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The Decline of Classical Liberal Policing in Britain and its Former Dominions

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The concept of classical liberal policing (henceforth "liberal policing") has taken a beating in recent years, nowhere more so than in Britain and its former dominions. When Sir Robert Peel established the London Metropolitan Police in 1829, the flagship of Britain's modern police forces, he envisioned it as a people's police. Officers would defend British liberties on behalf of the public, not because the common people were incapable, but because it was more efficient to delegate the task to full-time professionals. To reduce undue political influence, officers swore an oath of allegiance to the Crown and to the law, not to the government of the day. They were unarmed and dressed in blue, as opposed to military scarlet, to emphasize their civilian status. The liberal image of British "bobbies," as they were affectionately nicknamed, was immortalized in the television show *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955–1976). The main character,

Police Constable George Dixon, lived among the community he served and upheld the law through routine foot patrols. His knack for subduing wrongdoers through words of wisdom meant that he rarely used violence.

Even as this television show was being aired, however, British police forces were discarding the liberal policing model. Constables have become increasingly militarized, politicized, and distant from the citizens they are supposed to serve. Nowadays, they appear more likely to violate civil liberties than to safeguard them. Two examples will suffice to show this fact. In 2002, the police arrested Harry Hammond, a British evangelical Christian, for exercising his right to protest.[107] Hammond held up a placard in public criticizing homosexuality. When offended hecklers began verbally and physically harassing Hammond, the police were called. In the old days, they would have protected Hammond because freedom of speech is a central pillar of British justice. Instead, an officer arrested Hammond for hate speech. Even influential figures find themselves targeted. In September 2025,

[107] Peter Hitchens, *A Brief History of Crime: The Decline of Order, Justice and Liberty in England* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 297–299.

counter-terrorism police detained George Galloway and his wife.[108] Galloway is a former member of parliament who leads the far-left Workers Party of Britain. Many of Galloway's political opinions are anathema to liberalism. Nevertheless, he has a right to freedom of speech, and he is a brave critic of British imperialism. Counter terrorism officers informed Galloway and his wife that they were being detained without charge and that they had no right to silence. The elderly couple were grilled for several hours about their views on Palestine, Russia, China, and other areas of the world. Their devices and documents were confiscated. Galloway, who is in his seventies, says the stress of the ordeal has left him with heart problems.

How could the British police have degenerated so quickly from *Dixon of Dock Green* into an overbearing state gendarmerie? This article argues that there was always an illiberal streak in Peel's model of policing. Like many British liberals, Peel supported the British Empire, which used repression to keep subject peoples in check. From the outset, this concession to imperialism left the door open to

[108] "George Galloway Speaks Out on Being Forced Into Exile After Criticizing Ukraine War," Tucker Carlson, YouTube, 29 November 2025.

police authoritarianism. This threshold was crossed irrevocably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as colonialism reached its apex and the First World War militarized the country. This tendency compromised the British police by the 1920s, though it preserved some liberal aspects until the 1960s, and one could find a liberal-minded remnant well into the early 2000s.

The Burden of Imperialism

The tragedy of modern British policing is that it was established during the days of the British Empire. Supporters of the empire – who, then as now, are legion – allege that it spread liberty throughout the world. In reality, it was built and maintained through coercion. The concept of modern British policing was forged in this environment. Before Sir Robert Peel established the Metropolitan Police in London, he jumpstarted the modern Irish police force. Ireland was a thorn in the side of British imperialists. It was part of the United Kingdom, and plenty of aristocrats had estates there. Yet, Ireland was conquered territory. Many Irish loathed the empire, and they rebelled constantly. Peel recognized that it was impolitic to rely on the army to pacify the land. It highlighted the fact that the

British were colonizers, and the soldiers' heavy handedness sowed the seeds of future violence. Peel envisioned a police force as the ideal solution. It would be given sufficient powers to enforce order, and its non-military designation would give the British regime a façade of legitimacy.

