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A question of leadership



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Leadership

– the Imbert way

In his days as commissioner, Peter Imbert transformed the Metropolitan Police and changed the face of modern policing. Now he tells Lynda King Taylor how the Home Secretary should have tackled force amalgamations

“I’m prepared to give it a go, but only if the air vice-marshal shows me how to do it first.” This was how a pilot reacted to a top brass suggestion that the RAF should consider suicide missions. It made me think about how another force reacted to a one-time chief – a commissioner who set about transforming the Metropolitan Police Force into today’s Metropolitan Police Service. His efforts earned him the finest feedback from his troops: “An ordinary man doing extraordinary things.”

It is the 20th anniversary of the Plus programme, which has seen the work of Sir Peter, now Lord Imbert, translated to police forces across the world, forming a foundation for modern day policing. It was a pioneering programme to deal with a plethora of problems after a review highlighted that relationships in the Met between police and civil support staff had broken down, and public respect and confidence in the police had plunged into outrage. Not just riots at Brixton, but also the taxpaying public felt the Met was divided and dragged down by disloyalty and poor practice.

The commissioner might have been tempted to refute the review criticisms and shut the door on Scotland Yard’s eighth-floor mahogany corridor, but Imbert was a leader for his time. A local sergeant recalls from his youth, hearing Imbert address police training school: “Leadership must be constant, exemplary, long lasting. If it’s here today and gone tomorrow you may have led your troops over one dangerous crevasse only to leave them on the brink of another.”

Peter Imbert, Lord Lieutenant of London, was not so much a New Romney man, “more a New Romney urchin” – one of seven children. The Harvey Grammar School at Folkestone was an early influence. “Masters expected so much from you. They were a bit like physiotherapists pushing you a little bit further than your comfort zone,” he recalls. “But I still thought my school days were about games and girls.”

Is that why he joined the police service? Not quite, but he stresses: “I remember telling a friend I wanted to be the youngest detective at Scotland

Yard”, and that’s what he became – he spent 17 years in Special Branch becoming an expert in European terrorist groups and hostage negotiation – and then the country’s youngest chief constable (at Thames Valley).

A school report had warned him: “If this boy doesn’t mend his ways he will end up in the hands of the police.” In this instance it wasn’t a bad outcome. He became the forefather of flexible working hours, building internal customer service with civil staff as well as external, neighbourhood policing, divisional local-based police community consultative teams, diversity and the appreciation of individual community needs and more still.

The Plus programme was true innovation and from it a statement of common purpose and values was devised on which mission policing today is based. British Transport Police chief constable Ian Johnston says Imbert’s lasting impression on Met Police was of “a world-class human being, a leader who galvanised the organisation, strengthening support staff, engaging and entertaining, dignified and down-to-earth, charismatic and championing”.

From his current perspective, 14 years on from retirement, Lord Imbert says: “The call on the

service is immense. Workload is high, finances limited, and the pressures are, at times, overwhelming. Looking after London and elsewhere means helping to prevent crime, targeting and arresting local and international criminals, being professional and sympathetic to victims of crime.

“Police must not forget that today’s aggrieved customer could be tomorrow’s juror. What happens in one small part of the service affects the whole.” If they fail in this, “the public may well look to other agencies for reassurance. That alternative is unacceptable.” He believes customer clinics are essential. “They are selling peace of mind – it’s about knowing what the public want and giving them that service. That’s the measurement that counts. Police need a free rein on this.”

Discontent over crime, bureaucracy, burdens and budgets does not deflect Imbert from a belief in “proper visible policing”. That’s if enough still know how to do it given the Home Office figures that 67,000 of the country’s 143,000 officers never carry out frontline duties and a Scotland Yard survey that it takes on average more than 10 hours to process a single arrest.

He believes the aborted police force amalgamations plan was an opportunity lost. The Home Secretary “got frightened too soon. If it had started slowly with genuine consultation there wouldn’t have been agreement, but the next Home Secretary wouldn’t have had to draw a line through it,” he says. “If Charles Clarke had started by talking to police chiefs over a beer and asking their views...”

He says he treated the Home Office “as human beings and I found they treated me as one. There were occasions when I didn’t trust them and believed they would take a different message to their boss. One Home Secretary wanted to talk to me about a problem and the next thing I heard was he was saying he had discussed this with the Met Commissioner, almost as an endorsement, when in fact he and I saw things differently.

“There are times when police have made a real horlicks of it too. I have found that it is far better to be upfront about it,” he adds.

But then Peter Imbert is a man of courage. “He certainly is,” says BTP’s Ian Johnston, “especially when he’s telling his jokes.”



IMBERT: “better to be upfront”



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