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Policing Controversy

Written by Ian Blair

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POLICING CONTROVERSY

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‘The romance of police activity keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilisation itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. By dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, it tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our gates ... The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies. It reminds us that the whole noiseless and unnoticeable police management by which we are ruled and protected is only a successful knight-errantry.’

G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Defendant’
Quoted in Edwin Delattre, *Character and Cops*

‘They were killed because of their colour, which was neither black nor white, but blue.’ Elegy for two murdered police officers, one black and one white, New York City, 1972.

Quoted in Robert Mark, *In the Office of Constable*

‘Circumstantial evidence is a very tricky thing’, answered Holmes thoughtfully; ‘it may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different.’

Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Boscombe Valley Mystery’ in
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

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thanks, however, go to my family: to my brother Sandy, who has supported me for years through many vicissitudes and who took the trouble to read and comment on an early version of the manuscript; to my children, Amelia and Josh, and above all, to my wife Felicity. Without their forbearance, support and love, the pressures of office could not have been borne and this book would never have been written.

Foreword

A few minutes after noon on Wednesday 1 October 2008 I went into the City Hall office of the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. I had been the Metropolitan Police Commissioner for nearly four years. After defeating Ken Livingstone at the beginning of the previous May, Boris had been Mayor for five months. I had met him many times since but, on that morning, our relationship had formally changed. New legislation had come into force that day which provided Boris with a power which Ken had not possessed. As Mayor, Boris was now also empowered to decide whether he would also wish to be the Chair of the Metropolitan Police Authority, the body by which the Commissioner is most publicly and visibly held accountable. Boris had decided that he would.

Despite what had been expected and was often reported, I seemed to get on well with Boris. He is a likeable and witty man. With the exception that he had not been the Chair before, that morning's meeting should have been a standard one. The Commissioner would normally meet the Chairman of the Authority to discuss the agenda for a forthcoming MPA meeting. The next one was scheduled for the following Monday and, of course, Boris would now be chairing it for the first time.

As I arrived I felt good about the Met. Crime was falling at an unprecedented rate, down nearly 20 per cent since I had taken office: violent crime was down by double digits, the alarming increase in murders by teenagers of teenagers in London which had begun in 2007 was now slowing as the result of a number of Met initiatives, public confidence in London's police was up and a series of terrorist trials was clearly

reducing – but not eliminating – the terrorist threat to the capital. There were troubles around: there always were. The current ones were a very public spat with one of my senior Asian officers, Tarique Ghaffur, and a spurious but also public set of allegations about the letting of a contract by the Met to one of my friends. I was thinking, as I went into the Mayor's office, that despite an overwhelmingly hostile and disbelieving press – a normal situation for a Met Commissioner – I would have a good account to give of my stewardship to the Authority, whose members were largely new after the same recent elections which had brought Boris to office.

There were four of us in the room: Boris and me, Catherine Crawford, Chief Executive of the Metropolitan Police Authority and a good friend, and Kit Malthouse, who led for the London Tories on policing and was already being seen as Boris's right-hand man on matters to do with the Met. I began the meeting by telling the three of them about an injured officer I had just visited in hospital but Boris suddenly changed the course of the conversation. Without warning he made clear his determination to force my resignation and indeed I did announce my resignation the next day, although, in law, I could have chosen not to, as the power to appoint or remove me lay not with the Mayor but with the Home Secretary. I explain in Chapter 9 what happened, why I took the decision I did and who said what to whom, but my personal experiences are not the only reason for this book.

For nine years, from the beginning of 2000 to the end of 2008, I held the two most senior operational positions in the British police service: Deputy Commissioner and then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. This book is my account of those years: of what it felt like to be the Commissioner during July 2005, when the bombs went off in London and fifty-two people died in the largest act of mass murder in recent English history, of what happened in the case of Jean Charles de Menezes, of how was it that the most liberal Commissioner in the Met's history became a leading advocate of the most draconian powers for which it had ever asked in peacetime, of the arguments over policing and race, of how the Commissioner accused of being too close

to New Labour was in charge of the force which investigated the New Labour Prime Minister.