This force developed into the Irish Constabulary (later Royal Irish Constabulary) in the 1830s. It had a paramilitary character.[109] Officers routinely carried firearms and engaged in gunfights with rebels. The constabulary emphasized military efficiency; there was expectation that in times of national emergency, it would operate as an army unit. During the Crimean War, for example, the constabulary contributed a mounted detachment. It is true that in Dublin, a separate police force was established that was unarmed. But Dublin was a special case because its large Anglo-Irish population was loyal to the empire. The rest of the country came to be under the thumb of the constabulary. Escaping its reach was well-nigh impossible, and not only because of regular police patrols. The hostile nature

[109] Richard Hawkins, "The 'Irish mode' and the empire: a case for reassessment," in *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940*, ed. David M. Anderson and David Killingray (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 28–30.

of the country meant that the constabulary was entrusted with various administrative tasks, such as taking the census. In the words of Clifford Lloyd, a special resident magistrate in Ireland, the constabulary was "an army of occupation, upon which is imposed the performance of certain civil duties."[110]

The fact that most of the officers were ethnic Irish did not change matters. Upon joining this organization, an unbridgeable chasm opened between them and their fellows. In the eyes of republican activists, police officers were traitors because they enforced British colonialism. For example, the constabulary received its royal accolade after putting down the 1867 Fenian Rising. During the War of Independence of 1919–1921, the constabulary defended the British regime to the bitter end. They were reinforced by an influx of ex-military personnel (the infamous Black and Tans) together with a counterinsurgency Auxiliary Division, both of which committed war crimes. No less a figure than Brigadier General Frank Crozier, the commander of the Auxiliary Division, resigned

[110] Clifford Lloyd, *Ireland Under the Land League: A Narrative of Personal Experiences* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1892), 51.

when he learned that his men were committing atrocities and that the chief of police in Ireland condoned them.

The War of Independence ended with the liberation of most of Ireland. British police continued to serve in Northern Ireland, which comprised the six counties that remained part of the United Kingdom, as the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Resistance to British rule ensured that they remained a force for repression. For example, the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Acts (Northern Ireland) of 1922 and 1933 empowered the Home Minister of Northern Ireland, and therefore the officers under his command, to detain suspects indefinitely without trial.[111] Evidence was not required; suspicion of criminal activity was sufficient. These acts made a mockery of *habeas corpus*, the principle that the government must stipulate what law the suspect has broken and what proof they have to justify it. The police were granted unlimited powers of search and seizure, and they could advise the Home Minister to refuse a suspect contact with a legal advisor.

[111] Ronald Kidd, *British Liberty in Danger: An Introduction to the Study of Civil Rights* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940), 40–41, 56–58.

This dynamic of repression was evident elsewhere in the empire. In this short article, only the case of several dominions can be discussed, the term "dominion" meaning the territories in which British immigrants established settler societies. In 1860s New Zealand, the Armed Constabulary was established on Irish precedents. It was designed to bring a modicum of order to the country, many areas of which had been desolated by wars between the New Zealand government and rebellious Maori tribes. Continued unrest meant that the constabulary operated as a military formation. After the wars ended, the police remained heavily militarized. Even the pacifist protest at Parihaka in 1881 ended with armed police officers stampeding into the settlement. A similar situation took place in South Africa during the Second Boer War of 1899 to 1902. The British Army deployed the South African Constabulary as a regular military unit.[112] After the war, the constabulary was tasked with the pacification of conquered lands. As in Ireland,

[112] Albert Grundlingh, "'Protectors and friends of the people'? The South African Constabulary in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony, 1900–1908," in *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940*, ed. David M. Anderson and David Killingray (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 169.

conditions were so perilous for British officials that it assumed many non-police administrative tasks, such as taking the census.

It was not unknown for police officers in distant locales to discard the law for the sake of imperialism. In Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the North-West Mounted Police were concerned about the security of the north-west part of the country. Although the Northwest was nominally under British control, loyal British subjects were thin on the ground. It was feared that American gold prospectors – regarded as harbingers of republicanism and disorder – might undermine national security. The Canadian police, ironically, disregarded the law in their attempts to enforce British authority. Perhaps most famously, they developed a habit of arresting people they considered problematic and warning them that unless they left the country, they would be charged.[113] This habit was a breach of police powers. Often, the problematic persons had done

[113] William R. Morrison, "Imposing the British way: the Canadian Mounted Police and the Klondike gold rush," in *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940*, ed. David M. Anderson and David Killingray (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 100.

nothing to justify an arrest, as any half-decent magistrate would have determined had the matter gone to court. But magistrates were far away, and those affected tended to be foreigners unaware of British law.

