The Home Secretary Interviews

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A Plan to Reshape Britain

David Spencer

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Policy Exchange

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A note on the interviews

The interviews were conducted over a period of time between 2024 and 2026 – in some cases before the UK General Election of the 4th July 2024. The dates of the interviews can be found in the Appendices to this collection.

The Office of Home Secretary: The Extent and Limitations of Ministerial Power

By David Spencer, Head of Crime and Justice, Policy Exchange

One of the "Great Offices of State", the Home Secretary is accountable for, and perhaps in the public mind at least, has the power to control some of the most coercive arms of the state: policing, border control and immigration, counter-terrorism and elements of our national security apparatus. Yet as the interviews in this collection reveal, the practical levers of power at the Home Secretary's disposal, when it comes to crime and policing at least, are perhaps fewer and more constrained than the public might envisage.

Principal amongst those constraints is the concept of "operational independence" – that police officers and Chief Constables act independently of Government or ministerial direction in their operational decision-making. These interviews, suggest that central to being an effective Home Secretary, however, is the ability to simultaneously impose one's will through the levers of power that do exist whilst navigating the constraints – publicly at least – of operational independence.

This collection brings together interviews with fourteen of the men and women who served as Home Secretary between 1990 and 2024 – a period starting with Kenneth Baker in Sir John Major's Government and ending with Sir James Cleverly MP in Rishi Sunak MP's Government. While most served as Home Secretary for around one to two years, several – from both major political parties – served for extended periods. This included Michael Howard (four years), Jack Straw (four years), David Blunkett (three years) and Theresa May (six years – longer than any other Home Secretary since 1951).

The issues which dominated the attention of Home Secretaries over the period are, perhaps inevitably, wide-ranging. Kenneth Baker entered the Home Office in 1990 with prisons, in the aftermath of riots at HMP Strangeways earlier that year, as the pre-eminent concern. James Cleverly departed in 2024 having served during a period of large-scale pro-Palestinian protests and intense debates over immigration.

Between those two points, Home Secretaries wrestled with all manner of issues within their crime and policing brief. These included: efforts to

actually reduce crime – rather than merely accept increased levels of crime as being inevitable; the murder of Stephen Lawrence and subsequent public inquiry; the rise and fall of neighbourhood policing; the creation of the Ministry of Justice and hiving off of policy areas, including prisons, from the Home Office; the creation of Police and Crime Commissioners (only for their subsequent demise to later be announced by the current Labour Government); large-scale protests and public disorder; and multiple terrorist attacks in the UK and against British interests abroad.

The Levers of Power

Running through these interviews is a strikingly consistent account of what, at least some of, the direct levers of power are for Home Secretaries in relation to crime and policing. They are described as "direct" because police chiefs and forces have little option but to follow them. The most obvious are those which are perhaps little different to those held by other cabinet ministers – the ability to legislate and to allocate funding and resources. Added to this, for some of the period, is the role of the Home Secretary in the appointment of senior police officers and, in extremis, their removal – albeit the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners in 2012 substantially changed how much influence a Home Secretary could have in this area. Notably, the incumbent Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood MP, announced in November 2025 that the Government intend to abolish Police and Crime Commissioners and enable ministers to take a more interventionist approach – thus reversing the changes introduced by Theresa May through the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011.

During their interviews most former Home Secretaries outlined the legislation they were responsible for introducing. Michael Howard legislated to modify the "right to silence" through the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Jack Straw introduced the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 to tackle animal rights extremism. Suella Braverman MP used secondary legislation to extend police powers relating to protest through the Public Order Act 1986 (Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023 after attempts to use primary legislation had failed. Most significantly in relation to the oversight and governance of policing in England and Wales, Theresa May – through the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 – made sweeping changes which included the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners.

Similarly, several former Home Secretaries described their work in relation to either securing funding from HM Treasury or allocating police funding. Sajid Javid described his efforts to secure an improved financial settlement for policing – including a Sunday phone call with Prime Minister Theresa May, who Javid described as being "annoyed" with him. Priti Patel outlined her approach to creating separate funds for specific operational priorities – such as the Taser Fund and Safer Streets Fund distributed through Police and Crime Commissioners. Suella Braverman described channelling funding to hotspot policing activities.

On the appointment and dismissal of Chief Constables, although the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 removed the Home Secretary's role in appointing Chief Constables in relation to most police forces it was retained in relation to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Amber Rudd referred to her appointment of Dame Cressida Dick QPM as Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police as being a critical means of delivering on the Government's objective to reduce violent crime, saying: "So much comes down to leadership – and Cressida Dick was appointed early on, and she had as her priority violent crime. She felt like the right person to do it and it felt to me that the Met was seized by the fact that she was going to be a good leader – they wanted her and she felt like a good leader." Ken Clarke described appointing an outsider to lead the Metropolitan Police, Sir Paul Condon QPM, in the face of resistance and dissatisfaction from those inside the force. Jack Straw referred to appointing Sir John Stevens QPM as Commissioner – including that the competition was against several strong candidates.

Although the role of dismissing Chief Constables became the responsibility of Police and Crime Commissioners through the 2011 Act, that did not mean that Home Secretaries were necessarily entirely detached when serious issues arose. Despite being the Home Secretary who introduced Police and Crime Commissioners, in response to the question: "Following the introduction of PCCs did you ever say actually, 'that Chief Constable is just not up to the job and intervene?'", Theresa May said: "I think even with PCCs, it was possible for the Home Secretary and/or the Home Office to have conversations with PCCs.". Although beyond the scope of this collection, the most recent example of a Home Secretary's intervention contributing to the departure of a Chief Constable was that of the incumbent Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood MP declaring her lack of confidence in the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police following the Aston Villa-Maccabi Tel Aviv scandal.[1]

Interestingly, this collection of interviews suggests that the day-to-day exercise of influence over policing by Home Secretaries might well rest more heavily on a series of indirect levers – "indirect" because while police chiefs and police forces may not necessarily be mandated to follow them, in most cases they are likely to find it almost impossible to resist doing so. While linked, these levers can broadly be grouped into two. First, establishing priorities and then in line with those priorities: shaping policy and guidance, setting targets, and gathering and publishing data. Second, the use of persuasion in pursuit of those priorities – both in private and in public, particularly using Ministers' considerable and perhaps unique convening power.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of agenda and priority setting, particularly in reversing the way that things had previously been done, is described by Michael Howard in his refusal to accept the status quo presented by civil servants that an increase in crime was inevitable. He said: "…one of the first things that happened was that the officials produced this graph, which showed the crime had risen on average 5 per cent a

1. Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP, Hansard, 14th January 2026, Vol 778 Col 952, link

year for the previous 50 years, and would continue to rise inexorably, and there was nothing I could do about it, and my job was to manage public expectations in the face of this inevitable, continuing rise in crime. Well, obviously I didn't feel inclined to take that advice…". Having made clear his priority was to deliver a reduction in crime, Howard then described how he then set about using both the direct and indirect levers at his disposal.

Jack Straw was similarly clear in describing his approach to the use of targets and data collection, designed to monitor the performance of police forces and Chief Constables against the priorities set by Government: "In terms of holding the police to account on specific things we had two sets of targets to cut car crime and burglary. We did a lot with car crime with the manufacturers and with burglary with target hardening but we gave the cops a baseline and said, 'you've really got to concentrate on this'". On Straw's approach to implementing the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, and his concerns that progress might stall, he established a working group which met regularly and which he personally chaired. As he put it: "You've just got to keep driving these things. You've got to be driven from the top."

