

Why the conspiracy of silence?

January 18 was an Opposition day in the House of Commons. The Conservatives had elected to debate police numbers (for the umpteenth time). Usual accusations were exchanged about whose fault it is that there are too few bobbies on the beat.

The shadow Home Secretary, Miss Anne Widdecombe MP, entertained the House with a lively story of the Pontefract pensioner who is daily beset in his own house by gangs of rowdy youths. They wouldn't know a bobby on the beat if they saw one (which of course they never do). The besieged pensioner thus finds it necessary to ring his local police station for help almost every day. So, said Miss Widdecombe, he has cleverly added the police telephone number to his British Telecom *Friends and Family*.

When the Home Secretary, Mr Jack Straw MP, rose to answer the case put by the redoubtable Tory lady once known as Doris Karloff he was interrupted at the start.

Mrs Anne Campbell (Cambridge): On the subject of investment in the police force, may I thank my right hon. Friend for the £1 million that he announced yesterday as extra funding for the Cambridgeshire police force? Will he commend that force for achieving a 2.9 per cent. reduction in recorded crime since the election, despite its considerable difficulties in policing the protests against Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS)?

We know Mrs Campbell shouldn't have talked about the police *force*. For years its correct name has been the police *service*, just to show how servile and non-forceful it is nowadays. But I rather warm to Mrs Campbell for not having caught up with this.

Her intervention referred to the fact that a group had impudently announced its determination to "close down" HLS, so the police were being given an extra £1m to combat this. A similar group recently closed down Hillgrove Farm in Oxfordshire. Chris Brown, the law-abiding owner of this cat farm, meekly said its closure was a loss to medical research, then departed. Thames Valley Police refused to prosecute the organisers for criminal conspiracy.

The Home Secretary said this in reply to Mrs Campbell.

Mr. Straw: I greatly regret that it has been necessary to allocate £1 million to that force to deal with the outrageous intimidatory and, in some cases, violent attacks that have been made by so-called animal rights protesters against the perfectly lawful and important activities of Huntingdon Life Sciences.

Here a backbench Tory, successor to Julian Critchley as MP for Aldershot, intervened.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Can he say why he and the authorities do not use the conspiracy laws to tackle the people who plan such attacks?

This was the key question raised in the debate. I will tell you in a moment how Mr Straw answered it, but first I will fill in some more of the background.

Last year's scheme of digging up the turf of Parliament Square by "guerrilla gardening" was plotted in advance on the internet and widely known. The organisers of this criminal

conspiracy should have been apprehended and prosecuted well before it happened, but they were not. Why?

In last year's petrol crisis Mr Gordon Brown MP stated that it was "absolutely wrong for demonstrators to have decided who got fuel". Yet the police and prosecutors omitted to use the law of criminal conspiracy. Why?

Recently the port of Shoreham was overwhelmed by animal rights protesters objecting to shipments of live animals. In an unsuccessful prosecution (not for conspiracy) the Law Lord Lord Nolan said: "The result may be seen as the acceptance by the courts of a victory for the violent elements . . . I would describe it myself as an acceptance of the plain fact that there are limits to the extent to which the police can control unlawful violence in any given situation." Lord Nolan inexcusably failed to mention that an answer could have been found by prosecuting the main organisers for criminal conspiracy. Such a prosecution nips the plot in the bud, so that hundreds of constables do not need to be deployed against the protesters and are freed to be "bobbies on the beat".

Now here is the Home Secretary's answer to Mr Gerald Howarth MP.

Mr. Straw: The police and the Crown Prosecution Service are determined to use all the powers and charges that are available to ensure that such outrageous activities are deterred and effectively addressed. If there is evidence that would add up to a conspiracy charge, such a charge would be laid.

History shows this is highly unlikely to be proved true. Did any MP rise to support Mr Howarth? The answer is no. Nothing else was said in the entire debate about the failure of the authorities to gather evidence and prosecute for conspiracy. Why?

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2001.005 151 NLJ 137 (2 February).