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# Press, Politics and the 'Police and Public' Debates in Late 1920s Britain

John Carter Wood<sup>1</sup>

*Cet article examine une série de scandales affectant la Metropolitan Police londonienne entre 1927 et 1929. Bien que touchant à des questions diverses – accusations de parjure, interrogatoires musclés, corruptions – l'accumulation de ces affaires se chevauchant dans le temps déclencha une crise sérieuse dans ce que l'on considérait communément comme « la meilleure police du monde ». Les débats sur les rapports entre « la police et le public » comportaient une bonne dose de politique partisane. Le parti travailliste, en particulier, se servit de ces scandales pour attaquer le gouvernement conservateur et militer en faveur d'enquêtes et de réformes approfondies, quoique l'insatisfaction à l'égard de la police perçât également dans la presse favorable aux Tories. Mais en définitive la politique n'eut qu'un impact limité sur le cadre procédural de l'activité policière.*

*This article considers a series of scandals centred on London's Metropolitan Police between 1927 and 1929. Although based on various issues – such as accusations of perjured testimony, harsh interrogation methods and corruption – these overlapping events added up to a serious crisis in what was commonly argued to be the 'best police in the world'. There was a significant element of party politics in the 'police and public' debates. The Labour Party in particular used the scandals to attack the Conservative government and push for in-depth inquiries and reforms; however, discontent with policing was also apparent in the Tory-leaning press. Nevertheless, ultimately politics had little concrete impact on the procedural framework of policing.*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n June 1929, a *Manchester Guardian* editorial marked a London visit by continental police officials<sup>2</sup>. “The French and the Germans do many things better than we do”, the paper noted,

<sup>1</sup> John Carter Wood is a researcher at the Institute of European History and the author of *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England: The Shadow of Our Refinement* (Routledge, 2004). His main area of current research concerns topics related to criminality, policing and media in inter-war Britain, but he is also investigating the treatment of ethnic minorities by the London courts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and continues to examine the cultural and social history of interpersonal violence. Major recent and forthcoming publications: *The Most Remarkable Woman in England: Poison, Celebrity and the Trials of Beatrice Pace* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (13 June 1929, p. 10).

...but, by general consent, there is one institution that is rather better in England than in France or Germany. Our police are not at all perfect, as some recent events have shown, but they are, nevertheless, very good, and few foreigners visit this country without being impressed by their quiet efficiency.

Parisian police “are often brutal when they make arrests”, and while the Berlin police chief had done away with brutal, ‘third-degree’ methods:

...Herr Zörgiebel, too, could learn a good deal from the study not only of British police methods but also of the way in which the public reacts instantaneously to anything that looks at all like an excess on the part of the police, demanding that there shall at least be an inquiry and, if there is guilt, the punishment of the guilty.

Remarkably, this praise came in the wake of nearly two years of relentless scandals involving and parliamentary inquiries into the police (the “recent events” cited). From the autumn of 1927, diverse concerns about the police fed into one another, resulting in a perfect storm of controversy and the most intensive press debate about police procedures in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the police have always been contentious – and their relationship with some sections of British society chronically hostile – the late 1920s critiques were distinctive in their intensity and breadth, resulting in a series of parliamentary investigations that were given extensive newspaper coverage. Ultimately, these inquiries failed to change procedures; however, the police’s ability to ride out press criticism and political pressure does not diminish the significance of this particularly tense period in police–public relations. Indeed, analysing a specific example of successful resistance to widespread demands for change contributes to understanding the connections between the cultural and institutional histories of criminal justice in twentieth-century Britain.

At the centre of what I refer to collectively as the ‘police and public’ debates between 1927 and 1929 were constables and detectives from London’s Metropolitan Police, especially their Criminal Investigation Division (CID), better known as ‘Scotland Yard’<sup>3</sup>. The ‘Met’ was not only the largest and best-known force in the country but also the only one directly under the authority of the Home Secretary, making it especially sensitive to broader political currents. It has long been acknowledged that the inter-war period saw a series of tensions around police powers<sup>4</sup>. However, historians have only recently begun to closely examine their causes, contexts, media echoes and political consequences<sup>5</sup>. In this article, I contribute to this growing historiography by drawing out some of the political aspects of the ‘police and public’ debates, referring both to the actions and statements of the dominant parties (Conservative, Liberal and Labour) as well as to the arguments made more broadly by conservative, liberal and left-wing newspapers. What role did politics play in the debates? What impact, if any, did the press have? Finally, to what degree were the police debates influenced by the growing political power of the working classes and of women in the 1920s?

<sup>3</sup> I have adopted this collective name for the scandals as a result of widespread use of the phrase ‘police and public’ as a title in press discussions of these issues, e.g. *Daily Herald* (30 September 1927, p. 4); *Daily Herald* (19 May 1928, p. 4); *Daily Mirror* (25 May 1928, p. 9); *Sunday Pictorial* (16 September 1928, p. 8); *Daily Herald* (11 October 1928, p. 4); Wright (1929).

<sup>4</sup> Browne (1956, p. 326–336); Critchley (1978, pp. 200–202); Emsley (1996, pp. 144–145).

<sup>5</sup> Clark (2009); Clayton (2009b); Emsley (2009, pp. 202–230); Slater (2010).

## A PERFECT STORM: THE 'POLICE AND PUBLIC' DEBATES, AUTUMN 1927 TO SPRING 1929

There were several issues in the 'police and public' debates: doubts about police fairness in making arrests and their honesty in giving evidence; concerns about the methods used to question suspects and witnesses; discomfort about the use of plainclothes constables to monitor drinking in nightclubs and 'indecent' in parks; and suggestions of widespread corruption and bribery. Declining confidence in police evidence led in late 1927 to a parliamentary inquiry referred to as the 'Street Offences Committee', which focused especially on prostitution<sup>6</sup>. The law did not prohibit prostitution itself but rather the 'annoyance' it caused, evidence of which should have been provided by 'annoyed' members of the public; however, public reluctance to testify meant that people were being convicted on police evidence alone<sup>7</sup>. In late 1927 a series of 'failed' street offences cases – where police charges were dismissed or quashed on appeal – heightened concerns, especially successful appeals by two middle-class men (Major G. Bell Murray and Frank Champain) in September 1927<sup>8</sup>. The Committee sat for over a year, accompanied by continuing press interest.

Another concern involved so-called 'third-degree' interrogation through physical or psychological pressure<sup>9</sup>. Accusations that British police were using these 'American' methods occurred across the 1920s, growing dramatically in 1928<sup>10</sup>. Most cases featured men, but two that year involving women caused press sensations. The lengthy questioning by two Met detectives of Beatrice Pace, wife of a mysteriously deceased Gloucestershire farmer, brought charges that she had been left in a "state of collapse"<sup>11</sup>. The matter was debated in Parliament in May, but by then her case had been overshadowed by that of a twenty-two-year-old Londoner named Irene Savidge<sup>12</sup>. Savidge had been arrested on 23 April along with Sir Leo Chiozza Money, a well-known economist and former government minister, for 'indecent' (i.e., sexual activity) in Hyde Park. The case failed utterly and – echoing the concerns that had led to the Street Offences Committee – raised doubts about police evidence<sup>13</sup>. The press mocked the excessive policing of morality in the parks. More seriously, a perjury investigation of the arresting officers began, during which Savidge was questioned for five hours at Scotland Yard. Two days later, Labour MP Tom Johnston recited a series of accusations in Parliament about Savidge's treatment: detectives had questioned her respectability, insisted that she and Money had been engaged in a sexual act and even sought a 'demonstration' of how they

<sup>6</sup> Self (2003, pp. 7-9); Houlbrook (2005, pp. 27-31); Parliament (1928b); Slater (2012).

<sup>7</sup> This situation had resulted around the turn of the century from pressure from moral purity campaigns in which social-purity feminists had played important roles: Bland (1995, pp. 108-110).

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Herald* (25 August 1927, p. 5); *Daily Herald* (22 September 1927, p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Wood (2010).

<sup>10</sup> The National Archives (NA) HO 45/25860/27a, Blackwell to Pick, 25 October 1928.

<sup>11</sup> On the Pace case, see Wood (2009a, 2009b, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Clayton (2009b).