The second indirect lever – persuading, and in some cases cajoling, both publicly and privately, police chiefs and others towards a particular course – is central to how Home Secretaries describe exercising their influence. James Cleverly MP remarked: "One of the things about being the Home Secretary is that when you make public statements, the leadership of UK policing listens to what you say, in whatever forum you say it – whether you say it at the despatch box, or a speech to the Police Federation or the National Police Chiefs' Council, or even just in the round table meetings that we'd often have with senior police officers. That cascades through policing, I was quite impressed by how quickly the things that I was saying as Home Secretary were then being fed back to me by police officers".

Theresa May described her efforts to change police forces' approach to tackling domestic abuse: "I gave a clear message about that – it was about changing a mindset, it was about working with Chief Constables, working with the national police lead for the issue, talking to the police about the importance of this issue, bringing groups together and instilling that sense that this was something that they shouldn't be dismissing as 'just a domestic' but something they should be paying more attention to." She went on to say that: "It's not about beating them with a big stick – if you just beat with a big stick, then you probably don't get the results you want."

The private conversations Home Secretaries held with police chiefs appear throughout the interviews as a key means of exercising ministerial influence. Jack Straw describes how he approached police forces and Chief Constables who failed to adopt the new Labour Government's approach to young offenders: "I made it clear in subtle ways that it wasn't going to be career enhancing for anybody if they kept buggering about." Straw also notes that his efforts to secure the willing compliance on the issue could

be, particularly in relation to Greater Manchester Police, "exhausting". Jacqui Smith said: "There's all sorts of options here, if you say: "I'm going to ask for the Met Commissioner to come in and talk to me about this" – well, everybody knows what you're saying when you do that."

"Operational Independence" Taken Too Far – An Impediment to Policy Making and Accountability?

The issue of operational independence – and what its boundaries and limitations might be – is central to the relationship between Ministers and Chief Constables. As such, every former Home Secretary interviewed explored how they approached navigating those boundaries.

There was broad recognition amongst those interviewed that it is not the role of politicians to become involved in the individual operational decisions made by the police as to who to arrest or the direction of specific investigations. As an example, Michael Howard said: "once politicians have the ability to interfere, intervene in individual cases, that's an end of the rule of law, in my view. This is of absolutely fundamental importance."

Beyond this limitation, there were distinctions in the approaches taken by those interviewed in relation to how they approached Chief Constables and police forces. This ranged from Kenneth Baker, who described a highly non-interventionist approach, saying that: "the police are very much more responsible for themselves – and that's the nature of our society"; to Priti Patel who described herself as having a "more operational way of working across policing" due to the Covid-19 pandemic and also being willing to call Chief Constables, "at any time of day or night on any pressing issues".

The principal area which most Home Secretaries described their direct involvement was on matters of overarching performance and policy – including the policy outworkings of individual operational matters. Kenneth Clarke, recognising the distinction between this and individual operational matters, said: "…what you do not want is party political interference with the way in which the police go about their business or political interference in the investigation of particular cases. I'm a great believer in the rule of law and that independence from political pressure of the prosecuting authorities and the policing authorities is key in a democracy. But management, the quality of performance, what value for money you're delivering and measuring that value in terms of the quantity and the quality of the service you're giving to the public – accountability for those things is I think is essential across the entire public sector."

Jacqui Smith, in relation to the setting of one of the then Government's priorities on policing, described her approach to the Policing Pledge – an approach which involved police forces setting local priorities with local people and updating the public on performance against those priorities. She said: "There was never a time in relation to a particular area or particular force where I said, 'You must go and do that thing', because I think that would have overstepped the mark. But we did say on neighbourhood policing, and things relating to it, 'You must do this. And if you're not

doing it, you'll be explaining to me why you're not doing it. And what's more, we're going to change the targets so that it measures whether or not you're doing the things that we think you should be doing or achieving the objectives and the outcomes that we want'".

In relation to the policy outworkings of specific operational matters, several of those interviewed, described their approach – often in relation to public order matters. Jack Straw recounts that: "I had a meeting with him [the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police] once the dust had settled and I said to him, 'Look, the outcome here was really poor, we should have planned it better – I don't think we can have that kind of outcome again.'" Straw himself acknowledges that this could be interpreted as asserting influence over operational policing but that he believes this did not cross the line into an encroachment into operational independence. Instead, he frames his role as shaping expectations and encouraging changes in approach. Crucially, he reiterates the boundary: "there is an obvious line which you don't transgress, which is over an ongoing investigation where the Home Secretary of the day, in my case didn't, and in any event must just keep out of that." He concludes, "you can't get involved in who they arrest and who they interview, who they charge." Michael Howard described that, in his discussions with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, he might: "use an individual protest as an example of the way in which the law wasn't being enforced".

The role of politicians and Ministers in conveying the strength of public feeling on specific operational matters was also highlighted by several of those interviewed. Jacqui Smith said that: "When there is something where there is obviously enormous public concern, and you could feel justified as an elected politician in saying, 'I am the voice for this'; I think I would have been reasonably robust about what I expected to happen around that".

Theresa May described two contrasting events which demonstrate her approach. In relation to the 2010 shootings in Cumbria, which led to the murder of twelve people, May was reluctant to speak to the Chief Constable at an early stage of the operation – believing her involvement might be a distraction for the police officers involved in what was a fast-moving high-risk policing operation. Yet during the 2011 riots she described meeting with: "the then acting Commissioner of the Met in with one or two others and talked this through with them. This was not operationally saying, 'you must do this', but this is talking through what the response of the public is, why are the police doing what they were? And I think I'm right in saying they were doing what they were because the approach to public order had been set by the previous Government, and they were following that rather than doing what operationally might make sense. And in fact we then saw them being much more active, going in and arresting people."

May stated that one of the key distinctions between the two events was where it was necessary to convey to the police the overarching political and public context within which operational decisions were being made,

rather than the operational tactics themselves. She said, the distinction was: "partly about public concern and partly about that the riots weren't an immediate event – Cumbria was an immediate operation; this was happening, they were looking for the individual and trying to stop further people from being killed or injured. So not getting in the way of the police, in an operational sense."

Although there is no statutory definition of operational independence, the present Government has stated its intention to: "solidify the boundaries of operational independence and clarify the appropriate use of the Home Secretary's powers to intervene to support improvement within policing where necessary".[2] Key will be what this "solidification" and "clarification" means in practice. The current Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood MP, when addressing the role of Parliament and Ministers – on that occasion as Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice in relation to sentencing guidelines – has previously made clear her view, that: "How the state addresses a systemic and complex issue is clearly the domain of policymakers".[3] Furthermore, that: "It is entirely proper for a politician – a Government Minister, the Lord Chancellor – to assert that there is a boundary between that which is policy and a matter for Parliament and that which is judicial practice and consistency in judicial cases."[4] As the Government explores similar questions relating to policing and operational independence, this collection offers the considerable wisdom and experience of those who have previously sought to navigate these issues.

While it may not be possible to articulate where the exact line that operational independence should be drawn in every set of circumstances, there is broad agreement amongst this collection of interviews that the intervention of politicians in individual operational decisions or attempting to issue instructions to the police over who should be arrested, investigated or prosecuted would be inappropriate. It is also clear from the interviews however that such strictures should not limit Ministers in relation to addressing issues of policy – including the policy outworkings of cumulative individual operational decisions – or raising with Chief Constables the levels of public concern in relation to specific crime and policing matters and then expecting police forces to take a different approach where necessary.

