

#14 (SIR DENIS O'CONNOR)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe, again, with The Reducing Crime a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Sir Denis O'Connor has been in British policing for over 50 years and has been at the center of a number of significant high-profile reviews. We discuss police careerists, the growth of oversight regimes, and the need for a plan to win. Find out more in this episode at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_ReducingCrime.

Hi. Before I get to this episode I'd like to quickly tell you there are still a few seats available for a three day training program I'm facilitating in September 2019. From the 24th to the 26th I'll be running a police commanders crime reduction course in beautiful downtown Philadelphia.

This course is ideally suited to mid-level police command staff and senior analysts and is the only authorized training program accompanying the book *Reducing Crime: A Companion for Police Leaders*. Details can be found on the web at reducingcrime.com/events.

Sir Denis O'Connor has been a Stuart of British policing since the 1960s. He started as a copper with the Metropolitan Police in East London, rising to assistant commissioner where he led the development of strategy following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

He took over as chief constable of Surrey Police in 2000, and a few years later joined Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. In 1996, Sir Denis was awarded the Queen's Police Medal and he was knighted by the Queen in 2010 for his services to policing.

He has led numerous high-profile inquiries, had leading roles in the Association of Chief Police Officers, and piloted the National Reassurance Policing Program, the precursor to neighborhood policing. Sir Denis spent a number of years as an Independent Director of the Board of the College of Policing, and is now a Fellow at the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University.

I chatted with Denis over coffee at the 2019 International Evidence-Based Policing Conference at Cambridge University. We talk about the dangers of leaders that are careerists, the fallout from a counter terrorism incident that went wrong, the lack of political support for police, school boy football and the need for a policing story to fuel a plan to win. We also lament the loss of the East End of London's code around violence at weddings. Yeah, that used to be a thing. How long have you been involved in policing now?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

50 years. More than 50 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

More than 50 years, bloody hell. You and Chuck Ramsey are the only people I know who've been involved and still involved in the job 50 years.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It's a reduced involvement now, but I see quite a lot of what's going on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even though you say it's a reduced involvement, it doesn't look that way because you're marking theses here at Cambridge.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I mark theses, and last night we saw the Commissioner, I know Creswell but caught up in the Lawrence inquiry, for example. So I do know quite a few of the people in the business. So yes, I'm involved but I'm one step removed, which in some ways, if you're a mission person you like to be right in there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're a hands-on guy, aren't you?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Mission people are hands on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are there any other type in policing?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Oh, I think there's a mix. I'm not saying it because it's me, potentially mission people are the people that are going to break the case. They're going to literally crawl over broken glass and they will get there and they're great.

The thing is you have to care for them because they care a lot, they can absorb too much pain and the police service can put too much on them and they don't end up quite like Hieronymus Bosch or something like this or with terrible hangups and in the terrible state. But they are susceptible to making themselves ill almost because they care so much about results.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It makes for great television drama though, doesn't it?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Well it does because-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're always pain, don't they in some fashion?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Pain and flawed and flashbacks and all that stuff. That said and some of those people have been the very best people I've worked with. The people who always get a result on a homicide, counter terrorists in other roles work hours that are almost impossible to imagine, but not everybody is like that.

If we just had those people, I think we'd all go nuts because they are so intense. So we do have people who are less intense, who turn up for work, do a bit of a good job and go home. And then we do have some people who don't care, they're dangerous in police.

Because if you don't care the police you really are in the wrong business. If you can't empathize, even with your own colleagues, let alone with the public. So I think it's a mixed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's a great way of putting it. I joined the police cadets 35 years ago today. And over that time, I think it's the people that don't seem to give a shit. The people that have felt like the most destructive because, what are you doing here?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. My greatest concern in senior or other roles is when those individuals become senior and if they are senior and just careerists, therefore they're the wrong glory. And they're dealing with politicians who don't care. And there are quite a few politicians who really don't care that much about issues without naming names.

Now you have a toxic combination of the people who work for them because you don't join the police to get rich. You joined at least in part for a mission that is a mission literally to die for. And if you can't be inspired by the people that there are good people that you're working for, it's a real problem.