<sup>13</sup> Laite (2008, p. 218) wrongly labels Savidge "a prostitute" and suggests her case led to the calling of the Street Offences Committee; however, the latter had been sitting for half a year when Savidge and Money were arrested.

had been sitting, with one of the detectives standing in for Sir Leo. Her charges of intimidation and sexual impropriety forced the Conservative Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, to call inquiries into Savidge's treatment (widely referred to as the 'Savidge Inquiry') and overall police powers (ultimately in the form of the Royal Commission on Police Powers and Procedure, from September 1928 to March 1929).

Tensions peaked in July 1928. Beatrice Pace's acquittal brought the issue of her treatment back onto the front pages<sup>14</sup>. Then, the announcement that Lord Byng of Vimy, the sixty-six-year-old former commander of Canadian forces during the Great War, would replace Sir William Horwood as Met Commissioner caused Labour MPs and the left-wing press to vigorously protest further police 'militarisation'. Finally, the Savidge Inquiry ended in division: while a majority report by former high-court judge Sir John Eldon Bankes and Conservative MP J.J. Withers cleared the police of any wrongdoing, a minority report by Labour MP Hastings Lees-Smith took Savidge's side and condemned police methods<sup>15</sup>. The police's reputation was further marred by a scandal that broke out in August following accusations by a twenty-one-year-old Londoner named Helene Adele that two Met constables had sexually assaulted her in a north London garage. In mid-September, amid a press frenzy, the constables were sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment<sup>16</sup>.

The Royal Commission began within a month of the constables' trial, focusing on the topics of questioning in custody and the use of plainclothes officers. The public sessions were given extensive press coverage, as a parade of witnesses – high-ranking police and Home Office officials, experienced solicitors and magistrates, and representatives from pressure groups – gave evidence. The proceedings ensured that talk of 'third-degree methods' stayed in the news throughout the winter of 1928-1929. During this time, the Street Offences Committee report was released (in December). Additionally, from November 1928 to January 1929, public attention was focused on one of the most spectacular corruption cases in the history of the Met. The trial of Sergeant George Goddard for accepting bribes from London's 'Queen of the Nightclubs', Kate Meyrick, was not only a sensation but echoed Royal Commission testimony warning of the temptations involved in policing nightclubs<sup>17</sup>. The long series of police scandals coincided with the release of Oscar Slater in July 1928 after nearly twenty years in a Scottish prison for a murder he did not commit. Raising general concerns about miscarriages of justice, the case also involved allegations that the original prosecution had involved police misconduct<sup>18</sup>. There were also background tensions around the regulation of motor traffic, which brought the middle and upper classes into regular (and uncomfortable) contact with the police<sup>19</sup>. Across the period 1927-1929, these distinct issues – street offences; the Pace, Savidge and Adele cases; Lord Byng's nomination, the Royal Commission;

<sup>14</sup> E.g., *Daily Express* (7 July 1928, p. 8); *Daily Herald* (9 July 1928, p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> Parliament (1928a).

<sup>16</sup> Fido, Skinner (2000, pp. 2-3); *Manchester Guardian* (15 September 1928, p. 11); Emsley (2009, pp. 208-209).

<sup>17</sup> Emsley (2005).

<sup>18</sup> Toughill (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Emsley (1993).

corruption; and increasing regulatory responsibilities – suggested that something had gone seriously wrong in one of the most revered of British institutions<sup>20</sup>.

## POLITICS, PRESS AND POLICE

Crime and policing have tended to be downplayed as political issues in analyses of early twentieth-century Britain. On the basis of election manifestoes, Clive Emsley has persuasively argued that “crime, police and penal policy were never the political footballs that they were to become at the end of the century”<sup>21</sup>. The left criticised the police, but “the [Labour] party as a body studiously avoided making either the police or policing an issue of national political debate”<sup>22</sup>. Clearly, policing and crime failed to become electoral issues, and Labour leaders avoided open confrontation with the police; however, there was a hitherto underestimated political dynamic to the late 1920s’ ‘police and public’ debates. Labour and the left-wing press were most likely to criticise the police, arguing that problems were systemic – thus requiring thoroughgoing reform – and push for more intensive inquiries. Conservatives in the press and in Parliament were, by contrast, the police’s most ardent defenders and tended to resist pressure for reform. Liberals often sided with Labour, to whom they had unwillingly ceded their leading opposition role in the early 1920s, and liberal newspapers (the London-based *Daily Chronicle* and *Daily News* or the *Manchester Guardian*) were important critics of the police.

Labour’s leading role in the police debates is unsurprising: its working-class constituency had long been the main targets of police authority and, at times, violence<sup>23</sup>. However, Labour’s interest in police issues went well beyond these contexts. In the autumn of 1927, the union-owned *Daily Herald* gave relentless attention to the street offences issue, highlighting the vulnerabilities of working-class men and especially women from the overzealous policing of morality<sup>24</sup>. In May 1928 Labour MP Will Thorne – joined by his party colleague Ellen Wilkinson – condemned the ‘third-degree’ treatment of Beatrice Pace, demanding to know whether such a “wicked system” had been ordered by the police leadership<sup>25</sup>. All parties expressed outrage about the Savidge case, but Labour increasingly drove public and political responses. Not only did one Labour MP (Tom Johnston) dramatically air her charges, another (Hastings Lees-Smith) wrote the Inquiry’s minority report, warning of “grave perils to private citizens and to civil liberty”<sup>26</sup>.

Political affiliation was a strong predictor of press reactions to the Savidge Inquiry. The *Daily Herald* approvingly reported Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald’s comment that the public would be “far more impressed” by Lees-Smith’s minority

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Daily Herald* (9 July 1928, p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Emsley (2003, p. 449).

<sup>22</sup> Emsley (1996, p. 145).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., White (1983); Emsley (1996, pp. 136–143); Davies (2000).

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Herald*: (21 September 1927, p. 1); (22 September 1927, p. 1); (22 September 1927, p. 4); (24 September 1927, p. 5); (30 September 1927, p. 1); (30 September 1927, p. 4); (3 October 1927, p. 5); (5 October 1927, p. 3); (15 October 1927, p. 1).

<sup>25</sup> *HC Deb* (23 May 1928 vol. 217 cc1890–1892)

<sup>26</sup> Parliament (1928a, p. 29).

report than the majority one, “which seems to have gone on the assumption that the first duty of the Tribunal was to whitewash everything, and, when it had finished the whitewashing, to admit that it had been whitewashed”<sup>27</sup>. The Fabian *New Statesman* called the majority report a “disgraceful document” and condemned the “inanities” of its authors: it offered “an interesting example of the limits of ‘whitewash,’ because in it those limits are so clearly overstepped”<sup>28</sup>. In August, it reiterated its criticism: “To the public impression that police officers sometimes behave improperly – as naturally they do – has now been added the impression that however improperly they behave they will be defended and protected by the most authoritative members of the legal profession”<sup>29</sup>. “It is the system which is wrong”, argued *Reynolds’s Illustrated News*: “Its weaknesses are set forth in the series of questions included in Mr. Lees Smith’s report as fit subjects of inquiry”<sup>30</sup>. The liberal press was also critical. In the *Sunday Chronicle*, a county court judge observed:

But for the Minority Report of Mr. Lees-Smith the Savidge Inquiry would have been [a] waste of time and money; the Majority Report, with the exception of its concluding paragraphs, might have been written in Scotland Yard<sup>31</sup>.

The *Daily Chronicle* thought the majority report was a “slipshod, unindustrious piece of work”<sup>32</sup>. The *Daily News* called it a “singularly ineffective and feeble document”, compared to Lees-Smith’s “very careful and masterly analysis and comparison of all the evidence available”<sup>33</sup>. The *Manchester Guardian* took the same view, suggesting that current police methods were “open to grave objection” and observing that the Royal Commission “cannot be too wide or too searching”<sup>34</sup>.