In cases where colonies were pacified, the police could shed their paramilitary character. Most notably, in New Zealand, the police ended up adopting a character similar to the London Metropolitan Police. They ceased carrying firearms as a matter of course, and they emphasized their civilian status. Nevertheless, the door was always open for a return to paramilitary activity. In 1916, during the First World War, the prophet Rua Kenana publicly opposed Maori participation in the war. From his perspective, it made no sense for Maori, and especially his tribe Tuhoe, to fight for the British Empire that had, over the last few decades, stolen many Maori lands. A detachment of armed police, led by the police commissioner himself, marched into Tuhoe territory to arrest Rua Kenana for sedition. A gun battle ensued that left some dead, others wounded, and Kenana in chains.

The Corruption of the Police in Britain

At this point, one might object that regardless of what happened elsewhere in the empire, in Britain itself law enforcement officers were a people's police. This is true to a degree. Officers were unarmed except in special circumstances. They often built close relationships with local communities. Many took their oath to uphold the law seriously.

However, from the outset, some constabularies embraced a militarist attitude that placed rigid discipline above human dignity. George Bakewell, a former constable in the Birmingham City Police, published a whistleblower pamphlet in 1842. He complained that officers were treated like serfs. A battery of regulations governed every aspect of the constable's job, and even many aspects of their personal life. Most notably, this so-called people's police could not talk to members of the public while on duty, unless it were directly related to their work. "[T]he public interests cannot be sufficiently guarded, by men subject to such stringent and vexatious restrictions."[114]

[114] George Bakewell, *Observations on the Construction of the New Police Force, With a Variety of Useful Information* (London: Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1842), 10.

Several of Birmingham's petty regulations were discarded over time, and some constabularies were never so draconian. Nevertheless, efforts to enforce military discipline continued. Retired military officers dominated leadership positions within rural constabularies, and it was not uncommon for lower ranks to have a military background. The emphasis on obeying orders corroded the individual constable's initiative – a crucial attribute given that until the 1960s, police officers tended to patrol alone. Above all, militarist discipline weakened the constable's oath to uphold the law, as opposed to the directives of the government of the day. As the British warfare-welfare state waxed bolder in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, actively repudiating liberalism, the police became its foot soldiers.

The illiberal development of the British state took place because it remained committed to empire. Herbert Spencer, a leading liberal philosopher at the time, pointed out that "a society which enslaves other societies enslaves itself."[115] To protect the ever-increasing imperial possessions and the sea lanes that bound them together, military expansion

[115] Herbert Spencer, *Facts and Comments* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1902), 115.

was crucial. This policy necessitated higher taxation, government enlargement, and centralization. Supporters alleged that it made the British people safer, but in fact it plunged them into dangerous waters. Tensions in Ireland risked deteriorating into civil war; Irish terrorist attacks targeted the heart of England. Britain's aggression toward other nations provoked a war with the Boers and a naval arms race with Germany that, in the minds of many, made invasion a distinct possibility.

In this feverish atmosphere, the British police became heavily politicized. In 1883, the Metropolitan Police's Special Irish Branch was formed to keep tabs on political dissidents and foil terrorist attacks.[116] The Home Office had operated an intelligence gathering system before this date, but Special Branch was more robust. It was initially preoccupied with the Irish, but other groups were targeted as well. In 1888, "Irish" was removed from the name. The paranoia of Special Branch was legendary, as were its underhand methods. In the 1890s, the branch infiltrated and destroyed the Legitimation League, an organization that pursued

[116] Tony Bunyan, *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers, 1976), 102–151.

rights for illegitimate children and provided space for progressive sexual views. As far as Special Branch was concerned, the league undermined British values, and so it had to be chased out of public life. In the same decade, they arrested a foreign anarchist on circumstantial evidence: he owned revolutionary pamphlets and possessed materials capable of making a bomb. British justice ensured that the anarchist was declared innocent, since the pamphlets were legal to own, the materials were needed for the accused's occupation, and the accused was the kind of anarchist that deplored terrorism. The verdict failed to make Special Branch respect British liberty. During the First World War, when *The Globe* newspaper published content that the government deemed subversive, Special Branch marched into the office and disabled the printer.