And it's been a problem in the UK in the last few years, because I don't think a lot of police officers think that some of these people care very much. And I think they're right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because they won't take risks and because they won't support the troops?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I think there's an awful lot of pressures in the UK, because the way it's regulated to take great care with risks, you do take. Because it's very likely to get exposed and people do take risks.

Cressida Dick commissioner who was here last night, she dealt with one of the most difficult things where things did not go well, the De Menezes case in London after terrorism and she survived, lived to tell the tale. She was supported by the then commissioner.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was her role in there?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Her role? She was the commander who, sorry, let me reverse that. They were looking for a suspect. There was one particular suspect that was a drift from the terrorist incident on the 22nd July 2005, they were looking for this individual.

They were looking at a block of flats and De Menezes emerged and he on first blanch looked very like the suspect. The visual technology they had was not good enough at the time, people are trying to do a hard job-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have to make an instant decision.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

They had to make an instant decision and they thought on balance, this is probably him. And they followed him and it all went all the way down into the London Tube, where he had a bag he'd been looking backwards and messing about, they read lots of things into this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Confirmation bias, you see what you expect to see.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Exactly. And coming to London Tube where he starts to undo everything and they make a decision, I think he's going to do it. And they shoot him. She's in command on the whole process through that.

Now she, to be fair, did say, "Stop him, stop him, stop him." Before he got to the Tube. But he was just slightly too far ahead and too far on. They didn't want to start shooting with the other members of the public around. You can imagine what happened when they found that they had got the wrong person.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can't imagine being with anybody involved.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Well, I think that the technical phrase for it is shit storm. She was in a shit storm and I remember seeing her during this period and she was personally very resilient. A lot of people because of the media were descending on her life wolves.

She didn't fall to, she didn't let them see her bleeding as it were. And her management, the then commissioner and others supported her and the subsequent commissioner and promoted her. And you can imagine for some people, this was complete anathema. But with everything she had and all the information she had, they were doing the best they could in an imperfect approximate world not an exact world that everybody wants.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I find that interesting is because that seems like one of the things we've lost, we seem to have lost the capacity to appreciate that good people can make honest mistakes. That seems to have been lost in the last few years, at some point.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It's lost here. The degree of scrutiny now of officers is so intense, they have an independent complaints body. If somebody dies following contact with the police, the police officers are almost immediately interviewed and the interview is not a friendly or a casual interview.

They can be almost put in position to being a suspect almost immediately. And we have an inspectorate that is more resourced than it's ever been. It's resources have been increased by 77% whilst policing has actually reduced by more than 20%.

So actually the degree of control around the police in the UK has increased enormously. That's the single thing, over the last few years that gets ignored.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the complaint system has increased 70%?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

The inspection process by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has increased by 77%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[inaudible 00:09:25] policing is...

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Reduced by more than 20%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So is it micromanagement at every level almost?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It is. You could say it's a belief that you can make things better by controlling everything, every move. You can have guidelines for everything, you can have a standard for everything. At times it feels like there's an expectation that the standard will be one of excellence across so many different things that police do. Now, that's not realistic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So who's bearing the brunt of this? Is it mid-level or is it frontline supervisors who are struggling the hardest? Is it the leadership who are struggling the hardest?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I think they all have their own struggles. The frontline, it has reached a point and we get quite close to it every so often where people do not want to be firearms officers, even though they shoot hardly anybody here.

Because if there's an incident and shots are fired, there's an immediate investigation. They're separating their weapons separating their colleagues and then the process can take quite a long time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That can make you feel guilty before anything has even taken place.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Indeed. There's been quite a chilling effect on some people taking roles like firearms or undercover officers or these edgy roles where you're very exposed because they know that if something happens there's a very, very strong chance they'll be investigated and the management cannot, as it were, save them in a sense of insulate them from it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it because they think that the management don't want to save them because they're careerists or because the management are unable to by circumstances?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I think the management are unable to, but I'm not sure the frontline officers understand that. They don't understand all these structures and all their ramifications and the constraints around them.