As the Government explores the issue of operational independence, they would do well to consider three questions which particularly arise from the reflections of former Home Secretaries:

1. How can the pre-eminent role of Ministers and Parliament in the setting of policy – including the policy-outworkings of individual operational matters and decisions – be assured?
2. How can the role of Ministers to raise those operational matters which are of significant and substantial public concern – including being able to anticipate Chief Constables consider taking a different approach where necessary – be maintained?

2. Home Office, "From Local to National: A New Model for Policing", January 2026, link
3. Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP, Hansard, 1st April 2025, Vol 765 Col182, link
4. Ibid. Col 182

3. How can Ministers be assured of a role in holding police chiefs to account for their performance – particularly in relation to the priorities established by a democratically elected Government?

The Chief Inspector of Constabulary – the Home Secretary's representative on Earth?

Running through many of these interviews is the central and evolving role played by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services and specifically the Chief Inspector of Constabulary. Certainly, prior to 2012 it appears that it was through the Chief Inspector of Constabulary that successive Home Secretaries were most clearly able to intervene and have influence in policing matters which might otherwise have been considered to be straying into Chief Constables' sphere of operational independence. The role of HM Chief Inspector was also simultaneously able to provide professional and expert policing advice to Ministers, with the role having traditionally been undertaken by an experienced senior police officer.

Michael Howard stated that he: "always attached a lot of importance to my relationship with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary" which he described as, "my main lever" in relation to Chief Constables. He said: "If I thought that a particular Chief Constable was not doing what he should have been doing, and there were examples, I would say to the Chief Inspector, don't you think you should have a look at this? And he would have a look at it, and he would come up with recommendations. And that seemed to me quite a good system."

Howard's immediate successor, Jack Straw, described the Inspectorate in similar terms – as one of his main mechanisms for delivering change in policing. Of his relationship with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary specifically he said: "The Chief Inspector of Constabulary was David O'Dowd. I would get David in – his office was only one floor or two floors above mine in the Home Office – and I'd get him down and just say, 'I think you need to do something about this force or that force'".

Jacqui Smith, recognising that those in national senior policing roles could be helpful to a Home Secretary – and at the time the Chief Inspector of Constabulary would be one of the two principal such figures – described their involvement extending to: "personnel things, with people going earlier than they might otherwise have done." Charles Clarke similarly referenced that historically the Chief Inspector of Constabulary might have a "private conversation" with a Chief Constable if it was necessary to convey that they should "retire early".

Whilst most of those interviewed placed significant value on the ability of the Chief Inspector of Constabulary to be a means by which the Home Secretary could influence Chief Constables and policing more widely, they were also alive to the perception that the relationship might imply an inappropriate level of political control over police chiefs. Jacqui Smith

herself questioned whether, during her time as Home Secretary, it always represented a sense of "legitimate governance" saying: "I've worked ministerially and in other ways in a range of public services and I can't imagine Ofsted or the CQC [Care Quality Commission] doing what the HMIC used to do when I was Home Secretary."

In similar terms, Charles Clarke also referenced a sense of informality, saying that the discussions were: "a place you could have a conversation, both as Policing Minister and Home Secretary, where you could say 'so what are you going to do about this?' That was an important channel, because if the HMIC said to his policing colleagues, 'well, he's very serious about this, we had better sort it out', then he could talk to the Chief Constable concerned. It was a very informal type of approach, but that would be the extent of it." Clarke concluded: "I suppose what I've just described could be described as improper, in a way, but I think that was the safety valve for the system that I, as the Minister, could talk to the Chief Inspector, who would then in turn talk to the relevant police officers as a fellow police officer – and that was a channel which could be used."

Theresa May's conception of the role of the Inspectorate, however, appears to have been different to many of her predecessors, saying that in relation to the Home Secretary the Inspectorate should operate "very much at arms-length removed" and that "people need to know that the Inspectorate is not under political influence". Her appointment of Sir Tom Winsor to the post of HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary appears to have been in keeping with developing that sense of independence from policing, given he was the first occupant of the post not to have previously served as a police officer. One of May's near successors described the role in similar terms, with Sir Sajid Javid saying he did not work particularly closely with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, and that: "I saw that role pretty much as an independent role. I felt that while you might have conversations and updates, that Ministers shouldn't get involved".

By the time James Cleverly became Home Secretary in 2024 however, some two years after the departure of Sir Tom Winsor as Chief Inspector of Constabulary and eight years on from Theresa May's tenure as Home Secretary, there may well have been a sense that the role was further evolving. Winsor's successor in the post, appointed by Dame Priti Patel MP, was Sir Andy Cooke QPM, the former Chief Constable of Merseyside Police. Cleverly said of his relationship with Cooke: "I probably had six meetings with him over my nine months as Home Secretary. I had a good relationship with him. I think that's an important relationship. The inherent contradiction in his role is if it was perceived by UK policing that he was the Home Secretary's spy in policing, that would make it very difficult for that role to function properly. By the same token, it is his job to make sure that the Home Secretary has a really accurate idea of what's working well and what's working badly. Having someone from a strong policing background in that oversight function is important. That needs to evolve so there is more of a seamless relationship between the Inspectorate and the Home Office and simultaneously maintaining that close working

relationship between the Inspectorate and forces."

These interviews suggest that while the evolution of the relationship between Ministers and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary may have represented progress towards a more "correct" form of "governance", in the process something essential may have been lost. The informal channel that some interviewees acknowledged might look "improper" from the outside or was not strictly "legitimate governance" was, in practice, a means by which Ministers could act without crossing into overt interference in the operational sphere. A return to the pre-May era of "quiet conversations" is, in the modern era, almost certainly impossible; but the alternative – an Inspectorate so scrupulously distanced from Ministerial concerns that it does not contribute to transmitting democratic accountability into operational reality – may risk leaving the Home Secretary with all the accountability to Parliament yet limited means to discharge it.

The Future

This collection of interviews shows that, while holding ultimate political responsibility for policing in England and Wales, the office of Home Secretary has traditionally possessed only limited direct control over the actions of and decisions made by Chief Constables and police officers. Yet these interviews also show how a savvy Home Secretary can still be highly effective at setting the direction of policing and holding Chief Constables to account for performance by wisely using the "direct" and "indirect" levers which are available to them – and in some cases available to only them.

With proposals as part of the recent White Paper to abolish Police and Crime Commissioners, to merge existing police forces and to create a National Police Service led by a National Police Commissioner, the landscape of how policing in this country is organised may well be about to go through its biggest change for a generation. As part of those changes, considering how elected politicians can hold police chiefs to account on behalf of the public – and therefore the nature of the relationships between Ministers and Chief Constables and in particular understanding where the boundaries of operational independence lie – will be of critical importance.

In addition to being a unique historical record, this collection of interviews provides future Home Secretaries and their advisers with a guide: by best understanding the lessons of the past, so also might Ministers be effective in the future.

Kenneth Baker

Rt Hon Kenneth Baker, latterly Rt Hon Lord Baker of Dorking CH, was Home Secretary between 28 November 1990 and 10 April 1992. He also served as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary of State for Education and Science and Secretary of State for the Environment. He was the Member of Parliament for Mole Valley between 1983 and 1997, the Member of Parliament for St Marylebone between 1970 and 1983 and the Member of Parliament for Acton between 1968 and 1970.