Even more invasive than Special Branch was MI5.[117] Established in 1909, MI5 (Military Intelligence 5) was tasked with intelligence gathering within the empire. Its sister, MI6, operated beyond the imperial borders. Both units

[117] Tony Bunyan, *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers, 1976), 152–195.

were the brainchild of the Committee of Imperial Defence, a government entity concerned with military strategy. Like so many jingoists throughout the empire, the committee was obsessed with foreign threats. The Germans were at the top of their list. It was alleged that German spies were swarming across Britain, sketching warships and photographing military installations. MI5 initially reported to the military, though it soon came under the nominal purview of the Home Office. In true secret police style, it meddled in politics from its inception. In 1911, MI5 worked behind the scenes to push the Official Secrets Act through Parliament. This legislation – rushed through in less than an hour – undermined *habeas corpus* by allowing the government to arrest and charge people based on circumstantial evidence. The accused were presumed guilty until proven innocent. If a political dissident so much as walked past a naval base on their way to work, for example, they could be detained under the act. MI5 also helped pass the 1920 Official Secrets Act, which further widened the government's arbitrary powers.

MI5 exceeded Special Branch in its violations of British liberty. There was a complete lack of accountability to Parliament. It worked without

statutory mandate for decades. MI5 claimed that because of its clandestine role, it could disclose only limited information to Parliament. The home secretary and the prime minister, the government figures ostensibly overseeing the organization, were often left in the dark. As a result, MI5 ran roughshod over civil liberties. During the First World War, it spearheaded the policy of large-scale mail opening to catch foreign agents and "defeatists." It transformed spying on dissident politicians into a fine art. In 1924, MI5 agents even conspired with MI6, Foreign Office officials, and Conservative Party lackeys to bring down the Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald. They did so because they viewed MacDonald as weak on combatting communism.

At this point, one might argue that despite the growth of Special Branch and MI5, the ordinary police were still trustworthy. As noted earlier, many officers continued to be trained in a liberal manner until the 1960s, and one could find a remnant still active until recently. The present writer interviewed one such officer, a silver-haired inspector with an Edwardian mustache, for a school project in the early 2000s.

But each expansion of the British state diminished the scope of individual initiative. High-ranking officers were increasingly graduates of Hendon Police College, which groomed a progressive elite to head the various constabularies. Hendon aimed to displace the tendency of urban police forces to allow humble, traditional-minded bobbies to rise through the ranks. The result was a politicized senior leadership that conspired with anti-liberal politicians to restrict freedom. The militaristic traits Bakewell had identified in Victorian-era forces predisposed many constables to obey orders from this anti-liberal elite, regardless of how outlandish they were. Technological developments, such as the dissemination of radios and automobiles, made it all the more difficult for liberal officers to operate independently.

The First World War was a watershed for the police. In late 1914, Parliament passed the Defence of the Realm Act, commonly known as "DORA." It empowered the police to arrest anyone they considered a security threat, on the basis of mere suspicion. After the war, the government maintained as much of its bloated authority as possible by passing the Emergency Powers Act in 1920. By the time the Second World War broke out,

anti-liberalism was so normal that further legislation increasing police powers seemed somewhat redundant. When the National Council for Civil Liberties protested in 1940 for the right of free speech despite the war, the chief constable of the Middlesbrough Police declared, "[F]ree speech was still allowed in this Country, provided a person chose rather carefully what he said."[118] In other words, freedom of speech had been redefined to mean permission to voice approval of government policy.

Conclusion

This article was not written to denigrate British policing. In their most liberal phase, British police forces protected the lives and property of their local communities with astonishing success. Hence the affectionate image so many British people have for the bobby of yesteryear, with his dark uniform and custodian helmet. Since the decline of traditional policing, crime rates have risen, transforming Britain from one of the safest lands on the planet

[118] Tony Bunyan, *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers, 1976), 56.

into one of the most perilous. Civil liberties have likewise declined.

Nevertheless, one must recognize that the British police was flawed. Despite the intention of Sir Robert Peel, constabularies fostered a culture of militarization. This shortcoming was most evident when police forces were exported to the colonies, and the velvet glove of constitutionalism was removed to reveal the clenched fist of imperialism. In Britain, liberal policing lasted for longer. But as the British government became more interventionist, particularly to defend the empire, civil liberties were eroded. The police forces – especially the senior leadership – were complicit in this process. The lesson for classical liberals is clear: a liberal police force is impossible without a liberal government, and a liberal government cannot exist without a repudiation of empire.

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