The New Criterion

Dispatch August 18, 2011 01:33 pm

More on Fear and Respect

by James Bowman

Further to my last post on the late riots in Britain and fear of the police as a deterrent to violence and civil disorder, I note that, according to the London *Daily Telegraph*, the British police are no more afraid of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, than the rioters were afraid of them.

> The aftermath of the disturbances has seen relations between the Government and the police sink to a new low. Four police chiefs yesterday made public attacks on Mr Cameron's law-and-order agenda. One chief constable told *The Daily Telegraph* that the Prime Minister had been "disrespectful" and risks losing the support of the police.

The Prime Minister risks losing the support of the police? Shouldn't the fear calculus work the other way around? Shouldn't it be the respectfulness of the police for the Prime Minister that the former are worrying about and not his for them? Shouldn't they be the ones who worry about losing the support of the Prime Minister instead of vice versa?

Well, it's a topsy-turvy world. Writing in today's *Times* of London (paywall), Sir Hugh Orde, the president of the British Association of Chief Police Officers who was lately pooh-poohing the idea that British police could learn anything from Bill Bratton or other Americans, now claims to be a friend of Mr Bratton's and open to new ideas from any source. But he is also insisting on the principle of "a police service free of political interference."

> One of the foundation stones of British policing is Robert Peel's doctrine of constabulary independence. This insulates the police from political control and allows them to rely on their expertise, judgment and experience in their operations. But the essential counterpoint to this is public accountability — through the law, through the Home Secretary nationally level [*sic*] and through local representatives. But I am convinced there should be a healthy tension for these relationships to work.

In the context of the riots this kind of comment is disingenuous in the extreme. The police did a poor job of maintaining public order, and the political leadership of the country could not have done otherwise than express some of the alarm at the fact that ordinary people felt. Moreover, theirs will be the ultimate responsibility if the police can't figure out what to do about mass

recreational criminality in the underclass. For someone in Sir Hugh's position at this point to prattle on about the "healthy tension" in his relationship with the government suggests that the kind of insubordination to which the police have been subject in the streets must be catching. We used to have words like "impudence" and "impertinence" to describe such defiance of legitimate authority, but when was the last time you heard one of them used unironically?

Ironically, the generally unspoken foundation of the Bratton-style "broken-windows" or "zero-tolerance" policing that Sir Hugh was so supercilious about is precisely the re-introduction of the idea of respect for established order. Allow little manifestations of disrespect for authority like broken windows or squeegee men or fare-dodgers and soon you will have much bigger and more dangerous forms of disrespect running rampant. Unless the criminal element learn to fear the police, the police — and everybody else — will soon learn to fear the criminal element. But British politicians have hitherto shown little interest in making the criminal classes pay a price for their disrespect of the police. On the contrary, they have often seemed to support it by being quick to seek out and punish police wrong-doing. So perhaps they can hardly expect to make the police pay a price for disrespecting them in turn.

James Bowman is a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of *Honor, A History* (Encounter).