Do you have any initial observations on the role of the Home Secretary?
I was Home Secretary from 1990 until 1992 and my general observations on the role of Home Secretary are that, first, it is a unique position in the Government – not just because of its seniority, but because the Home Secretary is the only senior minister who can make a whole lot of decisions by himself, without going to other committees and getting approval.

On the whole, he's not a big spender of money – the money that he has is spent on the interests that he has of maintaining the court service, maintaining the constabulary and, to some extent, maintaining the security services. That money is very secure and he makes a lot of decisions that he doesn't have to go to colleagues on. Whereas, if you're the Secretary of State for Education, or the Environment, or Trade and Industry or Justice, you have to go to other colleagues to get that approval. So that is a unique position of the Home Secretary – you can make a lot of decisions by yourself.

And what are those decisions?
Mainly about the criminal justice system. Your main responsibility is to maintain the criminal justice system to ensure that it is appropriate to the needs of the country, namely, that the sentences that are available are, in fact, successful in maintaining or reducing crime. There are lots of new offences that get added from time to time – I added some during my time, dealing with the particular rash of young people driving cars madly, changing the balance of probability and guilt in the consideration of the court case.

That is the main job; but it had added to it over the years a number of subjects. There was a time when the Home Office was responsible for children's policy, and that was taken away years ago. I reduced the role of the Home Secretary quite actively; for example, I did not believe that it should be responsible for decisions on licences for television and radio. When Willie Whitelaw [Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw KT CH MC, Home Secretary (1979 – 1983)] was the Home Secretary, he thought one of his

main jobs was the licensing of the BBC and of ITV – and he spent a lot of time on it. I recommended that they should be moved out totally. I did that because I had previously been the technology minister and it was clear to me that when we had a separate technology minister, he should be responsible for the licensing of the entertainment industry, and not the Home Secretary.

And as the Home Secretary during my time, I spent a lot of time on reinforcing and protecting the criminal justice system. For example, I set up the only Royal Commission that we've had in recent years to examine the question of miscarriages of justice as the role of the Home Secretary being the ultimate person who decided whether there had been an injustice or not. I still had cases coming up to me when I had to decide whether there had been injustice in it or not, and I thought that was unsatisfactory. So I set up a Royal Commission, which was implemented after I ceased being Home Secretary, and there is now a separate body which deals with the practices of misjudgement and unfairness. It was taken out of the hands of the Home Secretary, and that did not worry me at all, because I did not think that, in fact, the Home Secretary should be the ultimate decider – as they were when we had the death penalty, with the Home Secretary being the ultimate decider as to whether the execution should take place or not.

When it comes to a particular relationship with the police and prison service, I always thought it was rather strange that if there were prisoners who had escaped from prison it should be the Home Secretary who was asked about it. One previous Home Secretary did offer his resignation to the Prime Minister following a famous breakout from Wormwood Scrubs and I had a similar one. I wasn't shirking my responsibility, but I thought it was absurd to believe that any Home Secretary of the day had to be responsible for the activities of a prison governor – it's an absurdity. It's expecting, in relation to other activities, the Home Secretary to be responsible for roads not having their potholes filled; so, I set up a Royal Commission, and it did recommend an institution which deals with miscarriages of justice, and I think that's a correct role.

With regards to relations with the prison service, the Home Secretary has a relationship with the inspectors – the prison inspector – and that's a very important relationship. I think I was the first Home Secretary to say that all the reports of prison inspectors should be published. And they became major news on the Today programme when they were published. The Home Secretary had to ensure that there were enough prisons, and he had to ensure that there was a good training system for prison staff, but he should not have been in the position of being involved in what staff should get paid and things of that sort. I wanted to make the whole prison service into a separate, independent quango – that was rolled back by Michael Howard [Rt Hon Lord Howard of Lympne CH, Home Secretary (1993 – 1997)], I think, and that was a mistake.

On the relationship with the police, I met a lot of Chief Constables, and it was very interesting to listen to them. Some were exceptionally able; some were more progressive than others but were very responsible

people. The best ones won the respect of the junior officers for which they were responsible; and I had some very good ones. The Chief Constable of Manchester was really good in my time, and so was the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. I did not interfere very much with the running of the independent police authorities, and we had no significant legislative change in my time as Home Secretary. So, although the Home Secretary is responsible for the police, the police are very much more responsible for themselves – and that's the nature of our society.

Do you think that is the way it should be?
I do. It is the way it is in America. If something happens there, the Attorney General in the United States, who has the equivalent responsibilities of the Home Secretary here, would never think of resigning, for example.

You mention examples of Chief Constables who were very able – were there examples of Chief Constables you dealt with where that was not the case?
Yes, you only hear about it by hearsay, very largely. I thought the Chief Inspector of Constabulary was always very, very discreet, in fact, and only told me what he really wanted to tell me. That is a more public role today because the press quickly identify a police service which has gone too far or not gone far enough. It's not identified by the Home Secretary. There's usually an event.

Prison breakouts were a big issue in my time because I had to handle the consequences of the Strangeways riot when prisoners took over the prisons and sat on the roofs. There was a very good report by a former lord chief justice on Strangeways, which was submitted to me on the treatment of prisoners. It had things such as access to television and that sort of thing. One of the big things that came out of that report was in dealing with prisoner riots, it established a trained core of prison officers would come from another prison equipped to deal with the riot.

Since your time as Home Secretary, responsibility for prisons has moved from the Home Office to the Ministry of Justice – how much of your time as Home Secretary was spent on prisons versus policing?
I did spend more time on prisons than policing, definitely. Because of Strangeways there were capital consequences, personnel consequences and training requirements. So that took up a lot of my time.

And immigration?
The interesting thing about my time as Home Secretary and immigration is that up until 1990 the number of applications we had under the 1951 convention was about 2,000 or 3,000 a year for 40 years. They were people who were genuinely persecuted and about to be arrested, or hanged, or murdered, or to have their houses taken away, and we were very generous in accepting many of them. It was when I was Home Secretary in 1990 that the application numbers suddenly rose to 45,000 in 1991. It was the

first year of the burst of immigration. Douglas Hurd [Rt Hon Lord Hurd of Westwell CH CBE, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1989 – 1995)], the Foreign Secretary, and I tried very hard to contain it, and we failed, as have all our successors.

Immigration now is almost the main responsibility of the Home Secretary, as the new Home Secretary has made clear. I don't think she's gone around visiting many police forces and I don't think she's gone around visiting many prisons; but she's very clear what she wants to do on immigration and it's a very tough policy. It's a correct policy, in my view.

I was the first one who had to face the increase in immigration and I realised there weren't enough people in the department to manage this. When you were dealing with 2,000 applications a year, you needed a much smaller number of civil servants dealing with it. Certainly with 90,000 you need many more. And now we have to have infinitely many more. That's the biggest headache facing the Home Secretary now – the Home Secretary is seen as the minister responsible for this, and she will either make her name or not make her name on immigration. There's no other issue.

How much bandwidth will the Home Secretary have to look at other things, such as policing?

Less time, because the next boat is going to be arriving and she's got to find ways of trying to contain illegal immigration, which is a very difficult thing to contain. The measures such as conditions on visas for education and things of that sort have already been taken. These issues only just surfaced slightly in my time. The Home Secretary that was mostly worried about students coming in and increasing illegal immigration was May – as comparatively late as that.

Was moving responsibility for prisons from the Home Office to the Ministry of Justice a wise thing to do?