They just know that they're under investigation. There's a lot of trouble and there's not that many people around to help them. And the people who tend to go for these roles are people who are pretty good in what they do, so they feel it.

Of course, they have a wide circle, so the word goes out about these jobs now. Now, so far, they are still managing to get people to it, but it's become so hard that they have had to reach out and try to do a lot of reassurance around firearms roles.

Even though there's very limited proportion of the British police are armed. A very, very small proportion, but just to get them to stand up has been quite an issue.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is this a change that has taken place? You have the capacity to look back over a career that started in the '60s. You started in the old age district, didn't you?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yes. The East End of London.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You and me both, except for 20 years in between us, I think.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. Millwall Docks, Limehouse.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, me too. I was posted to Limehouse, section house when I first arrived in London.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Oh my goodness.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah [crosstalk 00:12:19].

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Limehouse I'm falling under your spell. What a place.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And to that point it became a little too noisy in the cafe. So we relocated to a bench outside to enjoy the brief half an hour that constitutes the entirety of a British summer. Yeah. So, where were we? Is this the worst that it's ever been? You had the chance of looking back [crosstalk 00:12:40] 50 years, you joined the job in the '60s.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah, end of the '60s.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the old age district.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Where the guy who, when I turned up on duty wearing this ridiculous helmet was almost down around my chin, it was so big. With all these huge tall strong men who'd all been in the war and other things.

When I said my number, he said, "Speak up loud, I can't hear you under that helmet." And there was almost an attitude, wash that by and bring him to my tent. I was so young compared to everybody else there. It was an environment full of dockers. The pubs opened at six o'clock in the morning.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We should say, this is Limehouse in the East End of London.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. Now Canary Wharf where everybody makes millions and millions and this was the old docks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember it just before then. Because I went to Limehouse as well in 85 and it was just before all this growth and it was still East End [crosstalk 00:13:38].

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Twilight. The twilight of the docks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It's a twilight of the docs. And I think that, that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It still looked like the long, Good Friday though.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It did. Generally speaking, wasn't a weekend when there wasn't a good wedding and a lot of violence or the use of shotguns or machetes, because there was a lot of restaurants around there and we took it in our stride.

But there was a code that, that violence would not be used, that extreme violence on the police. That was the code that was understood between all the parties. So they would have their weddings, they'd have their funerals, they'd have their fights. We would turn up to mop up.

Generally speaking, if rules were followed, the police would stay standing. But the big thing about it then, was I think that there was a more benign regard for the police in general, in the media and from government.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It didn't last very long.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

No, and that over those 50 years has changed dramatically, but it was also the twilight, as I said to you the pole peel approach to on the street crime prevention.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we'll come back to that in a second, very different types of coppers. You talked about big blokes who were in the war.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah, big guys who'd been in the war. They were physically very able, they were not, generally speaking, men of lots of words. There was a bit of a crazy mix. There was a couple of public school boys, there were these guys from the war.

And then there's a few chances as they say, like myself, who people would wonder what the hell we were doing there. So that was the mix. Policing is good like that, you do get a good mix of people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Those big guys who didn't say very much, they must have fitted in fine, just down in the East End docks.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

They did. And they were the guys who drove the area cars. They were the fast response drivers, they were the ones who effectively exercise control when the sergeants were not around. There were men who could command.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The moral authority of the shift.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

They were held in high regard. There's the idea of economy of regard for people, these guys were high in that economy. If they attended an incident and there were a lot of other people milling around, if they took a view, we're going to settle this down, it would be settled down.

If they decided it wasn't manageable in that way, it wouldn't. Pretty much really, regardless of what the sergeant or inspectors would say, that's how it worked. So they almost like NCO's in the military, they managed the situation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But the dockers themselves probably had been through the war as well. So they shared that bond together?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

There was a lot of, what they call in England, working class guys. They came from some of the same places, they'd done some of the same things and they had a measure of respect for one another.