Conservative papers, to the contrary, tended to dismiss the minority report. The *Daily Mail* downplayed the Savidge matter as “at worst some small error of judgment” and highlighted Lees-Smith’s lack of legal experience compared to the authors of the majority report, “and therefore his views cannot carry the same authority as theirs”<sup>35</sup>. The inquiry was justified, the *Daily Express* admitted, but now, it urged, “let us have a rest”. “As for the Home Secretary,” it continued, “we suggest that for a time he lets the police alone and turns his lively intelligence in some other direction.” “Instead of shackling the police with new regulations let him use his great influence in the Government to unshackle the public from some of the absurd restrictions on its freedom and rational pleasures”<sup>36</sup>. Less than a week later, Joynson-Hicks echoed this sentiment, appealing to “every man and woman throughout

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Herald* (16 July 1928, p. 2). The *Sunday Worker* put the ‘whitewash’ accusation on its front page: 15 July 1928, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *New Statesman* (21 July 1928, p. 472).

<sup>29</sup> *New Statesman* (4 August 1928, p. 533).

<sup>30</sup> *Reynolds’s Illustrated News* (15 July 1928, p. 12).

<sup>31</sup> *Sunday Chronicle* quoted by Lord Arnold, *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol. 71 c1358).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted by Lord Arnold, *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol 71 c1357).

<sup>33</sup> *Daily News* quoted in *Daily Herald* (16 July 1928, p. 2).

<sup>34</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (14 July 1928, p. 12).

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Mail* (14 July 1928, p. 10).

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Express* (14 July 1928, p. 8). Johnston complained about this article in Parliament, suggesting “there is a definite and clear connexion between certain sections of the Press and Scotland Yard, and that this connexion is used for political and personal ends.” *The Times* (21 July 1928, p. 7).



London, those 8,000,000 of people – for God's sake, let the police alone for the next twelve months!"<sup>37</sup>. There were exceptions. In Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mirror*, barrister George Godwin argued that, "For the police to descend upon a girl and rush her to Scotland Yard for a lengthy interrogation without any sort of chaperonage is an outrageous proceeding"<sup>38</sup>. As with other contemporary issues – such as women's voting rights or trade – Rothermere's papers, though clearly 'conservative', were at odds with the government<sup>39</sup>.

In the Commons debate on the Savidge reports, the parties played the same roles they had in earlier exchanges on similar matters<sup>40</sup>. The same could be said of a Lords debate shortly thereafter. Labour peer Lord Arnold quoted from criticism of the majority report in the popular press and legal journals, and he denounced the official handling of the affair. His colleague Earl Russell voiced the common Labour refrain that the inquiry was "another case of whitewashing where whitewash was thought to be necessary"<sup>41</sup>. The Marquess of Reading, a Liberal, sought to bring the issue above the political fray:

All political Parties...were seriously disturbed, because they did regard the facts as they appeared as a very distinct attack upon the freedom of the ordinary citizen and as an assumption by the police authorities of a right of interference with the liberty of the subject in a manner which challenged the public mind<sup>42</sup>.

Tory peers, however, sided with the police. Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State for India, contrasted the majority report with the "comparatively inexperienced" work of Lees-Smith, condemned the "hysterical" response of police critics, criticised Savidge and Money, and fulsomely praised the police. Any problems were down to individual "black sheep": suggestions that people were losing faith in the police were "the murmurings of imbecility"<sup>43</sup>.

The systemic critique of the police by Labour and its allies led them to seek more extensive public inquiries. This tendency was visible in the *Herald's* attention to 'failed' street offences cases in late 1927 and Labour's demands for an inquiry into police powers. Later, just as Will Thorne had condemned the 'third-degree methods' allegedly used against Beatrice Pace, Labour sought to use the parliamentary debate on the Savidge affair to press for an in-depth investigation into a range of police methods. As the *Daily Herald* reported:

Labour cheers greeted an allusion by Mr. [Arthur] Henderson to Third Degree methods – not confined to this case. He hoped therefore the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister would keep their minds open as to the scope of the inquiry. 'Let us make it real and comprehensive and searching,' he said. 'Then probably we shall do something to restore public confidence and, I hope, prevent any repetition of one of the most disgraceful episodes ever brought to the notice of this House'<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> *Reynolds's Illustrated News* (22 July 1928, p. 1).

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Mirror* (14 July 1928, p. 4).

<sup>39</sup> Bingham (2002).

<sup>40</sup> See *The Times* (21 July 1928, pp. 7-8).

<sup>41</sup> *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol. 71 c1387).

<sup>42</sup> *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol. 71 c1371).

<sup>43</sup> *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol. 71 c1397, c1403 and c1404).

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Herald* (18 May 1928, p. 1); *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1318).



During the Commons debate about Lord Byng's appointment on 11 July, Joynson-Hicks referred to the forthcoming "commission in regard to alleged third-degree methods *for which hon. Members opposite are pressing*"<sup>45</sup>. In a 16 July memo, Ernley Blackwell, the Home Office Legal Advisor, observed that the inquiry that MacDonald sought would "practically cover the whole field of the administration of the criminal law so far as it rests with the Police." "I shudder to think," he continued, "what period Mr. MacDonald's Royal Commission would need to complete their inquiry. The members would have to be very young in order that any of those originally appointed might survive to sign the Report"<sup>46</sup>. In the end, the Commission was more narrowly defined and completed its work in about seven months.

While Labour was the key political protagonist in capitalising on policing scandals, conservative opinions were far from monolithic. On the one hand, they were most likely to downplay allegations, shift responsibility away from the police, blame 'black sheep' and urge the public to treat the police 'fairly', thus insinuating others were not<sup>47</sup>. Some Tories were willing, even eager, to use the police to enforce public morality, a tendency in the 1920s most strongly associated in the public mind with Sir William Joynson-Hicks, Home Secretary from November 1924 to June 1929. 'Jix', as he was often known, gained a reputation as a crusading moralist regarding issues such as gambling, drinking, public decency and sexually explicit books. He thus contradicted the spirit of the 'roaring twenties'<sup>48</sup>. However, he had inherited many of these regulatory imperatives, and, as Stefan Petrow has examined, pressures from moral reform organisations had helped ensure that "the powers of the Metropolitan Police, under Home Office direction, had been greatly augmented" before the Great War<sup>49</sup>. Wartime legislation – especially the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) – had extended police powers further. But although Joynson-Hicks had not individually defined police policy, he and his party strongly defended the police's methods. "Suggestions have been made that I should leave Hyde Park alone", he stated shortly before the end of the Savidge Inquiry: "The result would be a disgrace to civilisation within a fortnight. That I cannot possibly do"<sup>50</sup>.

On the other hand, there was also conservative and populist libertarian criticism of the police in the press throughout the 1920s. Like moral authoritarianism, these were rooted in pre-war trends<sup>51</sup>. An inquiry into the mistaken arrest of Major Robert Sheppard in 1925 for theft from a prostitute led even a solidly establishment paper like *The Times* to critique police methods, calling its report "disquieting" and warning that "anybody accused in like circumstances may be so treated at the unfettered discretion of a police sergeant tomorrow"<sup>52</sup>. Tory-leaning popular newspapers were

<sup>45</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 c2279). Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> NA HO 45/25860/12a, Memo by Ernley Blackwell (16 July 1928).

<sup>47</sup> They were not alone: in an article titled 'The finest police in the world', former Liberal Home Secretary Edward Shortt argued: "The British policeman is still held up as a model the world over." *Sunday News* (7 October 1928, p. 8).

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Blythe (1964, pp. 24-54). "He was the most prudish, puritanical, and protestant home secretary of the twentieth century": Thompson (2004).

<sup>49</sup> Petrow (1994, p. 294). For a more sympathetic interpretation of Joynson-Hicks, see Clayton (2009a).  
<sup>50</sup> *Reynolds's Illustrated News* (1 July 1928, p. 3).

<sup>51</sup> Petrow (1994, p. 300).

<sup>52</sup> *The Times* (17 August 1925, p. 11).

even more eager to raise concerns. In late 1927, they linked the street offences problem to DORA, adopting the common image of the wartime legislation as a censorious, elderly woman. "If ridicule could kill anything", The *Sunday Express* observed, "it would have killed D.O.R.A. long ago. But this obsolete old lady has defied public execration and obloquy for nine long years. Her stupidities and imbecilities are invincible and invulnerable"<sup>53</sup>. The *Daily Mirror* urged readers to pay attention to the Street Offences Committee, "since who knows that he or she may not fall under suspicion?"<sup>54</sup>:

There is after all so much of D.O.R.A. about still – the denunciatory lady still lurks in so many corners – that we want to be sure that she won't suddenly bang us with her umbrella, simply because we are, we really *are*, waiting for a bus<sup>54</sup>.