Yes – quite definitely. I think that the administration of a modern society is a very complicated thing to be done successfully, and the more you can delegate to make clear the lines of responsibility, the better. The fact that the Prison Service has gone to the Ministry of Justice is very similar to what I wanted. The Ministry of Justice being responsible for the conduct of prisons, the building of prisons and of magistrates – these issues were a really big headache.

I don't know how much time a Prime Minister would spend today on the Prison Service – only if there were a lot of prison breakouts and riots in prisons. I don't detect that, although Starmer [Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KC MP, Prime Minister (2024 – 2026)] comes from a justice background he is interested in the courts or judges. I don't think that he will take great interest in those matters.

What if a police force is failing, what should a Home Secretary do about that?

Well, you now have Police and Crime Commissioners – which we are about to abolish. They were never necessary. It was a fad that was implemented, and they have not been successful. Very third-rate people became Police and Crime Commissioners. That means that individual police forces will have even more open responsibility to be measured and to perform. I think that local communities will start taking a greater interest in them. Local councillors will start taking a greater interest in them.

When I was Home Secretary, my local force was Surrey Police and I only met them once, I think – because what could I do? I could do very little. Their success depends very much upon their ability to identify crime and arrest people, and also to produce cases that are effective in court.

Where forces are failing – that's what the inspector ought to identify; but during my time he never came to me. Perhaps, on one occasion, there was trouble in one force – I think Cleveland – which I had to become involved in because it had become a public issue. In that case I had to first find out what the complaint was – was it a reasonable complaint? What action had been taken by the authorities, by the police service itself and by the Chief Constable in dealing with it? And I had to go into detail on that.

I suppose, at the end of the day, the Home Secretary could remove a Chief Constable, although it's very rarely done. There should be somebody at the senior levels of Government who has that answerability, because it is the thing that affects so many people, whether they're living in towns, villages or cities where the actual policing has not been effective or is careless. One of the troubles, of course, is that the press now chase, much more than they did in my time, areas where things are going wrong and obviously going wrong.

Is it your sense that, in the case of policing, the Home Secretary's responsibilities and ability to make changes should be limited?

I do remember once visiting Surrey Police – they were very contemptuous of the Home Secretary and his responsibilities. I remember seeing them, and they were pretty belligerent, and they wanted to run it entirely their way – they had all the knowledge, they had the experience and their attitude was, "leave it to us". Now, if a police force is really well run, they can say that and keep the Home Secretary off their backs. If they can't, then there are problems.

Surrey Police were very belligerent towards me because they thought they were doing things better than I could possibly do, and I was too distant – not me personally, but that the whole system was too distant – and that they knew what they had to do. They would say, "we know how to reduce crime in Guildford".

A current issue is shoplifting. Suddenly, the police have got to try and do something about it. But it's not the Home Secretary doing anything all about it. The Home Secretary is only worried because two MPs have spoken to him and said, "It's awful, we had to close several shops because

of people nicking things". But the pressure comes, in fact, from the publicity of it, not from what the Home Secretary and all his officials are measuring.

So, there's actually a very limited number of things the Home Secretary can do about these things?
Yes.

One thing is that the Chief Inspector of Constabulary should be someone from outside of the police, and should not be from the uniform service. He should be taken from the general administration of the country – someone who would take a real interest in the performance of the police service. There are some sort of people who are very anti-police – you should keep away from those altogether. But if you just appoint another Chief Constable, you'll be putting in somebody who is very favourable to the police, and you want an outside look**.**

Kenneth Clarke

Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke CH KC, latterly Rt Hon Lord Clarke of Nottingham CH KC, was Home Secretary between 10 April 1992 and 27 May 1993. He also served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Secretary of State for Education and Science, Secretary of State for Health and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. He was the Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe between 1970 and 2019.

What are your initial reflections on being appointed Home Secretary?
My time as Home Secretary was probably the shortest post that I ever held – I was only there for a little over a year. I expected to be there for the whole Parliament, and police reform was going to be my main agenda for the rest of my time there, but then Black Wednesday came along and I was suddenly and surprisingly moved.

Why was police reform so high on your agenda?
I just thought they weren't accountable to anybody, and they varied so much in quality. I admire and have the usual public regard for policemen, but they're not well led and different forces are very variable. The Met [Metropolitan Police], which of course is the biggest and which I was directly responsible for, was one problem because it had these pockets of corruption and issues with racism and so on. It wasn't being led in a way that was ever going to deal with that, I thought. I did appoint a new Commissioner [Lord Condon QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (1993 – 1999)], and had a great row with those inside the Met because I introduced someone from outside who had a good record as Chief Constable of Kent. They were very annoyed that I didn't appoint the next person in the queue from inside the Met, but had brought in a provincial outsider. I don't think he was able to achieve much – the Met still has its problems, although I hope they're not as bad as they were in my day.

The thing that really troubled me was that the country as a whole was divided into a little short of fifty different small police authorities and police forces entirely run by individual Chief Constables who varied enormously in quality. The culture and practice between the different police forces seemed to me to vary a lot, and I thought we needed, if not a national force, a much bigger cross-local authority border approach to these things.

It's very difficult to hold Chief Constables to account. The whole Police and Crime Commissioner experiment which followed me was a failure, because ultimately everything's operational and there is no doubt that the operational independence of the Chief Constable from political

interference is a very valuable principle. So, the question is: how do you make Chief Constables accountable for their performance?

I reached the stage of discussing this, but there was huge resistance. I gather that's not now the case, as the present Government's thinking of doing something similar and many Chief Constables are in favour of it nowadays. I'm afraid, in my time, I just thought 40-something police forces meant 40-something people could be promoted to the level of Chief Constable and they rather liked that.

In relation to the relationship between ministers and Chief Constables – where do you think the line is or should be drawn in relation to operational independence?

It is a very serious point, because I do respect the fact that what you do not want is party political interference with the way in which the police go about their business or political interference in the investigation of particular cases. I'm a great believer in the rule of law and that independence from political pressure of the prosecuting authorities and the policing authorities is key in a democracy.

But management, the quality of performance, what value for money you're delivering and measuring that value in terms of the quantity and the quality of the service you're giving to the public – accountability for those things is, I think, essential across the entire public sector.

Navigating the line between those two things is particularly difficult to draw.

How do we go about navigating that line between the two?

It requires establishing processes and practices which acknowledge that it is the central question.

One assumes, if you've got people of goodwill, and you're talking about high quality, sensible Chief Constables and high quality, sensible ministers, then you won't have difficulty – they will know for themselves. They should be able to make the judgements about what's proper for the minister to ask them to account for and approach them on and what's not. It just requires the building up of a very established and understood practice on the subject.

But there's an inevitable tendency for Chief Constables to assert that absolutely everything is an operational matter and solely a matter for them. I think most of the Police and Crime Commissioners were driven off into total inactivity as a result, as far as I can see. In Nottingham, for example, as far as I could see we had one rather good Police and Crime Commissioner, but she was completely thwarted. The police force wouldn't tell her anything they didn't want her to know.

You've talked about the need for high quality ministers and Chief Constables – is your sense that we haven't had that?

No, I think we usually have. Where accountability comes into play is in the poor performance patches.

The problem in the police service, with all these different little local police services, and the problem with the health service, which is a giant organisation, is in my judgement the quality of performance varied enormously from between the spectacularly good to the pretty dismal. The point of accountability and proper exercise of authority is to make sure things get changed, including, if necessary, making personnel changes at the top.