Even, when they were attending weddings, where there had been violence or when people were being lifted because they were taking stuff out of the docks in vans, in trucks and any other way they could manage. Prolific, I have to say. If you spend a bit of time around there, even if you had not read Sherlock Holmes, you could not fail to make arrests, a phenomenal number.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So when did that all start to change? You talked about that frontline [pelean 00:16:39] preventions.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

So, I'm unusual because I only do a couple of years, then I go off to university. And the only reason I come back is because we get a new commissioner who says he's going to sort things out.

Some of the corruption which was evident, a bit of it was evident to me in the East End, a guy called Robert Mark. So I come back in the mid '70s, 74 or 75, and when I come back I noticed that, first of all, some of the cops around me have got long hair.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Disgraceful.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Dreadful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was the '70s [crosstalk 00:17:09].

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It was the '70s and of course the police weren't part really of the '60s loving. They missed out on that, but they were having a rather-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sure some of them gave it a go.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I'm sure they did, but they just didn't tell everybody else. But by the mid '70s, some of them obviously felt-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you want to share some experiences now?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I haven't had enough to drink. No, but the mid '70s, that generation because if you look at it now and think about it, it's 45 they finish. So by the mid '70s, they've done their time and at a sweep they're gone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All the guys that were in the Second World War.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. Pretty much, nearly all gone. It's dramatically different. So I get put through the whole training thing again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Blimey.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. The whole thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It seems unnecessary.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

The deal was they would make me class captain so that I didn't say what a load of nonsense some of it was. So we had that deal, but I had to do the whole 16 weeks again and I go out and I get one year's probation, even though I got an excellent thing before [crosstalk 00:18:10] and I'm now a graduate entrant.

So, but nevermind. I turn up at this police station, it's six o'clock in the morning waiting to go out and I'm ready to go. I've been thinking about it, I'm back. Villains, get ready here I am.

Six o'clock passes, half six passes, seven o'clock. Eight o'clock in the morning this guy who is supposed to be taking me out says, "No, I've got to go now and take the papers over to the court." On route I said, "Can we do some stuff and search or something?"

He said, "Oh, I've got to get back for breakfast." A call comes out and very reluctantly I just grab the thing and say, "We're on it, we'll do it. We're in the van." And we end up doing some firearms thing in some buildings and then he's hacked off at me because he's not having breakfast. And I thought something has slipped a bit here.

Now I know this is just a little story, but they went through a huge period then of uncertainty. The police were run down a bit, it became hugely reactive. So we went from pillion patrols when I'd first came in, if anything happened overnight, that was really bad. If anything happened and I'd missed it, that was pretty much nearly fatal.

You were just going to get absolutely excoriated in front of everybody. We went from that to people cruising around in cars and pretty much deciding what they were going to do. That was the transition and it wasn't just in this little backwater, this was in Lewisham, South London. So quite a transition.

I think the police went into this very reactive thing in the '70s and the '80s and you know the story there, crime went up. They seem to me and it's still suffering from this, they went from having a way of doing direct crime control to doing reactive stuff and to being a bit uncertain, really beyond doing that reactive stuff, being busy about quite what the ultimate goal was. The system around them, just wasn't strong enough to pull them into an organizational way. We're trying to win what we're doing by doing this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's what I remember through the '80s. It felt like there was a bunker mentality that was everybody in the police canteen was all right and everybody else outside was a bit of a shitbag.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

It was a bit of them and us, people did get brought in and if you were a sergeant I was and so on. They would put people in the slammer and they'd leave them there to marinade, percolate for hours sometimes days.

Because the controls were lax [inaudible 00:20:29] things went wrong some more controls started being imposed. Various rules, The Police and Criminal Evidence Act and then gradually the upgrading of the complaints investigation against the police and the upgrading of the inspection of the police. And what's absolutely missing in the police, is two things. One is a good narrative about how they're going to win.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't feel there's a plan?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Cops like the military need a plan to win. They may not be that convinced about the plan, but at least they need to know there is some plan. If you've ever been in a big operation, I've been on a lot, you cannot stand up on the canteen table and say, "Well, I'm glad we're all here to today. Now we're going to do our best." Yeah, you have to have a plan. Okay?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke 1880 said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy." But you know what? At least he had a plan.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

He did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a good start.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah, he did and he could always say, as he died, "That was the plan." So there was an absence of a plan and then I think there was increasingly an absence of high profile political support, and I don't mean unthinking support.

