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Fixing our broken police force [1]

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The Home Secretary, Theresa May, is proposing Tom Winsor as HM Inspector of Constabulary ? the regulator of Britain's police service. Naturally, a lot of people are alarmed at this prospect.

In the first place, nobody expects that Winsor would conduct the regulation of the police in a genteel manner. He has a reputation for speaking his mind, and uttering a few sharp words when he thinks people aren't doing their job properly. That is certainly what he did at the Office of Rail Regulation.Then of course there was his two recent reports on the police, in which he proposed a radical programme of reform, major changes in pay and conditions, and a demand that police officers shed their 'clock in, clock out' reputation with the public. He's not a man to take prisoners. It's partly down to his recommendations that 30,000 police came out on the streets to protest about their pay and pensions.

Police bosses, of course, argue that Winsor has no history or experience of policing. But maybe that is exactly what the police service needs, someone coming to it from outside who can see it from the point of view of the public, and of managerial and economic efficiency, rather than being bound up in the status quo. One of Winsor's criticisms of police recruiting is precisely that officers start on the beat and have to to work up to the higher ranks, steeping them in the status quo ? when really we should be recruiting intellectually able managers straight into the higher, managerial ranks such as superintendent. And usually it is only a police insider, an existing chief constable, who has come up in this way who gets to regulate the whole system.

Sure, the Chief Inspector has traditionally been more than just a regulator. Part of the job has been to advise senior police officers on difficult issues such as public order and the policing of large events, policy on terrorism and suchlike. Winsor, with no past day-to-day involvement in such issues, might not be the best person to advise. But again, maybe we need a police regulator who is not poacher and gamekeeper at the same time. Perhaps the advisory job needs to be done by someone else, or through some other mechanism, so the regulator can get on with regulating.

A public monopoly which starts people on the lowest rank, and through which people are promoted on the basis of longevity and clubbability as much as on brains and skill, is an outdated concept. If ever there is an example of producer capture, the police service must be it. That is why I am so looking forward to Dr Tim Evans's talk to the ASI's Next Generation Group tonight [3]. He goes even further than Tom Winsor, arguing that the only way to change the nationalised-industry culture in the police, and make them properly responsive to the public's demands, is to introduce competition and privatization.

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