And your sense is that, ultimately, in relation to policing, that should be the role of the Home Secretary?
That is the role of the Home Secretary. Once he or she becomes aware of serious failures of performance in a particular force, there must be some means whereby this can be addressed, investigated and recommendations made – but also changes of personnel made.

Of course, you have to have evidence for that – you have to be able to support your decision – but some ability to make your responsibility for the police service a meaningful thing, by being able to organise an intervention that raises the performance, is essential.

During my time, of course, we had local authority police committees which were, by and large, useless.

How much did you have to do with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary when you were Home Secretary?
I don't remember them making much impression on me. They seemed to me better than the Chief Inspector of Schools and the schools' inspectorate, which I completely sidelined and replaced with Ofsted. But looking back, I don't have any criticisms of the police Inspectorate.

What was your experience of the Home Office itself?
The Home Office was the most resistant to change department that I ever presided over – and I was much reshuffled and had a very lengthy career, having been a minister for over twenty years in many departments. Each department in those days had its own culture and we didn't have political special advisers surrounding ministers – it was a direct minister to civil service relationship in every department.

What was it about the Home Office that was so resistant to change?
It was conservative with a small c. They were resistant to almost every proposal you wanted to canvass.

On arriving in a department, I always used to take the first month or two, three sometimes, really getting into the subject and deciding what my agenda was going to be. And in most of my departments, I then went in for what were sometimes hugely controversial and quite vigorous reforms. I was a very active health secretary and education secretary and left behind institutions that hadn't been there before – such as the national curriculum and Ofsted in Education, and proper control of money inside

the health service with the internal market. These were all things which the Blair Government carried on with when they succeeded us, because Blair [Rt Hon Sir Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2007)] was a great admirer of the social reforms of the Thatcher Government.

I always had a very good relationship with the British civil service. I think that the British civil service is a marvellous institution, and I'm sorry they're so disillusioned now. I have an old veteran's prejudice, no doubt, but I deeply disapprove of the hundreds of political advisers recruited to marginalise the civil service in policy making.

I ran all my departments like a debating society: everybody would be involved, with quite large numbers taking part, all giving me their views, and reacting to my proposals and thrashing out what we should do. Most spectacularly, this was the case in the Treasury – it was like holding a long-running debate and seminar at high table of a very good Oxbridge college. It was a very high intellectual standard, and the newest arrival from university would sit there arguing some aspect of policy with the Permanent Secretary in front of me without any reserve at all.

The Home Office couldn't take to these large meetings. All the Home Office advice was supposed to be given to me by the permanent secretary. When I held these meetings, most of the officials would sit there silently whilst the Permanent Secretary did all the conversation with me. After some of them, where the permanent secretary had been particularly resistant to what I was proposing, I'd be told afterwards by my private office that actually the majority of people in the room had agreed with me, but in the Home Office they weren't allowed to contradict what the permanent secretary said was the advice of the department.

The advice of the department on most subjects could largely be summed up as, "Very interesting, but that's not how we do things here, Minister", and was, on the whole, anxious to preserve the status quo.

Most difficult of all were our friends in MI5 who were perfectly nice people but weren't remotely accountable to anybody. They were quite happy to meet me and talk about their work – they liked entertaining me with stories of some rather spectacular operation they were running, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was very worried, whilst totally supportive of our need for strong security services and understanding of the incredibly high level of secrecy and security they had to maintain, about the lack of accountability. I made teachers more accountable; I made doctors more accountable; ministers should be more accountable to a stronger parliament. I just think it's a good way of raising performance.

There is a strength in the select committees of the House of Commons and so I altered the rules for the Intelligence and Security Committee so they were all given security vetting – as a result, they were able to get inside the security wall and properly take their time investigating subjects. So while their reports don't reveal anything that's remotely private, the process and the reports became much more powerful than they used to be.

So really the problem with the Home Office was it was the only

department I encountered where the ethos of the department was formal, process driven and deeply resistant to change. Every time I did indicate a direction and instruct them to do something, it was very important to check a few weeks later whether anybody had taken the slightest notice or done anything about it. So while I enjoyed it, as I did all my ministerial jobs, it was the most frustrating, I think, of the ministerial jobs I had, and the least satisfactory department to work in.

How did this compare to other departments you worked in?
Some of the other departments were totally receptive to change. The main problem I had in other departments was a reluctance to upset the trade unions. They couldn't believe you were going to upset the BMA or the NUT. The trade unions in the Home Office were hugely powerful and equally resistant to change – such as the Police Federation and the Prison Officers Association and so on – but they liked taking me to great boozy dinners. That's what they thought they should do to entertain me, but otherwise I'm sure they were totally lined up with the civil servants they worked with to be totally resistant to changing anything at all.

What were the other issues that you were dealing with during your time in the Home Office?
I did introduce privately owned and managed prisons in order to bring some of the virtues of competition and expand our capacity by having private investment in the prison system. I also strengthened the role of the Intelligence and Security Committee, as I mentioned.

One other issue, of course, is immigration, which wasn't the issue then that it is now. I was responsible for the Border Force and so on, but there wasn't much ministerial or political activity on the subject when I was there, and I wasn't under any pressure on the subject either.

Since then, the volume on the subject has been rising all the time. It turned into a catastrophic, major issue under Boris Johnson [Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Prime Minister (2019 – 2022)], who was the worst Prime Minister of my lifetime. Not that Boris usually intervened much in policy, as he wasn't particularly interested in policy. It was Priti Patel [Rt Hon Dame Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary (2019 – 2022)], as Home Secretary, who introduced a visa scheme which was so lax and so generous that we suddenly increased the population of the country by 900,000 people in one year.

I was very proud of being in a country that was so tolerant and well able to handle becoming a multicultural, multi-ethnic democracy as we are. But the pressures came when the numbers exploded, and the numbers are a feature of the visa scheme. And, of course, what enrages the public are the illegal boat crossings. All that is down to Boris Johnson and his Government – his lack of interest in the subject was probably his main contribution.

James Cleverly [Rt Hon Sir James Cleverly MP, Home Secretary (2023 – 2024)] has been given no credit for the fact that he pretty well sorted it

out and reformed it, leading to the present collapse in net immigration as a result of his reforms.

But unfortunately it's had a lasting effect on public attitudes as we have an angry, disaffected public for other reasons as well, mainly because of the performance of the economy, and one way people manifest their anger is a rise in feeling about immigration and a rise in racism and racial tensions, which can only be restored by demonstrating to the public that it is back under control again.

Was it unexpected for you to leave the Home Office so quickly?

I didn't expect to be moved at all – I got the strong impression I was going to be the Home Secretary for the Parliament. These days we have far too many reshuffles. Now every time the prime minister is in trouble, he reshuffles, and prime ministers themselves get thrown out every two years by plotting parties. It is one reason why the standard of delivery of Government for the last ten years or so has been so thoroughly dismal. You need three or four years to make a real difference in any department.

Black Wednesday was a complete surprise to everybody. What I was very absorbed with was the actual politics of the Government – that absorbed a lot of my energy and time. John Major [Rt Hon Sir John Major KG, Prime Minister (1990 – 1997)] had achieved a quite remarkable election victory against all the odds in 1992. We were surprisingly in office, but the party was extremely embittered internally by the fall of Margaret Thatcher [Rt Hon Baroness Thatcher LG OM, Prime Minister (1979 – 1990)], and so it was the beginning of the internal turmoil within the party which has destroyed the Conservative and the Labour parties ever since, really.