Later, linking Money's and Savidge's arrest to the street-offences issue, the paper observed: "The Street Offences Committee is composed of almost terrifyingly respectable persons. Let them reflect upon this truly awful possibility – that even *they* might not be safe, if they dared to take chairs in Hyde Park"<sup>55</sup>. For conservative libertarians, such "puritan" and "nosey parker" policing meant a greater, and distinctly un-British, interference in everyday life<sup>56</sup>.

Even when concerned about the police, however, Conservatives tended to place blame elsewhere, especially on the legislature. In the Commons debate about Lord Byng, Sir W. Greaves-Lord highlighted police difficulties: "a great many of the regulations which they have to enforce, and a great many of the laws which they have to administer, concern actions in which a great many people see no particular wrong"<sup>57</sup>. Viscountess Astor agreed:

There is, as the Home Secretary said, a rather uneasy feeling throughout the country, but I believe it ought to be more against the laws than against the police trying to administer the laws. I do not believe a company of arch-angels could administer some of our laws justly, because the laws are not just<sup>58</sup>.

Their colleague on the Tory benches, Captain Terence James O'Connor – who, as we shall see, made his own charges about the police – argued similarly: "Believe me, my criticism is not so much against the [police]man in the street. I think at the present moment he is the victim of a pernicious system, and a great deal of this corruption begins at the very top"<sup>59</sup>. Some two weeks later, in the Lords debate on the results of the Savidge Inquiry, Tory peer Lord Balfour of Burleigh noted: "It is felt that the police are victims of the system which they now have to administer"<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> *Sunday Express* (6 November 1927, p. 12).

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Mirror* (22 December 1927, p. 7).

<sup>55</sup> *Daily Mirror* (4 May 1928, p. 7).

<sup>56</sup> *World's Pictorial News* (13 May 1928, p. 4); *World's Pictorial News* (20 January 1929, p. 4); *Sunday Pictorial* (1 July 1928, p. 8).

<sup>57</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 c2292).

<sup>58</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 c2305). She also criticised outgoing Met Commissioner Horwood for resisting the expanded use of female police officers, claiming that if earlier recommendations had been carried out, "we should never have had this Savidge scandal to-day. I am glad he [Horwood] is going." (c 2305).

<sup>59</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 c2320).

<sup>60</sup> *HL Deb* (26 July 1928 vol. 71 c1384).

The police had been “made a fool of by Acts of Parliament and by ‘moral’ chiefs,” argued T.A. Hannam in the *World’s Pictorial News* in July 1928, at the height of the crisis: “The policeman is the victim everywhere of a lot of pin-pricking laws and orders that he has to say are enforced; stupid regulations and rules, interference with our play and amusements, our tobacco, our sweets, and our sweetheating”<sup>61</sup>. The Royal Commission’s report itself strongly emphasised the problems caused by enforcing laws that, “in contrast to our criminal law as a whole, do not command the general or convinced support of public opinion”, such as those dealing with public decency, gambling and drinking<sup>62</sup>.

## CLASS AND GENDER ISSUES

The content of the parties’ analyses of the police issues also differed: Labour and the left put particular emphasis on class and gender issues. Throughout the inter-war period, the policing of demonstrations – whether by striking or unemployed workers – was condemned, and Special Branch was critiqued for focusing its efforts on left-wing and working-class organisations<sup>63</sup>. Police scandals involving the treatment of wealthier men were used to highlight broader problems: responding to Major Murray’s wrongful arrest case, the *Daily Herald* observed: “It should be noted that to establish his innocence has cost him over £300 – a sum utterly out of the reach of a poor man or woman”<sup>64</sup>. The paper likewise criticised the Street Offences Committee’s lack of “experience of working-class conditions”: its narrow terms of reference ignored the “connection between the evils of prostitution, public indecency and hooliganism and economic troubles (unemployment, underpayment, bad housing conditions, etc.) which Labour men and women have studied and fought insistently to remedy for many, many years”<sup>65</sup>. One Labour official asserted the Committee’s key aim must be to “equalise these matters of street offences between the rich and the poor” while another complained of the “one-sided view of things” resulting from the “entire absence of Labour representation”: “The committee is almost entirely representative of the rich and influential classes, who, if they suffer some injustice, have means to bring it to the public notice”<sup>66</sup>. Beatrice Pace’s MP, A.A. Purcell – a committed trade unionist on the Labour Party’s left wing – set

<sup>61</sup> *World’s Pictorial News* (July 22, 1928, p. 4).

<sup>62</sup> Parliament (1929, p. 76).

<sup>63</sup> Kingsford (1982); Emsley (1996, pp. 136-143); Clark (2009).

<sup>64</sup> *Daily Herald* (22 September 1927, p. 4).

<sup>65</sup> *Daily Herald* (17 October 1927, p. 4).

<sup>66</sup> *Daily Herald* (17 October 1927, p. 1). This perspective was not confined to Labour. In the parliamentary debate about the Savidge Inquiry reports, Communist MP Shapurji Saklatvala complained that other MPs had only raised concerns of the better-off classes, “of some people who want to drive faster than is good for them or for others, and of people who want to drink more than is good for them, or want to kiss their girls in public rather than in private, or on their feet instead of on their faces, or something like that.” 70 per cent of the London population were working class and realised “that the great class struggle is still developing, and that the police forces are used in that struggle as if they were the servants of a particular and privileged class.” *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 c2322). Members from other parties (including Conservatives) had, however, criticised working-class women being convicted of prostitution solely on police evidence.

up a legal defence fund for his impoverished constituent. After Pace's acquittal, he condemned her treatment and introduced a bill to create a public defender for poor defendants charged with serious crimes<sup>67</sup>. "Is there really no sense of decency on the part of the Crown", he exclaimed in the Commons, responding to the refusal to compensate Pace for her legal 'ordeal'<sup>68</sup>. Will Thorne – along with Rhys Hopkin Morris, a Liberal – also critiqued the handling of the case by the coroner and public prosecutor.

Having already criticised Lord Byng's appointment as Met Commissioner the previous week, Labour turned an 11 July 1928 parliamentary debate on the matter into a general confrontation about the police<sup>69</sup>. Philip Snowden presented at length the party's view that there was "a growing militarisation of the police force"<sup>70</sup>. Ellen Wilkinson echoed and expanded upon Snowden's comments: there was a need to thoroughly "modernise" the police after years of "reaction" under Horwood; the public had been "disturbed" by the police methods in the Pace case, she said, and "revolted" by detectives' efforts to use Pace's children "to put a noose round their mother's neck". In particular, the government had ignored,

...the attitude of many thousands of trades union men and women towards the further militarisation of the police force. Our experiences during the [1926] general strike are still in our minds. I had a good deal of experience and I saw something, and I raised questions in the House with regard to the brutality of the police in certain areas – not the local men who knew the circumstances but the imported men – and the general feeling there that the desire of the Conservative party and of the Conservative Cabinet was to militarise the police in order to hold up the workers of the country<sup>71</sup>.

Ignoring cries of "Nonsense!" from the government benches, she reiterated her view<sup>72</sup>.

Along with class, Labour and the left emphasised the particular vulnerabilities of women to the abuse of police powers. The relationship between feminism and Labour politics was often conflicted, but it appears to have been largely harmonious in the 'police and public' debates. For example, referring to the make-up of the Street Offences Committee, which included five women, a *Daily Herald* editorial commented:

Women are particularly affected by the present law and practice concerning these offences, and it is outrageous that the many able and experienced women connected with the Labour Movement should have been passed over<sup>73</sup>.

This emphasis continued through 1928, as the most publicised victims of alleged police abuses were women. After Beatrice Pace's acquittal, autobiographies and life stories appeared in the *Sunday Express*, *World's Pictorial News*, *Thomson's*

<sup>67</sup> *Reynolds's Illustrated News* (8 July 1928, p. 5).

