite all this restructuring the key question for the public remains one of bobbies on the beat. For the Opposition, Mr Oliver Heald MP, quoting the new Metropolitan Police

Commissioner Sir John Stevens, said that the numerical strength of the Met - the number of officers available, rather than the budgetary strength - had taken a battering recently. When the Government came to power in 1997, the strength was 27,166. Now the figure is 25,480, a drop of nearly 1,700 in just over three years. That is just the figure for the Metropolitan police; the City of London police have lost more than 100 officers in the same period. The thin blue line, mourned Mr Heald, is becoming even thinner.

Sir John Stevens says he needs to maintain at least 25,600 officers if he is to police London properly. He insists we have reached a point where he is going to have to say that we don't have enough officers to police London properly.

The chairman of the Police Federation, Glen Smyth, put the matter in a different way. Referring to the old quip about having one's collar felt by the filth, he was reported by Mr Heald as saying that you've got to have feet on the beat to put hands on collars.

Mr Straw undertook to do his best, but one felt his heart was not in it. The police culture of today is for sitting in heated cars sounding sirens, not pounding hard pavements in all weathers.

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