I think the cops are great, whatever they do. I'm talking about solid people who thought it through, who valued what the police did. My sense is it became politicized in the UK. Some politicians did value the police, but the police lacked what we call in the trade, third party endorsement by senior players and senior media.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Became a punching bag.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

They did, and of course, by the time they took on news international around everything that happened about press relations they-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was the newsprint strike in the late 1980s.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

In that case, there was, I suppose, seen as friends of publishing management. But by 2012, when they had that business about leaking and the press people penetrating police investigations to find out what was happening about murders and there was a public inquiry about it, that of course made enemies with the press.

So now they didn't have political support, they had reduction in the money allocated to them because of the financial crisis. And they had the press, not their pals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Looking at the situation now, from your perspective over the last 50 years, is there a clear path forward?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I think there is a path forward and it needs a big grownup conversation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not government specialty.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

No, if you wait for the government to do that, good look, what we do have here is we will have something called a National Police Chief Constables' Council. So the chiefs meet regularly and I do think it will be possible for them to put together a narrative.

You need a story to have a plan to win, and I think the government line has been two things really, crime is down and reform is working that was their line from 2010. That didn't survive contact with the enemy for very long.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You just have to look at the numbers to see that that's not exactly working out. Crime has been on the increase in the UK for the last two or three years now?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Three years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Three years.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

And violent crime in particular, has been rocketing in some of our cities. Not to mention a whole sude of cyber crime which the police are exercising virtually no control and almost no investigation. Of course like the States, we have terrorism and everything else.

I think the government, the politicians took the view. It is a bit like after the Berlin Wall, this is the end of crime. Western society is maturing and people are changing and they don't have fights at funerals and weddings anymore. Well, they do. And it's all cool.

And we can tell any story we like, and we can take money out the police. Well, it turns out they're wrong. We need to reflect on that. I do not think protecting people, given people's tolerances now and expectations of protection of police, I don't think that job's going to get easier. I think it's going to get harder.

So what does developing a narrative and a plan look like? It looks like this, at first 0.1 is I think the police should tell a story the people can understand about the choices they have to make every day. Because they would like most of them to do everything well.

But when you have 98 different lines of business, if you look at a complete command and control system, from antisocial behavior through a missing persons, to terrorism not everything is going to be done excellently.

The present government's assumption is that despite taking money out, I think in a way they've expected that everything can happen at this standard. That is ridiculous, it can't happen in any business and it certainly can't happen to police.

So I think there needs to be a story that we have to make these choices now every day and we regret them, but we're putting it in front of you because you, the body politic might want to change. That, you might want to change the priorities, you might want to put a lot more money in.

These are the choices we'd like to be making in five or 10 years time. But to do that, you need this training, we need this infrastructure. Frankly, we need this support about having priorities. Because there is no business in the world, including the military that can operate without priorities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It strikes me that there are two pieces to this that are going to need to be essential. It's the spreading of the message because I'm on Twitter and I just see two worlds.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

We all have our problem [crosstalk 00:25:35].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I know right? I follow some of left-wing academia whose perception of policing is completely at odds with the police Twitter that I follow. Which is good men and women, good blogs going out there.

Guys and girls heading out there doing a hell of a good job, not getting any refreshment breaks, doing overtime every single day, just to try and keep on top of the workload. And these two stories are completely at odds with each other. It's as if we're talking about two different jobs.

So that point about a story, it seems to be essential because what one side is telling themselves about what policing is, there's no relationship to what the other side is telling themselves about what policing is.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. There are two bubbles and they talk to themselves largely. Here's the thing, when I did rejoin, one of the reasons I rejoined was because this guy called Robert Mark became commissioner.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then started advertising tires on television, didn't he?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

That's afterwards.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Don't spoil the story, Robin Mark became commissioner and I remember one of the biggest demonstrations around Vietnam. There were a lot, where they tried to take the American Embassy. Now the British cops were pretty restrained by any international standards.