These years coincided with two specific developments: first, the way in which crime and terror became issues of increasingly rancorous political debate and, secondly, the resurgence of the Conservative Party, from bewilderment at the triumph of New Labour through furious impotence to rising influence and eventually power (at least in London). Throughout this period the Tories were obsessed at every level – from Michael Howard through David Davis to Boris Johnson – with the example of the reduction in crime that had been achieved in the 1990s in New York, with the doctrine of ‘zero tolerance’ and with the charismatic figure of my friend of long standing, the one-time Commissioner of the New York Police Department, Bill Bratton. Bill was an enormously successful Commissioner but he made the mistake of appearing on the front of *Time* magazine as the man who had saved New York. The mayor who had appointed him, Rudolph Giuliani, thought that this accolade ought to be his and promptly sacked him. A week after I went to City Hall I was due to go to an *Evening Standard* reception that would announce the 1,000 most influential people in London. The top five were highlighted in the newspaper. Boris was number one. I was number three.

Boris has never chosen to give me a coherent reason as to why I should step down. He made clear that, in his words, I was ‘more sinned against than sinning’. Given the Met’s successful performance in recent years, the most likely explanation for his action would seem to be that he had made a political decision that he did not want competition in either the achievement of crime reduction in London, which he had placed at the heart of his manifesto, or in the manner in which it should be done. I stand for a model of policing intensely concerned about, as a namesake once said, the causes as well as the actuality of crime, particularly where these concern issues of race and gender. I believe that senior police officers, like other experts in other fields, have the right and the duty to speak out about what should be done. There are others who see the police service as a body of street butlers, to be called on when required and invisible for the rest of the time.

The Conservatives have long been gripped by the power of the US model of policing, where police chiefs come and go at the behest of mayors. In New York, for instance, there have been forty-one Commissioners of the NYPD. In London I was the twenty-fourth Commissioner. Bill Bratton has just retired from being the fifty-fourth Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, founded in 1853, more than twenty years after the Met. The American system is a viable model but it is heavily politicised and connected to a different judicial system and Federal structure.

The system of police accountability in the United Kingdom balances power, in a classically British style, between the Home Secretary, Police Authorities and chief officers. What Boris and his advisers did on that day was to crash through that balance and politicise the position of the most senior police officer in the country, an act subsequently described by Charles Clarke, the former Home Secretary, as rendering them 'not fit to hold high office'. My concern for the future is that this politicisation may be repeated elsewhere, as the various political parties make different proposals about accountability: either Police Authorities which consist only of directly elected members or directly elected, single police commissioners to replace those authorities, or simply the bolting of executive mayors on to the current system.

Policing is a very significant function in any country: its police service is the principal organisation empowered to use force against a state's own citizens. Together with the absence of the rule of law, the absence of a properly functioning police force is part of the definition of a failed state. A police service that serves one political party or individual is an emblem of dictatorship. Mature democracies across the world have all developed methods of safely controlling the police function. Such systems have many similarities but there are also many differences. The British system which began to evolve in the nineteenth century has a number of features which are in balance with this country's particular legal and constitutional arrangements. This is made more acute by the fact that the Metropolitan Police is not only the police of London but also leads and coordinates the national police response to terrorism, a situation

apparently not to the liking of Boris and his London supporters.

The argument is not about me or whether any politician should have sought to do what Boris did. The argument is that the constitutional and legislative position of the police in Britain is a carefully constructed balance of competing and overlapping powers. Three coequal partners deliver policing: the Home Secretary, the local Police Authority and the Chief Officer of Police, who in London is called the Commissioner. All have different roles and none is entirely independent of the others. The system has grown up over nearly 200 years and is completely different from that of, for instance, France, where the police are almost entirely subordinate to central government, or the United States, where local police can be characterised as subordinate to local politicians, although the Federal police, in the shape of the FBI, have more independence. In much of Europe, the police work more directly to the requirements of prosecutors.

In Britain, however, the individual constable and the chief officer are independent office holders under the Crown. No senior officer can order a subordinate to make an arrest: that is a decision for that officer. The police in Britain have a far more significant role in the criminal justice system than their counterparts in continental Europe and are far freer to act independently within that system than officers in America. Similarly, in a manner different from other jurisdictions, chief officers in Britain have increasingly felt it incumbent on them to develop policy, within the rule of law, independently of the wishes of local or central government. That may be wrong and it may need changing, but not by one politician on a political whim.

The story of policing in Britain is the story of the struggle to develop that kind of system. It began with the Metropolitan Police, the headquarters of which were in a central London sidestreet called Scotland Yard. The Met was founded in 1829 by Robert Peel, then Home Secretary and later Prime Minister. There had been years of often acrimonious debate about what should be done about the rising levels of crime in London. For some the very idea of a police force was anathema, an affront to the rights of freeborn Englishmen. Many pointed to the

despotism of the French police system under Napoleon.

