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Lynda King Taylor can be contacted on:

Tel: +44 (0)20 7262 1531 Mobile: +44 (0)7775 658067

Fax: +44 (0)20 7706 1551

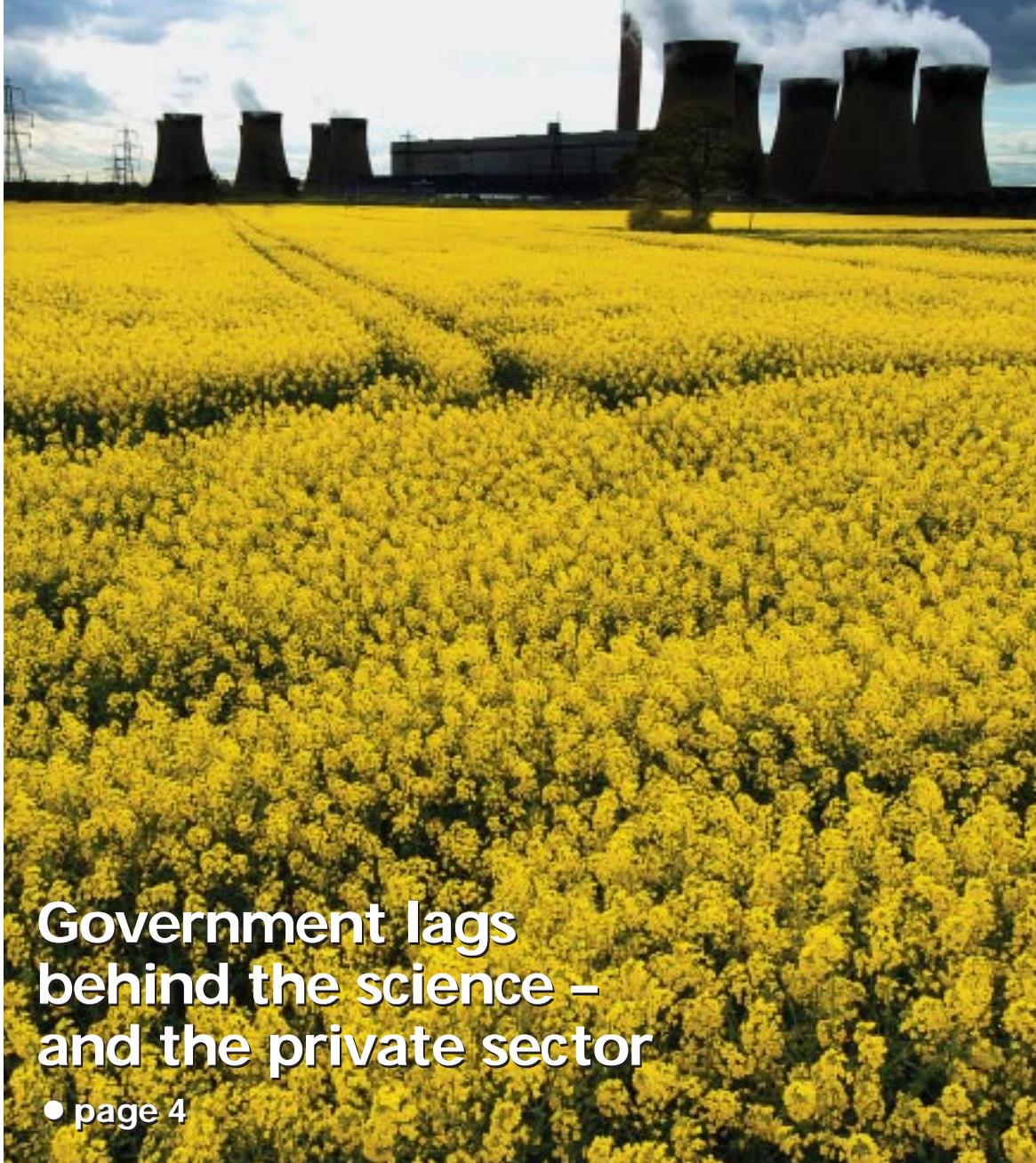
LKTLondon@aol.com • www.lyndakingtaylor.com

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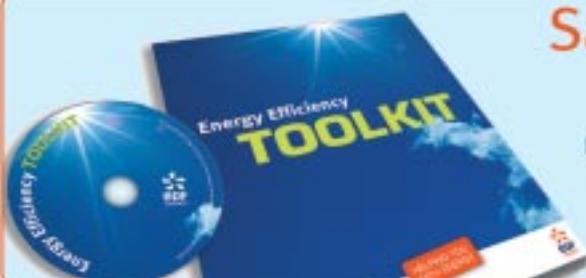
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Split for purpose – or chasing the targets and missing the point?

As John Reid prepares to step down from his ninth job in 10 years and quit government, Lynda King Taylor looks at what the future holds for the slimmed-down Home Office, and reports on the police backlash against a targets culture

Former Army chief Sir Mike Jackson refused to call John Reid “the Home Secretary” at a police dinner recently, referring to him throughout as Secretary of State – since by the end of his speech Reid might have moved to another job. At the same time, Reid, warming to his ninth senior job in 10 years, was enthusing and energising over the prospect of his obligation and sharpened focus to secure the life, liberty and lifestyle of us all in the fight for law and order and against terrorism.

At an end of April he was saying: “The Home Secretary should wake up every morning thinking about the security of the nation...and that is what I am now able to do.”

The split-for-purpose Home Office and the creation of the Ministry of Justice would, he said, “give the government strategic capacity fit for the challenges of today and the future”.

Reid was passionate about his role in leading a vital department ranging through the dynamics on personal, community and national security from neighbourhood policing to tackling organised crime and counter-terrorism.