Their basic line was they would try and hug you to death, really, if they could. They do a lot of people and some horses and things like this. But you would not get past them, you would not take the American Embassy, even if they were thrashed and damaged on the horses.

What Robert Mark recognized, you had to have a story around this. Now, I was at this demonstration and one of the guys standing beside me was hospitalized and never came back to work. He was held by some Merseyside [inaudible 00:27:10], we tried to free him and they kicked him in the head and eventually they did for him in normal terms.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's poor bugger.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. And he was just one of the casualties that day. Robert Mark's line was, that the media was, look when the police deal with big events and big public order issues where there's a lot of emotion they win by appearing to lose.

Now what he meant by that was, we will take some casualties to save symbolic buildings and big things. We will not let things fall, but we will not be forceful in a way that generates a huge upsurge of sympathy for people who are protesting and doing things.

Now, you may think that winning by appearing to lose is a pretty poor line. I have to tell you the frontline at the time, would like to win by appearing to win, that would have been their idea. But the point was, he understood the need to have a story and communicate.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A sympathetic narrative.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. And it was one that caught the eye of the public and engage people not just left-wing academics in universities, but the broader body politic. And they warmed to it because they understood and of course he drew huge sympathy into the police. Mind you what Mark did say was, it wasn't so much the office which is dreadful being injured. It was by putting marbles down and effectively crippling one of the horses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The British public love horses.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

They love horses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Horses and dogs.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Horses and dogs. So, the point really is we do need leadership now with a story to tell. [Peter Ember 00:28:36], another commissioner he used to say to me, I knew Peter well. The way I communicate with the officers is by television and one-on-one radio, trying to do it in the organization with an organization of 35,000, 40,000 people, not possible.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The tricky part with that is, nowadays, we have this change in culture. So it strikes me that one of the things that's changed is, there's an unwillingness to accept failure and what I would consider to be honest mistakes.

So now if you're winning by appearing to lose, simply the appearance of losing can come in for huge amounts of criticism because there's no honest mistakes anymore. Everybody's got a cell phone camera we're videoing the police and we're giving everybody a super hard time for that three seconds where they possibly did something that somebody has decided is slightly excessive in a 30 year career.

I just don't know any other professions where you could put a camera on somebody for 30 years and everybody would behave perfectly for that whole period of time. So it's a very different culture, can that approach survive nowadays?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Well, there's an upside isn't there? As you well know, as an evidence based person, Mr. Ratcliffe, that our cameras here and the use of them have been accompanied by a 90% fall in complaints. That a precipitative fall in [crosstalk 00:29:50].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's incredible, yeah.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

That is incredible. If you look at Barak Ariel's studies across the planet as aware that trend has prevailed. Now it's not perfect because in Australia where they have almost no complaints of course, you're not going to see very much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

But in this environment where there's no tolerance of any failure whatsoever, and when you get precipitative drop in complaints, it tells you something about the nature of what's happening around policing. So I do think there are some things that compensate, that's one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're right, because I've been reading some of the studies done by people like Mike White and [inaudible 00:30:24] and other folks who... a lot of people study body-worn cameras. They're starting to see a general trend in this area, and that's across multiple different police services in different countries.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. Now that's the plus side, the minus side on the cameras is, if you do the wrong thing chokeholds or you shoot somebody, obviously, in the back and the rest of it, chances are you will be found out.

But for the great bulk of people, it's actually showing that, you know what? They're doing a reasonable job. But the second bit is I do think part of the story has got to be acceptable failure when you're dealing with human failure as a business. The police actually are in the business already of dealing with human failure. The best they're ever going to do is recover things a bit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

I remember chatting to, on one of the previous podcasts, Ian Hesketh if you know him. Who offers a wellness in case... nobody calls the police, because things are going super.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

No, generally speaking, you're not going to [inaudible 00:31:19] when you call the police. You're caught, things have gone wrong. As Egon Bittner said, "Something's wrong and it needs to be fixed right now."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is one of the things I really loved about foot patrol is because once I moved away from foot patrol, I only ended up seeing two types of people, and they were always stressed. They were either stressed because they'd been the victims of crime or they were stressed because they were the suspects in crime.