The British already knew how to run police forces: they had them, mounted, armed and in barracks in their colonies. What Peel created, together with his first twin Commissioners, Charles Rowan, a soldier, and Richard Mayne, a barrister, was neither French nor Irish: it was something completely different, unmilitarised, preventative rather than detective, dressed as civilians, unarmed, a police for the people, not for the state. What began in London spread across Britain and then, with variations, across the common-law, English-speaking world (including New York in 1845).

And far beyond the English-speaking world. David Triesman was at one time a Minister of State at the Foreign Office. He told me that, on a visit to Darfur during the humanitarian crisis there earlier in this decade, hundreds of miles from the sea, he met a group of women in a refugee camp. When they found out he was from Britain they did not ask him for aid just in the form of shelter, water or education for their children. What they asked him for were British Bobbies. Which illustrates why what was said and done on 1 October 2008, whether I was a good or a poor Commissioner, is so important and so disturbing. Some eleven months later, on 3 September 2009, the events were still reverberating. 'We have seized control of Scotland Yard,' read the front-page headline of the *Guardian*, 'Johnson aide says Home Office "elbowed out" as Mayor tightens his grip on the Met.' (It is also interesting to note how the language changes over time: immediately after I had resigned, Boris repeatedly refused to say he had sacked me, insisting it was my decision. By September 2009, his official spokesperson referred quite openly to the 'sacking of Ian Blair'.)

A political approach like that to some functions in government seems to me to be inherently dangerous. The Opposition and the press that supported them criticised me for seemingly to support some aspects of government policy: the same combination praised Richard Dannatt, the recently retired head of the British Army, for apparently criticising the government. The party in government seemed to take the opposite view in both cases. It is interesting to surmise what would happen to

both views were the roles of the two political parties switched after an election. For whatever reasons and with whatever caveats, the appointment of the former First Sea Lord, Alan West, as a minister by Labour and of Richard Dannatt as an advisor by the opposition, so soon after they left office, indicates that a potentially seismic shift is taking place in relationships. It may be impossible to return to a period in which such positions were not politicised in this way but, if so, then those that hold them will need ever greater support and skill to discharge their duties.

I fully accept that I am a controversial figure. I certainly made mistakes during my time in office. And perhaps there was some justification for the same Kit Malthouse to announce that Boris and he wanted the next Commissioner to be boring (although this is not at all a fair reflection on Paul Stephenson, who was selected to succeed me). Much of that is because of the tensions I have just outlined, together with the events which happened on my watch, whether the bombings of July 2005, the death of Jean Charles de Menezes, the 'cash for honours' investigation, the campaign for increased powers of detention or the manner of my departure. What follows recounts those years and those events, together with some of the less well-known things of which I am proud: the reintroduction of community policing in London, the fall in crime there and the significant rise in both public confidence and minority recruitment to the Met.

The political controversy which surrounded my tenure needs to be seen in the light of the political controversy in which Britain's police service was born. The argument with Boris Johnson and the uneasy relationship between his City Hall office and that of the Home Secretary echo the arguments between the first Commissioners and the Home Secretary and the emerging metropolitan councils in nineteenth-century London. The arguments about extended detention repeat the arguments between utilitarians and libertarians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the response to international terrorism echoes recent responses to the IRA and to Anarchists and Fenians at the end of the nineteenth century. The rows over race and gender are a continuation of similar concerns from the second half of the last century.

Perhaps only the rise of the twenty-four-hour global media takes what I experienced into a place not visited before, although the unrestrained newspapers and cartoonists of the early nineteenth century would recognise their successors as heirs.

This book shows how politics and policing have mixed for centuries in London and how the Met, while occasionally engulfed in scandal at home, made ‘Scotland Yard’ one of the most enduring brands in the world. It was no surprise that, in 2007, the government of Pakistan asked Scotland Yard to assist in their investigation into the death of Benazir Bhutto.

Shortly before my resignation, an article in the *Observer* suggested the Commissioner’s post might be the most difficult job in Britain, bar none; after I resigned, Bill Bratton said that I had held the most challenging police job in the world. As the main political parties now consider different options for police accountability, I end with an examination of what lies ahead for policing in England and Wales.

