

Sentimentality or Menace



by Theodore Dalrymple

The days of the friendly British bobby are long gone. British police now veer between the grossest sentimentality on the one hand, and ineffectual menace on the other, often without passing through much in between. When I was young, I was told, "If you want to know the time, ask a policeman." I would now teach a young person, "If you see a policeman, cross the road."

The dialectic between sentimentality and menace was illustrated to perfection in reports of a tragic incident in Wimbledon, the well-heeled suburb of London, during the famous tennis championships there. A \$100,000 vehicle, driven by a woman in her forties, who was subsequently arrested, veered far off the road and plowed into an expensive preparatory school where, as bad luck would have it, a tea party was going

on to celebrate the end of the school year. Two children were killed, and several other people were injured.

The incident naturally required explanation. The tea party was at a considerable distance from the road, so the vehicle could have stopped before reaching it. Naturally, everyone's first thought was of terrorism, but this was swiftly ruled out. The woman had perhaps had a heart attack or an epileptic fit and lost control of the vehicle, but if so, this has not been confirmed. For the moment, no explanation has been forthcoming.

At a press conference after the incident, a senior policewoman reportedly fought back tears, so great was her emotion. But the expression of personal feeling is not what we expect, or ought to expect, of our police. All the policewoman needed to say, if anything, was that the police would make every effort to find an explanation for what happened and bring the culprit, if any, to justice. The police are not public purveyors of sympathy, compassion, or empathy, though senior policemen increasingly claim that their thoughts and prayers are with the victims of the crimes they investigate. It is unclear whether this would be worse if it were true than if untrue, real or feigned.

A photograph in the *Daily Telegraph* in the wake of the incident (and since removed) illustrated the other side of the British police coin. The policemen in the picture looked like thugs, in a uniform that would do for a fascist militia in an occupied country. We see them thus attired commonly now.

They convince neither in their grief-counselor mode nor in that of ruthless Robocop defender against crime. The first pose fools no one, while the second inspires fear in the law-abiding but does not deter the lawbreaker. British police have become the opposite of what their founder, Sir Robert Peel, intended them to be.

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