<sup>68</sup> *HC Deb* (9 July 1928, vol. 219 cc1857-58); *Daily Mail* (10 July 1928, p. 13); *Reynolds's Illustrated News* (15 July 1928, p. 5).

<sup>69</sup> *HC Deb* (4 July 1928 vol. 219 cc1381-5); *The Times* (5 July 1928, p. 9).

<sup>70</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 cc2263-330).

<sup>71</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 cc2307-09).

<sup>72</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (12 July 1928, p. 6).

<sup>73</sup> *Daily Herald* (17 October 1927, p. 4).

*Weekly News* and *Peg's Paper* that emphasised the 'ordeal' she had been put through by the legal system. Irene Savidge and Helen Adele epitomised the 'flapper' that preoccupied the 1920s press, and commentary about their cases mixed titillated fascination with young, attractive and self-assertive 'modern girls' with concerned protectiveness. In what later became a much repeated comment during the first Savidge debate, leading Liberal Sir John Simon exclaimed, "If it happened to my daughter how should I feel?"<sup>74</sup>. Of the three cases, Savidge's had the most direct political impact. Without explicitly retracting the charges made in the press about her interrogation, Pace later claimed detectives treated her well and by the time the Adele scandal broke in August parliamentary investigations were either completed (the Savidge Inquiry), underway (the Street Offences Committee) or about to begin (the Royal Commission)<sup>75</sup>.

As Louise Jackson argues, feminist arguments for using women police "soon blurred with protective arguments about moral propriety – that it was indecent for a woman to be questioned by men about intimate matters" – as well as with 'traditionalist' views that saw 'social' and 'welfare' work as feminine<sup>76</sup>. This helped to make the argument for increased numbers of female police at least theoretically palatable across party lines; however, Labour was most consistent, and insistent, on this issue. In Parliament, senior Labour politician and former Home Secretary Arthur Henderson argued that the Savidge case showed the need for women police<sup>77</sup>. That a woman police officer had accompanied Savidge to Scotland Yard, but been dismissed before questioning began, was particularly criticised<sup>78</sup>. Another Labour MP urged that at least one woman should be on the inquiry into the affair<sup>79</sup>. Scepticism about women police was most common among Conservatives and reflected resistance among significant parts of the police hierarchy itself<sup>80</sup>. One exception was Nancy Astor who, with other female MPs (Labour, Liberal and Independent), worked to expand the role for women police. Astor felt compelled to "protest" the lack of women on the Savidge Inquiry:

I must say that, as this case concerns women, and particularly the treatment of a woman, we do feel that if the recommendations of the women's organisations which have been fighting so long in the country to see that women were in Scotland Yard, had been carried out, this would never have happened.

<sup>74</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1321). The *Daily Herald* observed: "During the Commons discussion on the case, Sir John Simon made a remark which struck an answering chord from Land's End to John o' Groats. It was this: 'If that happened to my daughter, how should I feel?': *Daily Herald* (14 July 1928, p. 4); see also *Observer* (20 May 1928, p. 16); *Reynolds's Illustrated News* (15 July 1928, p. 12).

<sup>75</sup> As a Home Office official put it, the Pace allegations "heated public opinion to the point where it was ready to explode when the Savidge case occurred". NA HO 144/10854/31a, 'Memo in anticipation of questions being raised', Arthur Locke (9 July 1928, p. 1). I thank Bob Morris for assistance in analysing this source.

<sup>76</sup> Jackson (2006, p. 19); see also Jackson (2000).

<sup>77</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1317).

<sup>78</sup> Wyles (1952); Clayton (2009b).

<sup>79</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1337).

<sup>80</sup> Emsley (2009, p. 211-212). Met Commissioner Horwood told the Royal Commission he agreed with the proposition that women police would be unfit for "really responsible police work": *Manchester Guardian* (16 October 1928, p. 4). See also *HC Deb* (30 July 1931 vol. 255 cc2612-13).

She was interrupted by jeers while pointing out that there were women barristers; Ellen Wilkinson defended her, framing the issue as non-party-political:

I thought it was very extraordinary when a woman rose in this House to raise this matter, which is felt very keenly by a large number of women connected with all parties judging by the letters we have received on this subject, that the suggestion should have been received with shouts of derision<sup>81</sup>.

The controversial conclusion of the Savidge Inquiry fed continuing pressure from Labour and feminists. The Women's Freedom League, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the National Council of Women of Great Britain as well as Scottish feminist organisations – in part via sympathetic MPs – urged the Home Secretary to name women to the Royal Commission<sup>82</sup>. In a letter to *The Times*, the NUSEC leadership – among them Will Thorne – observed, "It is notorious that the majority of cases where police methods have given rise to public anxiety have concerned sexual offences, and that the recent case of a grave criminal prosecution in which police methods have been specially criticized also concerned a woman (Mrs. Pace)." The tiny number of women police officers at this time meant that "the possibility of abuse, of unfair pressure on witnesses by the police, and, on the other hand, of calumnies of the police by witnesses, are at their gravest in cases in which women are concerned". "Women are more than half the adult population", it concluded, "and we do not consider that one woman member of such a Commission is adequate"<sup>83</sup>. Ultimately, two of eight members were women: Dame Meriel Talbot and Margaret Beavan<sup>84</sup>.

## EXCEPTIONS AND COMPLEXITIES

I have argued that politics mattered to the 'police and public' debates. Labour used the various scandals in order to push for broader inquiries into – and greater restrictions on – police powers. Conservatives were more divided on the policing issue. Although the Conservative government set up the Street Offences Committee, Savidge Inquiry and Royal Commission, it actively defended the police, downplayed the existence of systemic problems and sought to justify police actions. Libertarian conservatives – both among backbench MPs as well as in the press – were, by contrast, more willing to condemn police excesses. While the police were criticised from both left and right, however, these critiques remained distinct. Political differences, for example, coexisted with a strongly shared cultural consensus about the distinctive nature of British policing, an 'indulgent tradition' that idealised the British police as the guarantors of a particularly British liberty<sup>85</sup>. 'Britishness' (or 'Englishness')

<sup>81</sup> *HC Deb* (23 May 1928 vol. 217 c1928). Liberal Ernest Brown moved an amendment to the terms of the tribunal to ensure that at least one woman would be a part of it: "This is not a matter of man's liberty or woman's liberty but a question of the people's civil liberty, and I think that when a tribunal of this kind is set up there should be a woman upon it." (c1927) This was seconded by Wilkinson. When it became clear that this amendment had no chance, Brown withdrew it (c1929).

<sup>82</sup> TNA HO 45/25860/1 and /12a.

<sup>83</sup> *The Times* (30 July 1928, p. 8).

<sup>84</sup> *Daily Herald* (14 August 1928, p. 1).

<sup>85</sup> Emsley (1992).



is always hard to define; however, the inter-war decades saw efforts to develop a more humane and ‘gentlemanly’ national ideal<sup>86</sup>. There were also concerns about national decline and foreign cultural influences, whether from continental Europe or the United States<sup>87</sup>.

The emphasis on a distinctive national tradition of policing was strongest among conservatives in press and Parliament. For example, in the midst of the debates around the findings of the Savidge tribunal, a *Daily Mail* editorial condemned the “wild exaggeration” in most of the charges against the police, noting in particular that it was “preposterous” to compare Scotland Yard with the Soviet Cheka. The next day, while admitting that the police were “not perfect”, the paper insisted “we know of no foreign police force which can compare with them for efficiency, courtesy, good humour, and unflinching courage”<sup>88</sup>. Labour MPs and party leaders, however, also frequently downplayed party political motivations and praised ordinary police officers. Ramsay MacDonald, although criticising the senior members of the police hierarchy, was quoted as saying he did not blame individual officers for the Savidge incident: “The police have always got a very difficult job to perform, and they deserve, and I hope they will always receive, our wholehearted support in carrying out their work.” “Even when they make mistakes”, he insisted, “they must be generously and fairly dealt with”<sup>89</sup>. Two months later, in the wake of the Savidge Inquiry’s divided conclusions, he reiterated his point at a socialist festival at Crystal Palace, describing Savidge’s treatment by a Scotland Yard detective as “not British at all.” However, “It was evident that men like Inspector Collins detested the system as much as they did. The people responsible were not Inspector This or Sergeant That, but those at the head who ran the system in their own class interest”<sup>90</sup>. The degree of open partisanship varied from issue to issue, being most noticeable in the debates around Lord Byng and least apparent, at first, in the Savidge case. Its prevalence in the former was unsurprising: ‘militarisation’ went to the heart of enduring trade-union sensitivities about the policing of demonstrations and strikes.