The Labour Party was always at war with itself, but the Conservative Party was at war with itself over Brexit, mainly because the Thatcher enthusiasts – and I believe Margaret was the best Prime Minister of my lifetime, but it was perfectly obvious she had to go by the time she went – believed this was a great betrayal. They became ferocious Brexiteers and convinced themselves it was all a European plot, with pro-Europeans like me and Heseltine [Rt Hon Lord Heseltine CH, Deputy Prime Minister (1995 – 1997)] being responsible.

John's Government between 1992 and 1997 was dominated by internal fights and quarrels of the most extraordinary kind. He did appoint hardline Brexiteers to the cabinet to reflect the balance of the party and to try to manage it politically. Some of those hardline Brexiteers were very loyal, good Ministers in every way – people like Michael Howard [Rt Hon Lord Howard of Lympne CH KC, Home Secretary (1993 – 1997)] – but some of them were openly and privately disloyal. Cabinet Government, which we ran in those days, became very difficult because everything leaked, with rather distorted leaks giving a strange impression of what had gone on at meetings to the newspapers, with half the newspapers being briefed within ten minutes of a Cabinet meeting ending.

John was surrounded by a kind of Praetorian Guard of Michael Heseltine, Douglas Hurd [Rt Hon Lord Hurd of Westwell, Foreign Secretary (1989 –

1995)] and me, who were his most ardent supporters and his protectors. But the politics of the party and of parliament were particularly hectic at that time. That was coloured by other things that destroyed the Major Government – such as cash for questions and corruption of various kinds, such as members' expenses.

How much of your time and energy went into that sort of politics, rather than the more traditional business of running the department?
Rather more went into the politics than the rest of my time as a minister. My recollection is it was a particularly difficult political time, and there was a lot going on. And to actually help John protect the whole thing, the party from – you can only describe them as – his enemies was rather more time consuming than it usually is in a normal spell of a new Government.

The Home Office is an important department. It is a very difficult department and politically, a very dangerous department – it throws up many unbelievably silly crises, which have been fatal for one or two quite good Home Secretaries.

Being a cabinet minister in a serious department is at least a 12-hour job, probably rather more. You're never free of things. And it's true in all the bigger departments that suddenly something can happen, of which you're blissfully unaware – somebody's done something, somewhere – and immediately the press are after you asking "What are you going to do about it?" And you can be held responsible for all kinds of crises and things which you have had nothing to do with and hasn't crossed your desk. The Home Office has produced some beauts over the years – it has the reputation of being a rather dangerous department for one's political career.

Michael Howard

Rt Hon Michael Howard, latterly Rt Hon Lord Howard of Lympne CH KG, was Home Secretary between 27 May 1993 and 2 May 1997. He also served as Secretary of State for the Environment and Secretary of State for Employment. He subsequently became the Leader of the Conservative Party and Leader of HM Opposition between 2003 and 2005. He was the Member of Parliament for Folkestone and Hythe between 1983 and 2010.

What were your priorities when you became Home Secretary?

I was never expecting to become Home Secretary. I'd never spoken on law and order in the House of Commons. So I went into the Home Office with a completely open mind. I didn't have any preconceived agenda at all.

One of the first things that happened was that the officials produced this graph, which showed that crime had risen on average five per cent a year for the previous 50 years and would continue to rise inexorably, and there was nothing I could do about it, and my job was to manage public expectations in the face of this inevitable, continuing rise in crime. Well, obviously, I didn't feel inclined to take that advice, but I really didn't know what to do about it.

I spent the first couple of months of my time listening. I went around the country, spent a lot of time in police canteens, and was astounded at how low morale was. Police officers would say to me, "We don't know why we bother. It's hard enough to find the people who've committed crimes. If we do find them, the chances are the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] would tell us we don't have enough evidence to prosecute. If we do prosecute, the chances are they'll be acquitted and if, by some miracle, they're convicted, they'll be given sixpence from the poor box and told to get on their way". I was very disturbed by this, so I decided to try and tackle this across the board.

First of all, I wanted to deter people from committing crime in the first place. I thought one of the ways in which we might help to do that would be a vast increase in the installation of CCTV cameras. The use of these cameras had really been pioneered by John Stevens [Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2000 – 2005)]] when he was Chief Constable of Northumbria, and they'd worked. He'd succeeded in reducing crime at a time when it was going up all over the place. So that was my first thing that I thought would help to deter crime, because if people could see they were being looked at, and they knew that the evidence would be there on camera, they might think twice.

Also, it helped to achieve my second goal, which was to make it

easier to find the criminal once they had committed crimes. The other way in which I was hoping to achieve that was by setting up the first national DNA database in the world. There had been a recommendation by a Royal Commission, just at the time that I became Home Secretary, which recommended the establishment of such a DNA database, but I went further than the recommendations of the Royal Commission and extended the remit of the DNA database. And I thought that would help to convict criminals, which indeed all of these measures contributed to what happened.

The third thing was to try and make it easier for criminals to be convicted without really affecting the rights of the innocent. And so, I modified the right to silence so that people still had a right to remain silent if they wanted, but that it could be commented upon at trial, which previously had not been the case. The previous position was that if someone was accused of a burglary and was arrested, and said nothing at all, and at his trial for the first time, said, "Well, I went into that house by mistake, because I thought it was my brother-in-law's house", the prosecution weren't allowed to say, "Why didn't you say that at the time?" And the jury weren't allowed to take into account the fact that he said nothing at the time. It was not allowed to be in a factor at the trial – so the law I introduced meant that you still had a right to remain silent, but if you did it could be commented upon at the trial. We had to change the police caution. The caution which we now have was devised actually by me, because officials said it couldn't be done because it would make things too complicated.

And the final thing was that if people were convicted, we didn't have repeat police cautions, which was one of the banes of the system when I took over – people would be cautioned many times for the same kind of offence, which meant that by the time they appeared before a court for the first time they were hardened criminals. And I did toughen up sentencing. And I said "prison works", meaning not, as sometimes distorted, that prison was the key to rehabilitation – no one has yet found the golden key to rehabilitation, which I'm all for – but that if people were in prison they couldn't continue to commit crimes against the public. And by people, I meant persistent, professional, serious criminals – obviously not every criminal could be sent to prison and I never suggested that.

Now I should add that the other report which was on my desk when I took over was the Sheehy Report, which had the police up in arms. They were completely opposed to its recommendations. I did introduce some of its recommendations, which did slim down somewhat the number of ranks and the chain of command, but I decided that if reducing crime was to be my top priority, I couldn't afford to have a war with the police at the same time. So to the consternation of Kenneth Clarke [Rt Hon Lord Clarke of Nottingham CH KC, Home Secretary (1992 – 1993)], who had set up the Sheehy report, I did implement some of its reforms, but not all of its reforms, because I thought I needed the co-operation of the police if I was to achieve my number one objective, which was to reduce crime.

How were you able to override the sense of civil servants telling you this was the way things were done – that crime couldn't be combatted?
So we started off with this graph. And then, you know, I spend my time listening, and then I decide what I'm going to do about it, and I make my first speech as Home Secretary at the Tory Party Conference, which contained 27 proposals for change. And because this ran counter completely to the received wisdom of the Home Office, no official saw the whole of that speech before it was delivered. The speech was crafted by me and my two special advisers, one of whom was David Cameron [Rt Hon Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, Prime Minister (2010 – 2016)], and we showed the relevant bits of the speech to the relevant officials, but we didn't show the whole speech to anyone, and that was because there was, at the time, a considerable resistance to the things that I wanted to do.