I am very proud to have been a police officer. I am very proud to have been the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. I am very proud of the men and women whom I had the honour to command. I think they are extraordinary. Britain has in common with only New Zealand, as far as I know, a police force which is largely unarmed. And, with all respect to Auckland and Christchurch and Wellington, they are not Hackney or Lambeth or Moss Side or St Paul’s or Croxteth. British police officers are the heirs of Peel, who said of them that they ‘are only members of the public that are paid to give full-time attention to the duties which are incumbent on every citizen’. And sometimes they pay for that with their lives. The arrangements by which they are held to account, commanded and supported are worthy of close attention.

Politics and terrorism have been the context in which its Commissioners have worked almost since the very beginning of the Met: over the years corruption, race and an ever more intrusive media have joined as other pressures. I will tell something of the story of how other Commissioners fared after 1829 but the book begins with one day in the summer of 2005.

1

7 July

Graham Cross is a Metropolitan Police sergeant who, on 7 July 2005, was based at Albany Street Police Station, in the Borough of Camden, just north of central London. He had a small team of neighbourhood officers doing ‘early turn’, the shift which runs from early morning to early afternoon. Around 9am on that warm summer morning Graham was told that there had been a train crash at nearby King’s Cross Underground Station. He volunteered his team to close Euston Road, a major thoroughfare which runs past King’s Cross, in order to provide a clear route in for emergency vehicles. It was towards the end of the rush hour but still very busy.

Inspector Mark Perry of the traffic division worked at the Met’s Euston garage. He was informed of a developing major incident at Edgware Road Underground Station, about a mile from King’s Cross, which was believed to be the result of an electrical power surge. Mark was making his way towards Edgware Road on his motorcycle when he was redirected to Aldgate Underground Station in the City of London. However, he found he could not go far in that direction because the road was closed near another Underground station, Russell Square, because of an incident there. Something much worse than a power surge was going on, he realised, so he radioed his concern to the Met’s traffic control unit. It was nearly 9.40am.

Graham Cross and his colleagues had the road closure under control. A number 30 red London bus came past the team and they sent it south down Woburn Place towards Tavistock Square, about 150 yards away. Mark Perry was some 300 yards further south and east.

At that moment I was in my office at Scotland Yard, four miles away. I had been Commissioner of the Met for a little over five months out of what was expected to be a five-year term. I knew neither Graham Cross nor Mark Perry, although I would meet both of them in the months that followed, when I awarded them and many others with High Commendations for the outstanding leadership and bravery they displayed on that day.

I had already been made aware that there had been an incident on the underground, more often known in London as the tube. The first report to reach me was the same as Mark had received, of a power surge, though I had been told that it was in Edgware in north-west London. This made sense because I knew that a part of the electrical supply to the tube came from near there. I was very busy as a meeting had been scheduled for two hours later that morning with my 200 or so most senior staff. I had spoken to this group on my first morning as Commissioner, on 1 February, and outlined to them my intentions for the service. The meeting this morning was my first chance to bring most of them back together to assess how things were going. I always write my own speeches and invariably leave myself a bit short of time, probably because I know I work best under pressure. That day, however, I had really cut it short. Very unusually, I asked not to be disturbed unless it was something very important.

I never finished the speech. The meeting didn't happen. Graham Cross and Mark Perry had one of those moments which define policing, when, without warning, an incident unfolds in front of a police officer which he or she has to deal with then and there. And they both had it in spades because what was unfolding was the beginning of probably the most challenging three weeks in peacetime in the long and often tumultuous history of Scotland Yard.

Neither officer actually saw the bus explode at 9.47 but both heard it. Graham only had to look up to see the smoke. The roof was torn back so savagely that at first he thought it was an open-topped tour bus as he and his colleagues ran down Woburn Place. Mark radioed in that there had been another explosion and rode his motorbike to the

scene. It was horrific: the dead, parts of the dead and the desperately injured lay in and out of the bus. Long experience had drummed it into all the officers there that they should fear secondary explosive devices (and despite the blast a large cardboard box – actually a microwave oven – was still perched on the downstairs luggage rack); experience also warned them not to interfere with a scene of crime. Nevertheless, without hesitation most of them climbed into the bus to do what they could. Mark and Graham took command, desperate to get stuck in but knowing it was their job to call for assistance, ambulances, explosives officers and dogs, to set up cordons and casualty reception points and to provide a commentary to the control at Scotland Yard. Thirteen people, including the bomber, died at Tavistock Square and many more were dreadfully injured: Mark Perry and Graham Cross were now in charge of the most dramatically visible part of the worst terrorist atrocity in English history. The picture of that wrecked bus became one of the iconic images of what would be known simply as 7/7.

