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# This is why Scotland Yard is in disgrace: bad policing and penny-pinching politicians

*Duncan Campbell*

Officers will be rightly criticised as Britain's biggest force is put into special measures, but ministers betrayed the public too

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**T**he headlines, from the Times and the Mail to the Sun and the Guardian, all announce that the Metropolitan police - Britain's biggest force, and progenitor of the mantra that we have the "best police in the world" - has been placed in "special measures". Much like "institutionally racist" and "not fit for purpose", the phrase has a formal ring to it. But what does it actually mean?

Earlier this year a former Met officer, Iain Donnelly, published a book about his time in the police entitled [Tango Juliet Foxtrot](#), a title making use of the phonetic alphabet that translates as “the job’s fucked”. That sums up both what many serving officers currently feel and what Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary has just concluded.

The scandals that have engulfed the Met are familiar: the [murder of Sarah Everard](#) by a serving officer, Wayne Couzens; the [bungling of the investigation](#) into the murders of four gay men by Stephen Port; the pursuit of those [falsely accused of sex crimes](#) by the fantasist Carl “Nick” Beech; the callous sharing of photos of [two murdered sisters](#), Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry, by two officers, leading to their jail sentences. All this compounded by the fact that Scotland Yard, [in the words this week](#) of the inspector, Matt Parr, “hasn’t always shown a great willingness to [learn from others].”

The latest charge sheet is a long one. It ranges from “a barely adequate standard of crime recording accuracy, with an estimated 69,000 crimes going unrecorded each year” to “a persistently large backlog of online child abuse referrals”. This all comes at a time when the Met is still waiting to find out who the new commissioner will be after [Dame Cressida Dick’s departure](#) from the role in February. How did we get to this state of affairs?

The warning signs have long been clear. Donnelly writes that the problems had been apparent for many years and came to a head with “the painful and horrible years when Theresa May was home secretary and then prime minister” and the impact of “losing 20,000 officers and 23,000 support staff” made itself felt. Attempts to remedy these shortages have been inadequate - and have come too late.

Apart from the cuts made by May, there have been other disastrous government decisions. [More than 600 police stations](#) in England and Wales, over half the total, have been shut down since 2010, disconnecting the police from the public on whose support they depend. Officers have disappeared from the streets. In the United States, radical voices critical of their own, much more violent and devious, police forces launched a “defund the police” movement, arguing that funds were better allocated to other agencies. Here the government has accomplished that unbidden.

Another former officer’s book, published only last year, is [Rocking the Boat](#) by Paul Wilson, one of the originators of the Black Police Association. This catalogues what [happened to him when he suggested to Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight, after the inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s murder](#), that the Met was indeed racist. He became

something of a pariah for the last decade of his service. Do the government ministers responsible for the criminal justice system read any of these books?

One book that they might find it easier to get their hands on, *Assault on Liberty*, published in 2009, is an examination of what went wrong with the criminal justice system. Its author, a lawyer who had worked with Liberty, explained how “the police have clamped down on freedom of speech, restricted public demonstrations and stifled peaceful protest using an array of powers bestowed by a blizzard of legislation, hastily enacted by parliament”. Typical lefty lawyer? Er, no. Those are the words of Dominic Raab, now the justice minister and seemingly unaware of the fact that this is exactly what his own government now requires of the police under another new blizzard of legislation.

As we know from the extraordinary sight of bewigged barristers on picket lines, the courts system is also in chaos, and **prisons are overcrowded and chaotic**. We have a prime minister and a home secretary who like dressing up as police officers when a photo opportunity beckons, but seem incapable of tackling the real problems.

The Met, as the largest force in the country, comes under the greatest scrutiny; Greater Manchester, Cleveland and Gloucestershire face similar criticism from the inspectorate, without the national headlines. Some argue that this attention, and the extra pressures imposed on its officers by Covid, exacerbated existing problems. But it is half a century since **Sir Robert Mark** was appointed commissioner at the Met, at a time when some very special measures were required, mainly focused on widespread corruption. “I had served in provincial forces for 30 years, and though I had known wrongdoing, I had never experienced institutionalised wrongdoing, blindness, arrogance and prejudice on anything like the scale accepted as routine in the Met,” he recalled of his arrival at Scotland Yard. The inspectorate clearly feels that some things have not changed enough.

***We Own This City*** is the title of the spectacular new television series about Baltimore police from the creators of *The Wire*. “If Baltimore cops don’t get complaints every day, they sure as hell ain’t policing,” is the bullish response of one of their officers to any attacks from outside. Few Met officers would either claim to “own” London, or use that justification for the criticism now directed at them. But, for all the opprobrium, they are right to suggest that much of the blame sits above their heads, with those of higher rank. Look also to a government and to a criminal justice team that is, to use the preferred jargon, not fit for purpose, institutionally inept and in great need of very special measures.

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