The initial outrage generated by the Savidge case, in contrast, appears distinctly cross-party. In presenting Savidge’s charges, Tom Johnston insisted that Labour had not “the slightest concern” with the original arrest (Sir Leo Money was a well-connected member of the Labour Party): “Our concern tonight is that we should take whatever steps can be taken by this House to preserve what civil liberties we still possess, and it is our duty to offer a resolute and determined opposition to anything in the nature of a Tcheka, or the Turkish system, or the Star Chamber method, or what is known in the United States of America as the third degree”<sup>91</sup>. At the conclusion of his Commons speech, Johnston appealed to “every member of the House who had

<sup>86</sup> Mandler (2006); Lawrence (2003).

<sup>87</sup> Waters (2007).

<sup>88</sup> *Daily Mail* (14 July 1928, p. 10); *Daily Mail* (13 July 1928, p. 10).

<sup>89</sup> *Sunday Express* (20 May 1928, p. 1).

<sup>90</sup> *Sunday Dispatch* (22 July 1928, p. 13). MacDonald and Margaret Bondfield were “booed” by Communists, and “several persons were ejected from the hall.”

<sup>91</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1304). Johnston reiterated this point in a later debate on the Savidge Inquiry’s reports: “This question [of the Savidge case] had been raised purely on the ground of civil liberty. He had never spoken to Miss Savidge, and he had never had any communication from her. It was over four years since he had had any communication from Sir Leo Money, and Labour members were concerned in no way with the Hyde Park case.” *The Times* (21 July 1928, p. 7).



any respect for civil liberty” to unite against such police methods, to cheers from both government and opposition benches<sup>92</sup>. He drew here upon a well-established language of British exceptionalism, one replicated in press coverage. “From all parties and all quarters of the House”, wrote the *Economist*, “came the unequivocal demand for immediate, full and impartial investigation of the [Savidge] incident, and the Home Secretary, with whose difficult position we sympathise, acquiesced with a good grace and with a well-balanced gesture of justice and impartiality as between the police and their superiors”<sup>93</sup>. Even newspapers that were not normally friendly to Labour praised the fairness with which Johnston presented the case. The then-Tory *Observer* thought the case touched upon issues that went to the heart of British politics and even identity, praising how the House of Commons “instinctively rose above party”<sup>94</sup>.

The Savidge case – centring on a young woman from a respectable lower-middle-class background and a prominent man of means – provoked anxieties across all political opinions, which initially served to defuse explicit party conflict, even if the scandal occurred in the midst of an already active opposition campaign critical of the police<sup>95</sup>. However, even during the Savidge debate, there were hints of sharper political divisions between the parties. When Johnston referred to ‘third degree’ methods, one Labour backbencher exclaimed “That is British liberty” to cheers from his colleagues<sup>96</sup>. A Scottish Labour MP cried out “British bullies” when Johnston was laying out Savidge’s charges, and a Labour Member at one point exclaimed “The Home Secretary is in the dock”<sup>97</sup>. One should not read too much into the background noise of parliamentary debate, but in this case it matched wider political divisions and foreshadowed reactions to the divided results of the Savidge Inquiry. When the two reports were issued, the *Sunday Pictorial* observed, “it is notorious that the Socialist Party have [sic] always been hostile to the representatives of law and order”<sup>98</sup>. Cross-party unity on police issues, though a part of the ‘indulgent tradition’, proved to be brief.

Individual opinions also mattered. Labour may have taken a leading role in criticising the police throughout this period, but a few Labour voices sought to defend ordinary police officers. This was most notable in the case of Jack Hayes, MP for Edge Hill. Hayes had been a prominent figure in the struggle to establish an independent police trade union in the immediate post-war period, which was effectively ended by the Police Act of 1919. His political career emphasised “representing the interests of lower-ranking police and prison officers”, which was apparent during the ‘police

<sup>92</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 cc1310-11). *Manchester Guardian* (18 May 1928, p. 8).

<sup>93</sup> ‘Liberty and the police,’ *Economist* (26 May 1928, p. 1063).

<sup>94</sup> The case touched upon “The whole relationship between the citizen and the law, the whole tradition and development of British institutions, our national pride in principles of government wherein we have set an example to the world.” *Observer* (20 May 1928, p. 16.)

<sup>95</sup> There were exceptions. A letter to *The Times* on the Savidge case in May noted “some signs of an attempt in certain Socialist quarters to exploit this lamentable episode as an instrument of attack upon the authorities who are responsible for the maintenance of law and order in this country.” *The Times* (19 May 1928, p. 15).

<sup>96</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (18 May 1928, p. 8).

<sup>97</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1309).

<sup>98</sup> *Sunday Pictorial* (15 July 1928, p. 8).

and public' debates<sup>99</sup>. Commenting on Savidge's charges, Hayes critiqued a system which left "the individual officer to incur the penalty of public opinion"<sup>100</sup>. Hayes – sometimes joined by former Liberal Joseph Kenworthy, who had joined Labour in 1926 – took a public interest in the two officers who had arrested Savidge and Money in Hyde Park. Savidge's later questioning by detectives had, after all, arisen from an investigation into whether these two constables had committed perjury. Hayes was concerned about the impact that the "bad atmosphere" resulting from Savidge's accusations might have had on any trial<sup>101</sup>. Ultimately, there was no prosecution against the two policemen<sup>102</sup>. Hayes echoed a common critique – one not confined to Labour – about the growing use of undercover police: "They did not go on duty in plain clothes for their own amusement, but because they were ordered to do so"<sup>103</sup>. Two days later, Hayes reiterated his point, claiming that the officers were "as much victims of the system as any other aggrieved persons" and asserting "they are entitled to justice"<sup>104</sup>. Hayes's views were not untypical for Labour, but his ardent defence of individual constables was distinctive.

As noted, Nancy Astor was unique among Conservatives in these years for the extent of her advocacy of women police<sup>105</sup>. Another exception was the Member for Luton, Terence O'Connor. When the Savidge matter was debated on 17 May 1928, O'Connor, a barrister, made a series of accusations about the police that even exceeded those made by Labour MPs. He said he had personal knowledge of cases "which approximate to the 'third degree,'" (i.e., people "kept at Scotland Yard for considerable periods of time while statements were being taken from them"). He had himself been the victim of police perjury in a 'dangerous driving' case – which was later dismissed. He had wanted to raise the issue before; however:

I was told by sensible, serious people whom I respected, in all quarters of the House – not by way of threat, but by way of caution – 'Do not dare mix up in this [sic], because, if you do, they will get you sooner or later'; and there are serious, reasonable people in this country who are afraid to go into Hyde Park, and who really do view with apprehension the threat that, somehow or other, the police will get back at them if they attempt to enforce the ordinary rights of citizens<sup>106</sup>.

In the debate on Byng's nomination, O'Connor reiterated some of his police criticisms, highlighted the degree of public discontent with the police and raised new, more specific claims about police corruption<sup>107</sup>. In the view of the *Daily Mail*,

<sup>99</sup> Davies (2004).

<sup>100</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1323).

<sup>101</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1324). See also *HC Deb* (5 July 1928 vol. 219 cc1548-50); *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 cc2241-43).

<sup>102</sup> *Daily Express* (11 July 1928, p. 1).

<sup>103</sup> *Daily Herald* (23 May 1928, p. 5).

<sup>104</sup> *Daily Herald* (25 May 1928, p. 1).

<sup>105</sup> "Though officially a Conservative, she never hid her ambivalent attitude towards the party, yet at the same time her attacks on the Labour Party made it difficult for her to emerge as an independent politician." M. Pugh, 'Astor, Nancy Witcher, Viscountess Astor (1879-1964)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30489>, accessed 2 June 2010].

<sup>106</sup> *HC Deb* (17 May 1928 vol. 217 c1319).