It's only when I wasn't in a car and I was on foot patrol that I got to meet lots of them. And there were many great and wonderful people in the East End of London. But you don't get to meet them if it's response policing [crosstalk 00:31:51].

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. Because you're going from one stress call to another.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And nobody's ever at their best.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. On my foot patrol, apart from the dockers and people like the pub landlord who were called, they used to call and he was a transgender guy, Molly Malone. And he called everybody, he came into the pub at six o'clock in the morning off night duty, Molly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Marvelous.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

What I learned because of my area, which was around the old [inaudible 00:32:13] tree. Well, I learned about all the vagrants who lived in church yards, the guys who had not come out of the war well and who drank meths and things like this.

The first half I thought they were strange creatures. But then I found out about the stories and then I understood them and understood how they were trying to survive. And you rich patchwork of that East End of London, as you said, you get that from foot.

You do not get it by being a detective and you don't get it, I don't think definitely, you don't get it from response.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, you don't get in a car.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

No. And people who think it's always more efficient to put people in cars, completely misunderstand the relationship between police and the people they're around. The thing that really bothers me in developing a story for the future about policing rather than the past is if the police leaders do not understand their business and what they can do well. Their ability to put together a convincing story and a convincing organization that can operate in this world is remote to say the least.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't think they really know the business anymore?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Here we are in Cambridge University, the course we are running which is, what do we really know that works in policing in a very businesslike way. The thought that the people who actually run police departments don't necessarily have to do that course is just astonishing to me. It's mind blowing, unless you think people can read a book somewhere, that's got all that stuff and of course they can't. Or they can by osmosis drag it up from the ground.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or worse they think that the job is the same as when they went through the academy in their first years, that could be 30 years ago. And it's changed dramatically. I go on ride-alongs as much as I can, wherever I am.

Because, you really get to see what it's really like. Even in the 20 years I've been in Philadelphia when I started ride-alongs in Philadelphia, it's changed a lot now. I was out with some transit police just recently.

Yeah, there are parts of Philadelphia that have changed dramatically in the last 10 years for the worst. The policing job there has changed, it's gone from being a crime fighting role to a social service role. Just trying to keep people alive.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Intuition is not enough. We have too many police leaders that rely on intuition. The one thing that saved my sorry ass more times than I can tell you is particularly operating in big jobs in London and nationally.

Is because I have tried to avoid making the assumption that my intuition is enough and get situational awareness, whether it's a public order or a terrorism issue or even a patrol issue about what is actually happening.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really going on, yeah.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Find out what's really happening. They used to have an old saying for it, which was in relation to public order and events and the [inaudible 00:35:00] the first thing you do is take the ground.

The ground in this case is what's actually happening in relation to that issue. Don't assume you know the ground that gap for our senior leadership is so fundamental because without that, whatever plan or narrative you have, you'll have people working on yesterday's idea. That was probably irrelevant yesterday.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In terms of thinking about moving policing forward then, we need a good narrative and a good story.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

We do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Put some clarity about what the role is, but also an acceptance that there's going to be failure and a realization that if we don't fund enough things then failure is going to be a part of the business.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I think what we need is an honest conversation about the role of the police and how much the police can actually do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The mission creep nowadays has been through the roof. Mental health and behavioral health of the public has become a policing job. Other than the fact that I used to work at Bow Road in the East End London across the road from the old St. Clements Hospital, which no longer exists, apparently it's luxury apartments. There's a story there, I'm sure.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

But the idea of committing people still exists.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But now it's shifted seeming to be and I think we're seeing this pretty much worldwide. I'm certainly seeing it in Philadelphia and in many cities in the United States, that's become a policing role.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yeah. What we've ended up, is I think the police, as you know, they used to be last resort. Some people say first resort, what I do know is people are expecting them, whether it's in relation to mental health, domestic abuse or other things to expect police to compensate for society, that's way beyond their role.