A few minutes later Caroline Murdoch, my chief of staff, knocked on the door and came in. Caroline was the first non-police officer to hold this position and she was to be one of my closest confidants in the years ahead. ‘There are reports of a bus blowing up,’ she said. There were two large television screens in my office, one connected to network TV and one capable of capturing images from the police and traffic cameras across London. While I called for more information, the screens were switched on. I can’t remember now which screen first caught the image of that number 30 bus but I remember how instantly it was obvious that what we were looking at was not the result of a power surge. And I had another problem.

My sixteen-year-old son Joshua was staying with me in London because he was doing work experience with the *Sun* newspaper, whose editor, Rebekah Wade, my wife and I had grown to know. Just the day before he and a fellow reporter had covered the announcement from Trafalgar Square that London was to host the 2012 Olympics. On 7 July, I had gone to work before Josh and he was to travel a bit later on by tube to the paper’s offices in Wapping. He had rung my mobile

phone a minute or two before Caroline had come in. He had said that his train had only got to Victoria, had stopped there for ages and then there had been an announcement that the line was closed because of a power problem. I told him to get on a bus and which one I thought it would be. As soon as I saw the bus at Tavistock Square, I went cold. I knew Josh wasn't on it, but how many more buses would be attacked? At the very moment when I had just begun to realise that I was facing the greatest policing challenge of my life, I did not know where my son was and I might have just sent him to his death. I rang his mobile phone. It took a long time before it rang. When he answered, as calmly as I could, I told him to get off the bus and walk straight to the Yard. That moment remained with me, as did the call from my wife, Felicity, who rang me as news began to break of the scale of what was happening. Of course, she had only one question and her relief was immense when I told her that Josh was sitting in a room along the corridor from my office. Those brief moments of concern have always stayed with me and later gave me some tiny insight into the nightmare that was now to engulf so many families. In fact it was one of the things that made me so insistent that we should do everything to get as much information out to people as we could as soon as we could.

We needed to: in addition to the explosion on the bus at Tavistock Square, carnage had occurred in three tube tunnels under the streets of London. Liz Kenworthy was a police officer, based at Haringey, who was travelling into central London to attend a training course. She was in the third carriage of a train when the first carriage exploded, an hour before I saw that bus. Almost everyone else streamed away as fast as they could: alone, not in uniform and with no means of communication, Liz struggled forwards into the carriage where the explosion had occurred and found the dead and the dying, people missing limbs and with their clothes blown off. She used her own clothing to make tourniquets and did her best to comfort and reassure those who were still conscious. Liz saved lives that day and was later awarded the MBE for her bravery: in the darkness, she also knew about secondary devices and was conscious that the tunnel might be about to collapse.

I have used Graham, Mark and Liz's stories to illustrate what was going on that terrible morning. The police use the phrase 'the golden hours' to describe the first period of response to a catastrophic incident. If the policing in those hours is not got as right as possible, the days and weeks that follow will be much more difficult. This was the period when these three officers and many other brave men and women, some from the emergency services (including colleagues from the City of London and British Transport police forces), but many others who were not but happened to be there, chose not to flee but to stay and fight in the filth, the blood and the chaos to save lives and give some comfort to the dying. Without what they all chose to do, the eventual toll of fifty-two innocent lives would have been much worse.

But at the strategic level there are also golden hours in the handling of such an incident. Difficult decisions have to be taken which are capable of affecting the outcome of an attack carried out on such a scale. In the longer term the response is a matter for government but, during those golden hours, the responsibility lies above all with the police because, by long-established convention, they coordinate the work of the fire brigade and ambulance service at incidents of this nature. And this one was on my watch.

The Met's most senior decision-making body is known as the Management Board and at that time this consisted of seven police officers and four non-police colleagues, looking after finance, human resources, IT and public affairs. Over the years we had prepared for this moment and by 10.15 we were meeting in emergency mode. I was very well supported by Paul Stephenson, who had taken over from me as Deputy Commissioner, later to be my successor, and on whose loyalty and judgement I would increasingly come to rely. Others who would be particularly involved that day were Andy Hayman, the counter-terrorism chief, an Assistant Commissioner; Alan Brown, another Assistant Commissioner, then carrying out the internal review of the Met which I had announced on my first day; and Dick Fedorcio, the head of press. For the moment the key players were the operational cops but everyone had a role to play and had delegated every other task.