<sup>107</sup> *HC Deb* (11 July 1928 vol. 219 cc2317-21).

the “startling allegations” O’Connor made “came like a bombshell”; his “grave charges”, the *Daily Herald* thought, “have filled the man in the street with dismay”<sup>108</sup>. The *Daily Express*, in a front-page article, called his charges “sensational”<sup>109</sup>. A subsequent comment in the paper’s gossipy ‘Talk of London’ section praised O’Connor’s courage: “It is courageous for so young a man – a politician is quite young at thirty-seven – to fall out with one of his own leaders”<sup>110</sup>.

In contrast, popular crime fiction writer and journalist Edgar Wallace took a strikingly pro-police opinion. Under the headline ‘Strangling the police with orders’, he dismissed the Savidge case: “They did not put her on the rack; they asked her questions. They did not sit her on a chair as they do in New York, bully and scare the life out of her for twelve hours at the time. They merely put certain possible aspects of the case which she accepted or rejected”<sup>111</sup>. He condemned efforts to increase regulations on police questioning after the Savidge Inquiry. Referring to the investigation into the 1927 murder of police constable George Gutteridge, which had been dogged by accusations of ‘third-degree’ methods, Wallace mocked the sensitivities of the “stickler for fair play”, bullishly arguing that “No murderer is entitled to anything but a rope, and everything is fair which nails to a cowardly brutal murderer his responsibility for the act”<sup>112</sup>. A few months later, during the Royal Commission, Wallace, in an essay titled ‘Leave the police alone’, attacked the “mischievous nagging” of the press:

The strength of the police lies in public confidence. Commissions of inquiry, which offer unrivalled opportunities for mud slinging, can have no other result than the destruction of that confidence. ‘Oh, but isn’t it better that the truth should come out?’ you ask. The answer is that the truth has always been ‘out’—to the men who count. The real heads of Scotland Yard have no illusions<sup>113</sup>.

He referred to the “self-made men” who had worked their way up the ranks: they, rather than the public, should be trusted with civil liberties. Somewhat incongruously – given these views – Wallace stood as the *Liberal* candidate for Blackpool in 1931<sup>114</sup>. In different ways, Hayes, O’Connor, Astor and Wallace highlight how viewpoints on police issues could not be entirely reduced to party politics.

## IMPACTS AND LEGACIES

The Royal Commission issued its report in March 1929<sup>115</sup>. Though it recommended procedural changes and was not uncritical of the police, it cleared

<sup>108</sup> *Daily Mail* (12 July 1928, p. 11); *Daily Herald* (13 July 1928, p. 1). “Some of the accusations made by Mr. O’Connor are the staple of conversation in working-class circles in London.” *Daily Herald* (13 July 1928, p. 4).

<sup>109</sup> *Daily Express* (12 July 1928, p. 1).

<sup>110</sup> *Daily Express* (21 July 1928, p. 15).

<sup>111</sup> *Sunday News* (12 August 1928, p. 8).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* See also, *Sunday News* (8 July 1928, p. 8).

<sup>113</sup> *Sunday Pictorial* (4 November 1928, p. 8).

<sup>114</sup> Glover (1994).

<sup>115</sup> Parliament (1929).

them of the more serious charges that had been made. The report received largely favourable press coverage, and, in combination with the positive attention given to the new Commissioner's efforts to 'clean up' the force, it marked the end of a tumultuous year and a half of almost constant, critical and sensational scrutiny of the police by press, public and politicians. Concerns about the police lingered, but they certainly subsided, and debates of this intensity and significance did not recur until the late 1950s. However, the central role of politics in these police debates is confirmed by reactions to the Royal Commission.

In the summer of 1928, even before the Commission had begun sitting, the conservative *Express* argued that a post-Savidge procedural change involving questioning on matters "in which the character or reputation of the witness is chiefly involved" amounted to a "charter of the criminal's rights" and was "making it easy for criminals"<sup>116</sup>. The paper thought the Royal Commission "futile", judging it "extremely doubtful" whether it "will be of the slightest benefit either to the police or the public"<sup>117</sup>. Immediately upon the report's release, it highlighted police criticism of recommendations regarding questioning, particularly the emphasis on 'cautioning' those to be questioned with regard to their rights<sup>118</sup>. Later that year, the *World's Pictorial News* condemned the "shackles" put on detectives<sup>119</sup>. In June 1930, the *Daily Express* announced that, despite figures showing that Britain had the lowest murder rate in twenty years, an increasing percentage of cases remained unsolved<sup>120</sup>. In July, the paper ran a series of articles, each focusing on an inconclusive murder investigation and claiming that the Royal Commission had made police work more difficult<sup>121</sup>. That month, the *Daily Mail* claimed that the Commission "has made crime easier and life unsafer"<sup>122</sup>. Labour and liberal papers condemned conservative calls for a renewal of police powers: "The public", the *Daily Herald* warned, "will need to watch any such agitation with great care"<sup>123</sup>. In early 1931 when a supposedly murdered woman was found alive, the *Manchester Guardian* mocked Fleet Street's "crime specialists": "here is one 'undetected murder', at any rate, which cannot be attributed to the hampering effect" of the Royal Commission<sup>124</sup>. "One would like to know", wrote Kingsley Martin, "why such frequent suggestions have appeared in the papers to the effect that the rules laid down as a result of that Commission's work have hampered the police in their investigations." "These statements", he suggested, "have at least the appearance of Scotland Yard inspiration"<sup>125</sup>. But suggestions that the police were "shackled" were not made only in the right-wing press: between

<sup>116</sup> *Daily Express* (6 August 1928, p. 8). See also *Daily Express* (6 August 1928, p. 1). The order was dropped two years later: *HC Deb* (18 February 1932 vol. 261 cc1803-4). See also NA HO 45/22971/23a.

<sup>117</sup> *Daily Express* (15 August 1928, p. 9).

<sup>118</sup> *Sunday Express* (24 March 1929, p. 15).

<sup>119</sup> *World's Pictorial News* (19 October 1929, p. 4).

<sup>120</sup> *Daily Express* (17 June 1930 in NA HO 45/22971/45).

<sup>121</sup> *Daily Express* (15 July 1930, p. 1); *Daily Express* (16 July 1930, p. 1); *Daily Express* (17 July 1930, p. 9); *Daily Express* (8 July 1930, p. 9); *Daily Express* (19 July 1930, p. 9).

<sup>122</sup> *Daily Mail* (24 July 1930, p. 8).

<sup>123</sup> *Daily Herald* (25 June 1930, p. 8).

<sup>124</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (12 January 1931, p. 7).

<sup>125</sup> Martin (1931, p. 431).

July 1930 and May 1932, backbench Conservative MPs kept pressure on Labour and 'National' governments. Repeated parliamentary questions to successive Home Secretaries (Labour's John Clynes between June 1929 and August 1931 and the Liberals' Herbert Samuel from August 1931 to October 1932) implied that restrictions introduced after the Royal Commission were impeding murder investigations.

The Home Office and Metropolitan Police, however, were bemused by these political and press campaigns. Responding to parliamentary questions about a rise in 'unsolved murders', one memo from November 1930 pointed out that the questioner had distorted figures by including cases of infants found dead (the inherent difficulties of solving such cases were unaffected by changes in police rules) and those in which the police had in fact charged a suspect who was later acquitted<sup>126</sup>. That month, a memo by the Met's Assistant Commissioner explained that "all that has happened since the Royal Commission is that there is a tendency for the Police to avoid taking any risk of overstepping the Judges' Rules [i.e., official guidelines for questioning] and incurring criticism thereby"<sup>127</sup>. In March 1932, another memo pointed out that the Royal Commission's suggestion to caution all people before questioning was never taken up in practice: it "was not only unknown to law but most undesirable in practice and, in the present temper of the press and of M.P.'s [sic] no one is likely to criticize the authorities for having ignored that recommendation"<sup>128</sup>. It continued:

It will be seen therefore that the position in regard to the interrogation of persons by the police is the same as it was before the issue of the order in the Savidge case. The matter is still governed by the Rules approved by His Majesty's judges which have not been altered, and there is no ground for the repeated statement that hampering regulations have been imposed on the police in their investigations and duties.