As we see in Hong Kong at the moment, the police can do a certain amount of things, but we need to be clear about what they can reasonably do well for us and where we expect those standards high. And we need a clear statement about where they cannot protect us from our own lifestyle and other things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think this has been a leadership failure by accepting too many roles that set the police up for failure to some degree? By taking on too much?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

I've dealt with the police, the military and our security services. If you go to a meeting, say to look after the Olympics involving those three bodies, the security service will say things like, "Minister, we think these are all the risks. How much risk do you want to absolve?"

The military will say, "We do these things well. We can do a lot of scanning of signals and communications and so on, but that's the limit of what we do." And the police say, "What would you like us to do?"

And that's so well intentioned, but so misconceived, you cannot be in the role of the hero, rescuing everything and compensate for society. You just set yourself up for failure. They're going to have to draw some lines around what they do now. I think that needs to be done very carefully.

I cannot imagine another agency, realistically, for example, taking on something like missing persons. Well, because behind every missing persons is a long tail risk, which you will understand all your sophisticated statistics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wouldn't go that far, but-

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Well there's a tail risk and [crosstalk 00:38:01] by that it's a small percentage, but repeatedly people who have gone missing die. And that possibility means that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And the vast majority of cases, most of these end up really well, but there's always going to be that small group that carry a lot of inherent risk for policing.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

And a lot repeat, and people will be [inaudible 00:38:16] amount of resources that go into it. But what other agency can anticipate the potential worst outcomes and can mobilize everybody and has that bit, no type authority to mobilize lots of other services.

So I think one needs to be careful when your mission is Queens Police Medal to guard my people. You need to set your parameters around well. But I do think it's quite possible to say we can deal with incidents immediately, but we cannot track people over long periods of time to see what happens to them subsequently because we're not geared for it, we're not resourced for it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think the public have some concerns about whether the police should be retaining records of people over 2030 plus years.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

You run into another debate entirely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Something also that you've said in the past, that resonates with me is and I think it's to do with this mission creep is it because it's spread so thin the response policing just becomes what you've termed as 'schoolboy football'?

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Yes. Because we don't have the degree of coordination and communication to sort the wheat from the chaff, in terms of giving jobs out to response officers, they try and play the game themselves. They run as it were, in the cars from one end to the other.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wherever the ball goes, which is the crime or the cause [crosstalk 00:39:26] they all surround it and scurry around it and then it moves and they go somewhere else.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

No, to be fair on them. They, to a degree, try and organize themselves around incidents and the rest of it. But that's only as good as the best organizer and the most experienced organizer.

And as you know, in response policing, quite a lot of the people are the least experienced and the least organized. So you can get whole clusters of people chasing that ball. One of the things that's changed dramatically, the number of people in local policing since 2010 is down in this country more than the rest of policing.

I had a big role in launching something called Neighbourhood Policing. I ran the trial and it went national and people liked it a lot, locally. That has been eviscerated, it has been scaled right back. But also the number of local offices in response and other things that's been scaled back.

And so the number of calls actually being attended to is reduced. So the number of people available for that every day, patrolling whether it's in cars or on foot is dramatically down and the public have noticed it. So in one sense, the 'schoolboy football is a lot thinner than it used to be here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There are no more big quiet men in the East End of London, keeping an eye on things.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

There are no sentinels out there, looking stern and convincing with lantern jaws that keep everything just as it should be. The public, they like to think that there are those people around in a variety of roles.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I like to think that there is those people around still.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Indeed, who they can reach out to, who don't own the [inaudible 00:41:06] in when the worst things happen. That's not the story I want to have.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of things to think about for the future.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Indeed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sir Denis O'Connor, it's been a pleasure.

Sir Denis O'Connor:

Pleasure, too. Thank you, mate.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 14 of Reducing Crime recorded in July 2019 at Cambridge University. You can find more episodes at reducingcrime.com or the usual podcast places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime, don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.