I had appointed Andy Hayman as head of counter-terrorism. In this position he had to follow a long-standing and famous predecessor, David Veness, and this incident was a huge first test for Andy. I was confident he would be fine. We were friends and had passed together through some very choppy operational waters. Later he and I would part company but this was his finest hour and he richly deserved the CBE he was awarded for his part in this investigation.

For now, the crucial issues were to try to get the best picture we could of what had happened, to devise a plan for these first few hours and to determine whether we should be making any public announcements. Each member of the meeting reported on what was known. Our approach that morning was based on the system then in use in COBR – rather prosaically, the acronym stands for the Cabinet Office Briefing Room, the location of the government's first response mechanism to an emergency – as this was what we had practised.

Of course, it was still very unclear what had happened. The bus was obvious but it seemed there might have been five other incidents, not only at Edgware Road but also at King's Cross and Russell Square and Liverpool Street and Aldgate because casualties were emerging from both pairs of adjacent tube stations after bombs had gone off in the tunnels between them. We didn't know that. What was clear was that this was a massive and coordinated attack on the capital. Loss of life was going to be very high. It was almost certain that this would turn out to be an Al-Qaida-inspired attack. The effect on intercommunal tensions was potentially very serious. A number of things had to be done. Andy would be throwing all his detectives into the scenes but they needed coordinated uniform command. Resources would have to be drafted in from outer London. We had to prepare for further attacks.

In the half-hour before the 10.15 meeting I had been in touch with both No 10 and the Home Office. A COBR meeting had been arranged for 11am with Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, in the chair, which Andy was to attend. The Home Secretary was chairing the meeting because the Prime Minister was at the G8 summit at Gleneagles, from where he later rang me. It is probable that the 7 July bombings were

designed to coincide with G8, possibly as a message to the West, possibly because the bombers and those who had schooled them thought that security would be lowered in London because we were lending security support to police at Gleneagles in the face of the determined demonstrations there. (I was often asked subsequently if the bombs were a response to London winning the Olympics. My answer was always that this would have required optimism about London's chances of winning of an unimaginable order.) In fact one of the few mercies of that day was that the Met had deployed additional officers into central London already, in case secondary demonstrations against the G8 summit occurred in the capital, and as a result there were far more officers for immediate deployment than usual. This explains why some of the first officers to reach the scenes were from outer London, something which surprised me very much when I visited the locations later that day and met first responders from as far away as Sutton, on the city's southern edge.

As we ran through what we knew, who was in command of what, what had already been done and what were the next priorities, I began to reflect on the time that was slipping past. The news channels were already making clear that this was a very serious attack but no official confirmation or announcement had been made. A COBR meeting would put something out but getting ministerial agreement to a statement would take time and the meeting itself had not yet begun. I put it to my colleagues that the public needed reassurance, that some form of message had to be given and this would be best done by someone in authority and in uniform, and that I thought it had to be me. To different degrees, all of my colleagues disagreed: it was too early, we didn't know enough, things weren't clear. Dick Fedorcio was dead set against the idea. For probably the only time in my life, I overruled unanimous advice to the contrary, from senior and trusted colleagues, in relation not to a policy decision but something immediate and irrevocable. Dick phoned the main TV channels and agreed a pooled statement to a single camera at ITV's Millbank Studios in central London.

Just after 11am, accompanied by Joy Bentley, the press officer who

would be with me through almost all of the events of the next four years, I stood there and delivered a very simple series of messages: the incidents were very serious and there would be loss of life but above all that people should stay where they were for the time being and that a long-rehearsed and well-planned operation by all the emergency services was now swinging into action. As I finished I had an unbidden thought that if such an operation wasn't swinging into effect as I spoke, then someone else would be talking to them tomorrow because I wouldn't have a job.

Sometime after I returned to the Yard I was told that COBR was actually discussing what public announcements were to be made and by whom while I appeared on the screens in the room. Fortunately, after initial consternation, there was broad agreement that the messages and the messenger had been right, particularly as every few minutes the scale of what had happened became more apparent.