Thus informed, both Clynes and Samuel argued consistently against claims that additional rules were interfering with investigations. In February 1932, Samuel responded with apparent exasperation to yet another series of questions by saying that "the whole position [of critics] is misconceived": "There has been no change of practice at all. Hon. Members appear to have been misled possibly by some articles in the Press on the subject"<sup>129</sup>. The questions did not stop, however, and a few months later, he repeated his assertion:

With regard to the suggestion that the police are now hampered in the preliminary examination of persons who may be brought forward as witnesses in some criminal case, I have, on many occasions, answered questions in the House of Commons on that point. There is a widespread misapprehension regarding it. There has been no change in practice which hampers the police in any way<sup>130</sup>.

After this point, Conservative parliamentary criticism on this point subsided: it may be that the appointment of someone from their own party as Home Secretary (Sir

<sup>126</sup> NA HO 45/22971/45. This responded to questions by Conservative MP Captain P. MacDonald: *HC Deb* (13 November 1930 vol. 244 cc1838-9).

<sup>127</sup> See also NA MEPO 3/2973/4a, Memo from Sir Frank Trevor Bigham, Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. I thank Bob Morris for assistance in interpreting this source. On the 'Judges' Rules', see Wood (2010).

<sup>128</sup> NA HO 45/22971/63.

<sup>129</sup> *HC Deb* (18 February 1932 vol. 261 c1804).

<sup>130</sup> *HC Deb* (2 May 1932 vol. 265 c861).

John Gilmour, in October 1932) reassured them that the Metropolitan Police were once again in good hands.

## CONCLUSION

No ideological perspective had a monopoly on rhetorical defences of civil liberties with regard to police powers in the late 1920s. Moreover, the ‘indulgent tradition’ of British policing provided both a common framework for understanding and a shared language for discussing police powers. However, there were important political differences that shaped the ‘police and public’ debates, with Labour clearly being the driving force in using particular police scandals to press for increased scrutiny of and greater restrictions on police powers. Although often similarly outraged at perceived violations of ‘British’ liberties, conservative commentators saved most of their ire for the legislature and, perhaps, the higher echelons of police hierarchy. If criticising the police directly, they were more likely to blame individual ‘black sheep’ or, like Labour the ‘system’.

‘Police powers’ were, of course, a broad field, and arguments about them were often complicated. Conservative libertarians, for example, condemned the petty interferences of police officers in the everyday lives of ordinary people because these ‘needless’ tasks (regulating traffic, morality, street betting or nightclubs) hindered the fight against ‘real’ crime. With ‘real’ criminals, they saw no need to limit police powers. This combination is well expressed by comments in 1932 from Scottish Conservative MP Frederick Macquisten, who complained of the “hard time” the police were having because of such “foolish duties” as traffic regulation and the enforcement of drinking laws. He appeared to blame this situation on Joynson-Hicks, the persistence of DORA and the “hysterical and emotional” reactions to the 1928 policing scandals. The police were “very much hampered by certain regulations which were brought into force on account of a memorable Hyde Park case, in regard to which I have always had the suspicion that they were right, although they were not able to prove it”<sup>131</sup>. The argument that restrictions on police powers were obstructing murder investigations was made by many conservatives in the wake of the Royal Commission.

As Emsley has rightly argued, these obvious and, at times, intense political conflicts were not translated into the election manifestoes of any of the major parties in this period. For all of the impassioned debate around police issues between late 1927 and early 1929, the matter played no role in the May 1929 general election, which was dominated by issues regarding the economy, social welfare and foreign policy<sup>132</sup>. When Labour was in power (in 1924 and between 1929 and 1931) they undertook no meaningful reforms of the police. The overall legal and procedural framework of policing thus passed through the conflicts of 1927 to 1929 virtually unscathed, and the period was only a minor hindrance in the longer-term trend that saw the expansion of police questioning as a ‘central’ element in crime

<sup>131</sup> *HC Deb* 2 (May 1932 vol. 265 cc8850-54).

<sup>132</sup> Williamson (1982). See, e.g., *The Times* (23 April 1929, p. 18); *Daily Herald* (22 April 1929, p. 4); *Daily Herald* (11 May 1929, p. 4).



investigation<sup>133</sup>. Police scandals involving the treatment of women had provided an opportunity for Labour and the left to raise long-extant criticisms of the police in a language of responsible – and non-party-political – moral concern. Yet, once the Royal Commission reported and Labour formed a government in the spring of 1929 public attention and political priorities had moved on. Labour's hesitations to take on the police may also have been partly driven by its leadership's desire to demonstrate the party's trustworthiness with regard to managing one of the key institutions of British life. Nonetheless, in the late 1920s debates – particularly in the comments of backbench MPs and the press – one can discern the outline of subsequent police debates, which in the decades after the Second World War became more explicitly politicised.

British police forces have generally, over the century, become more transparent and accountable, even if they have also become more centralised<sup>134</sup>. Nonetheless, given the distinctive nature of the police – an organisation that is not only responsible for solving crime but also empowered to interfere, sometimes forcibly, in citizens' lives – there may be indissoluble tensions between police effectiveness, on the one hand, and openness and democratic control, on the other. The conflict between the 'interests of justice' and the 'liberty of the subject' is an enduring one that was at the centre of debates in the late 1920s<sup>135</sup>. Arguably, there were particular pressures on the police–public relationship in the inter-war period, so that by 1929 the *Saturday Review* blamed the "coldness between police and people" on the "multiplication of the occasions of collision between the police and decent honest citizens" occasioned by increased regulations<sup>136</sup>. Clearly the growing political influence of the working class and the efforts of feminists shaped the debate on police powers. Nonetheless, affecting the public debate and changing police procedure were two different things. Editorials in the *Daily Chronicle* after the Savidge Inquiry proved prescient. One suggested that the upcoming Royal Commission would "likely to be invested with much outward pomp". "It may sit for one, two, or even three years. And then, when Parliament has lost all interest, it will issue a Report, which will be pigeon-holed"<sup>137</sup>. In the event, the inquiry was relatively swift, lasting only half a year. Still, the paper's prediction was not far off the mark. A Royal Commission, it noted,

is a slow-moving machinery, and too often, by the time it reports, public interest has lost the temporary energy needed to overcome official inertia. And so things will be apt to drift on, till a breakdown or a scandal or worse reminds us harshly of neglected realities<sup>138</sup>.

Decisions regarding procedure remained largely isolated from 'politics', being internal matters for the police and Home Office. Furthermore, as Stefan Slater has

<sup>133</sup> Williamson (2007, p. 73); Parliament (1981, p. 16).

<sup>134</sup> See, e.g., Williams (2003).

<sup>135</sup> See, e.g., comments by J.W. Orr at the Royal Commission: *Daily Herald* (20 November 1928, p. 6). Similarly *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 December 1930, p. 8: "But even if it were established that the police find it more difficult to make a case now that the browbeating of witnesses is looked upon askance, there could be no question of slackening the regulations framed to end a vicious system. The liberty of the subject comes first."

<sup>136</sup> Quoted by Rawlings (2002, pp. 200–201).

<sup>137</sup> *Daily Chronicle* (14 July 1928, p. 6).

<sup>138</sup> *Daily Chronicle* (21 July 1928, p. 6).



recently emphasised with regard to street offences, “Administrative, bureaucratic, and legal procedures established a framework for policing, yet in practice action was based upon an occupational culture predicated on the importance of knowledge gained on the beat”<sup>139</sup>. The police were not immune to pressures, but in this period the most important of these involved their day-to-day interactions with magistrates and the public rather than parliamentary debates or newspaper editorials. The ‘police and public’ crisis may have made police officers more cautious<sup>140</sup>. Still, despite being besieged from both political sides – from the left between 1927 and 1929, from the right between 1930 and 1932 – the police proved remarkably immune to institutional reform, raising intriguing questions about the unhurried rate at which this institution was adapting to a rapidly democratising society.

John Carter Wood  
Institute of European History  
Alte Universitätsstraße 19  
D-55116 Mainz  
wood@ieg-mainz.de

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<sup>139</sup> Slater (2010, p. 355).

<sup>140</sup> Slater (2010, p. 355). See also Houlbrook (2006, pp. 31-32).

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