This was a responsibility, he said again, “I take very seriously indeed”.

It was a potent presentation on securing critical UK infrastructure. That was April. Why, one must ask, does a man who only emerged from the Westminster shadows at 50 – a winner on the

toughest ministerial battlegrounds – then meekly announce he is walking away from the prospect of establishing Labour government beyond Blair.

Understandably, the FDA, representing senior civil servants, rose amid a chorus of concern over yet more changes on top of changes at the Home Office. It said stability, continuity and a review of resources are now required from any new minister taking up the helm.

Responding to Reid’s announcement that he would step down from the cabinet this summer, FDA national officer Rob O’Neill, said: “The next Home Secretary will be the fourth in a three-year period. This merry-go-round is destabilising.”

It was acknowledged that Reid has been “successful in stemming the flow of unresourced initiatives which had overburdened the department, and established a framework of priorities”.

The union challenged the assertion that the Home Office could be split into two departments without requiring extra resources – this was simply not reflecting the reality of experience with machinery of government changes: “Splitting the department will do nothing to improve how the Home Office works. Clear priorities and adequate resources will.”

Reid proclaimed: “The world doesn’t stand still and neither should we, which is why we have refocused the Home Office on the issues that matter the most to the public.”

The frustrated FDA fired back: “The last thing the Home Office needs now is a new minister to walk in with a box of new priorities.”

The police are often first in line to judge the gov’nor at 2 Marsham Street, armed with the latest set of priorities and targets. The leaders of 130,000 rank-and-file police officers drew up a “dossier of lunacy” for the recent Police Federation annual conference. Delegates told new Justice Secretary Lord Falconer that children were being arrested for throwing cream buns and slices of cucumber. The pressure to get results is so bad, they said, that officers “are criminalising and alienating their traditional supporters in Middle England and many (officers) are so disillusioned that they are considering quitting”.

Last autumn the Home Office issued 30 general targets that police must meet, as well as more specific figures, and some chief constables have voiced a call for more retired cops to work within the Home Office to help steer a clearer course. An essential consideration must be changing the way that effectiveness is measured from mainly quantitative to qualitative.

Officers say that 10 years ago a minor incident that would have led to “words of advice” has now been upgraded to become a criminal statistic. Chairwoman of the Police Federation Jan Berry conceded “advice cannot be counted as easily as a ticket”.



REID: the Home Secretary, nicknamed Soprano, prepares for his swansong in government

Home Office research last year found a nationwide increase in drunks being penalised for causing harassment, alarm or distress.

Researchers concluded that the trend may have been driven by government target-setting. Notices issued for offences such as causing harassment, alarm or distress count as a “violent crime” and an “offence brought to justice” for the purposes of statistics. The alternative, lesser charge of being drunk and disorderly, does not count towards detection targets.

The whole issue was summed up by Reid, addressing the Federation, as “hitting the target but missing the point”.

The point is, according to a group of sergeants in London, that the police do not get performance credits for ASBOs or closing down crack houses, no matter how much work and effort it entails.

Sanctioned detections, these officers say, are more important – a couple of lumps of cannabis in one pocket, even when the offender is not arrested, look better in the books than a closure order for a crack house.

Demonstrating the government’s commitment to rebalancing the criminal justice system in favour of the victim and to provide the police with necessary resources, the Home Secretary announced new powers at the Federation’s May conference to be brought forward shortly in the Criminal Justice Bill. These include widening

existing powers to close premises where there is persistent rowdy behaviour or where residents threaten neighbours; and introducing Violent Offender Orders (VOOs). Subject to final medical advice, he also agreed to extend the trial use of the Taser stun gun to a wider pool of officers than at present.

Reid said he was committed to cutting bureaucracy, improving the target mechanisms and engaging in debate on local accountability in order to support frontline officers to deliver a service that is respected locally and trusted nationally.

“It is a decision for chief constables and local basic command unit commanders how targets are met,” he told them, “but let me be clear – in future, government crime reduction and detection goals must provide a focus on serious crime, particularly the most serious violent crime, and not reward numbers for numbers sake.”

For the incoming Home Secretary, there is another row brewing. Not one at a recent police community meeting in Westminster would deny that ID and immigration pressures had to be better handled, believing, as one representative stated, that “the Home Office has been clueless about this. Apparently they are opposed to an immigration amnesty because they feel it would be nefarious to local communities, but they must tackle the problem of the many thousands of ‘invisible’ people in this country”.

“

The next Home Secretary will be the fourth in three years. This merry-go-round is destabilising. Splitting the department will do nothing to improve how the Home Office works. Clear priorities and adequate resources will

”

The rising cost of implementing ID cards, even when based on existing databases rather than the previous concept of a completely new system, will not gladden the heart of Prime Minister-in-waiting Gordon Brown.

Brown is committed to identity security and will back ID cards – but at what cost?

Many of the stiffest challenges facing the new, leaner Home Office are bound up in its relationships with operations organisations deep within Whitehall’s most complex web – the Joint Intelligence Committee, MI5, MI6 (via the Foreign Office), GCHQ, the Terrorism Analysis Centre – all wielding impressive autonomy.

The new Ministry of Justice, meanwhile, surveys the terrain from new vantage points inside Home Office HQ to direct offender management, prisons, probation and criminal justice.

There is much to do before a new balance is achieved from the latest scaling down of Home Office duties. The nature of the demerger and its complexity may only intensify the risk of failure.

Whatever happens, there is a certain sadness at the bruiser from the Lanarkshire coalfields heading back to the shadows.

Reid has battled for his departments and been prepared to mix it with the most notable critics along the way, earning the nickname Soprano in some quarters.

And that’s not because he has shown himself to be much of a singer.