In the early afternoon I left the Yard to visit the police and others working at two of the scenes, Tavistock Square and Russell Square. It would be another couple of days before I went down into the tunnel beneath Russell Square station because it is a cardinal rule that police chiefs are there to encourage, not to interfere with a crime scene, however vast. But already it was obvious that something terrible had happened. Exhausted emergency service personnel stood about, covered in dirt but anxious to talk and equally anxious to know from me the scale of what had happened elsewhere. Tavistock Square was even worse. Because debris, including human remains, had been blown at least that distance, I stayed about 30 yards from the bus. It took me a number of return visits to notice the irony that one of the principal statues in Tavistock Square is that of Mahatma Gandhi, the great advocate of non-violence.

In the early evening I went out again and visited Edgware Road and Aldgate, the Jaguar passing almost alone through empty streets. Wherever I went, though, I drew strength from the way that so many people had responded with so little thought for themselves. I felt the same deep admiration for the staff of the County Hotel and the British

Medical Association, near to the bus, who set up temporary triages, as for the parish volunteers of St Mary and St Mark's Church, Paddington, who opened their doors so that emergency staff could have a rest, or the staff of Marks & Spencer at Edgware Road, who not only provided the first triage site at that location but also emptied their shelves of bottled drinks for emergency workers and minor casualties alike.

Over the coming weeks many more stories would emerge but I learned of only a fraction of them in these early visits. But it was outside Russell Square Underground Station on that afternoon that I first became aware of something that I would use again and again to show how extraordinarily the Met had reacted to the events of 7/7. The system has now changed, but in 2005 new officers joined as police recruits and went to the Met's training college at Hendon in north-west London for eighteen weeks of residential training. Thereafter a group would be allocated to a Street Duties trainer at the police station where they were to work. The group would then work together for a further ten weeks before they could patrol on their own. A group from Camden, led by Sergeant Neil Drinkwater, were near Russell Square tube station on 7 July. They were in week five of the course, which meant they each had been a police officer for less than six months and they were still in full-time training.

As members of the public began to stream out of the station's entrance it became obvious to Neil Drinkwater that there had been a serious incident on the tube. He radioed that position to the Camden control and then decided to investigate. He told the Street Duties officers that they did not have to come with him but they all volunteered to do so. They went down the steep steps into one of London's deepest tube tunnels, then walked along the tunnel in the dust and the darkness, not knowing whether the roof might collapse, never absolutely certain that the electricity was switched off. As they climbed into the bombed carriage they entered a scene of medieval carnage. I have always regarded that action as deeply emblematic of an organisation whose values are in the right place. All of these officers were also highly commended.

After returning from Russell and Tavistock Squares I held a series of

meetings to try to assess the emerging situation and our response. Then I received a telephone call saying that a visitor was arriving. Tony Blair had flown down from Gleneagles and was coming to the Yard. I had met the Prime Minister before on many occasions but in nothing like these sombre circumstances. Together with Charles Clarke, Tony Blair arrived at Scotland Yard at about 4.30pm. They sat in my office for ten minutes while Paul Stephenson and I briefed them about developments in the last couple of hours. Then I took them down to the second floor of the Yard, where I knew that a briefing was going on for those senior officers who would be taking on the late-afternoon responsibility for both returning London to normality and guarding it against further attack. The control room at Scotland Yard is a place of restricted access and, as the three of us walked along the corridors, officers pressed codes into doors which swung open. The briefing officer was Superintendent Roger Gomme, a public order expert. The small room was crowded by the time we entered.

Roger was mid-speech. It was probably the toughest afternoon of a tough career. No one knew what would happen next. For him, what happened next was that the Commissioner entered the briefing room. That was 95 per cent unusual – on a highly unusual day. In all the activity, the call from my staff that I was coming down to him hadn't got through. If Roger was surprised to see me, he was even more surprised when the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary walked in as well. We have chatted many times since then about that moment. Roger did very well. He welcomed us all before carrying on with the briefing. The Prime Minister listened and, at an appropriate pause, he told those present what a great job they were doing, what a challenge we faced and how proud he was of them. The three of us left. A slightly gobsmacked Roger continued.

We went downstairs to the front of Scotland Yard. I said goodbye to the Prime Minister and his team left. Charles Clarke and I remained for a moment standing on the small tarmac area inside the Yard's armed perimeter. His protection team, anxious to move on, moved forwards. The Home Secretary had his hand on the door of his car as he turned to me and said, 'Ian, find the fuckers' and got in. I smiled a bit grimly but said nothing.