In fact, there's a story which I've never entirely been able to authenticate, but it has the ring of truth. A journalist phoned the Home Office press office at around that time and said, "What's the policy on X?" and got the reply, "Well, Home Office policy is A, but the Home Secretary seems to think that the policy should be B". And there was huge resistance.

Also one of the factors was the previous three Home Secretaries, David Waddington [Rt Hon Lord Waddington GCVO QC, Home Secretary (1989 – 1990)], Kenneth Baker [Rt Hon Lord Baker of Dorking CH, Home Secretary (1990 – 1992)] and Ken Clarke [Rt Hon Lord Clarke of Nottingham CH KC, Home Secretary (1992 – 1993)], had all been there for just a year each., and the officials thought this was some johnny-come-lately trying to change everything. They thought, "He'll be gone in a year, just like the others. So, we needn't take too seriously all these changes that he wants to make." But after a few months, and particularly after Richard Wilson [Rt Hon Lord Wilson of Dinton GCB, Permanent Secretary, Home Office (1994 – 1998)] came as Permanent Secretary, and when I had made it clear that I was determined to push these changes through, and I was in charge, they came round – it took a while, but they did come round.

And I'm not one of the people who thinks the civil service is institutionally feeble, or whatever. I think that the civil service then, as now, responds to strong political leadership. If it doesn't get strong political leadership then things go wrong – things go awry. But if it gets strong political leadership, I think the civil service is an asset.

Although one former official lamented the fact that some of the changes that I made and said, "One of the problems was that we had Michael Howard come along saying, 'I'm here to make a difference'"; as though that's a problem – as if it's the job of the Home Secretary not to try and make a difference, but to just accept things as they've been going on for, for years, if not decades.

Did you face pushback from a civil liberties perspective over the introduction of new technologies such as the DNA database and more CCTV cameras?

Hugely, everything I did was bitterly opposed. Bitterly opposed. It was claimed CCTV cameras were an infringement on personal liberty, so was the DNA database. It was considered monstrous to change the right to silence, which, it was claimed, was a God-given right that had been an Englishman's birthright for centuries. And, of course, "prison works" was bitterly criticised. Across the board I faced fierce opposition to everything I tried to do, including within the Home Office, although after a while I made it clear that I was in charge and I was going to do the things that I wanted to do.

And ultimately, during my four years, notwithstanding what I was told by the officials, crime fell by 18 per cent. There were almost a million fewer crimes a year committed in 1997, when I left office, than in 1993, when I started. That is according to the recorded crime figures but, for those who are sceptical about those, there was also a simultaneous reduction in the figures from The National Crime Survey.

What was your relationship like with the police? Were they on board with the things you were trying to do?

The police weren't the problem. There were some Chief Constables who weren't terribly keen on what I was doing. There were some quite sort of "liberal" Chief Constables at the time who weren't very keen on what I was doing. But for the most part, the police were on side. And I had a very good relationship with the officers of the Police Federation, which was not common for Home Secretaries to have. The police on the whole were on side.

How have relationships changed between Government and policing since your time as Home Secretary?

I think there has been a shift and. And to be fair I think there have been reforms that have been necessary. One thing I regret, for example, was that we did change the rules relating to discipline and gave Chief Constables somewhat more power than they previously had, but we didn't go far enough and that is still an issue today. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 onwards)] was complaining the other day, and largely as a result of a completely misguided decision, in my view, of the courts, that he was completely hamstrung, that he was he wasn't able to dismiss someone who hadn't been vetted properly. So, I should have gone further on that.

And Theresa May [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Home Secretary (2010 – 2016)], for example, had a rather difficult relationship with the police, but that was because she was trying to change things. So, I wouldn't blame my successors for the fact that some of them had a more difficult relationship with the police than I had, because things change

over time and you have to deal with the circumstances you face.

Aside from crime and policing, where else did you focus your attention?
Crime was my number one priority. In the first debate we had when I was Home Secretary and Tony Blair [Rt Hon Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2007)] was my shadow, he said, "Will you accept as the criterion of your success as Home Secretary a reduction in crime?" And to my eternal regret, I ducked the challenge because it seemed to me such a formidable task that, although I was determined to try, I was by no means confident I would succeed. So, reducing crime was certainly my number one priority.

But remember, the Home Office then included most of what is now the Ministry of Justice. So it was a huge department, and there were many other things that I had to focus on, including, notably, prisons, now in the Ministry of Justice, which caused me a lot of grief with the escapes and my dismissal of Derek Lewis [Director General of Her Majesty's Prison Service (1993 – 1995)].

I always say that the difference between the Home Office and other departments is that every minister makes mistakes. It's human, we're fallible human beings. If you're in another department there's a pretty good chance that your mistake will be in some dark, hidden corner and no one will ever know about it. But there are very few dark, hidden corners in the Home Office, because everything the Home Office did in those days, and the reduced Home Office does today, is a matter of intense public concern, and there are no dark, hidden corners. If you make a mistake, everybody knows about it.

Did you see it as the Home Secretary's job to hold Chief Constables to account for their performance?
Yes – I tried to change the composition of the police committees of local authorities and the opposition was led by Willie Whitelaw [Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw KT CH MC, Home Secretary (1979 – 1983)] in the House of Lords, who was a very eminent figure in the Conservative Party, and I think I had to modify my plans. We did get some reform through, but not as much as I'd originally wanted.

And I was the author – I know they're not very popular – but in a later incarnation, when I was Leader of the Opposition, I put the establishment of the role of Police and Crime Commissioner in our 2005 manifesto. So that was the origin of what Theresa May introduced. It's in the 2005 manifesto, because the previous way of holding police Chief Constables to account with a committee of the local authority, the existence of which was pretty unknown to the public, and no member of the public would be able to name any member of that police committee. Whereas I thought if you had an elected Police and Crime Commissioner with a greater public presence, you might be able to have some effective means of holding Chief Constables to account.

What's your sense of how Police and Crime Commissioners have transpired in practice over the last decade or so?
Some and some: it perhaps hasn't been as resounding a success as I might have hoped, but I think it's a good principle.

As the Home Secretary sat in Westminster, what were the levers that you personally were able to pull when you wanted a Chief Constable to do something or head in a certain direction?
I always attached a lot of importance to my relationship with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, and for most of my time we had an excellent Chief Inspector who I had a very good and close relationship with, and that was my main lever. If I thought that a particular Chief Constable was not doing what he should have been doing, and there were examples, I would say to the Chief Inspector, "Don't you think you should have a look at this?" And he would have a look at it, and he would come up with recommendations. And that seemed to me quite a good system.

Has the relationship between Home Secretaries and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary changed significantly since your time?
Funnily enough, I know Tom Winsor [HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary (2012 – 2022)], and I have a high regard for Tom Winsor, but I would not have appointed a layman as Chief Inspector of Constabulary. I'm very reluctant always to criticise my successors, or my Conservative successors, but I think that was a mistake. I don't know to what extent you can trace some of the difficulties that have arisen since that appointment, but I always thought the police would be much less likely to be responsive to constructive criticism from a Chief Inspector who hadn't himself been a Chief Constable. Now, this was all part of Theresa's [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Home Secretary (2010 – 2016)] reform agenda, and I've no doubt some reform was necessary, but I think having a layman as Chief Inspector of Constabulary is not an advantage.

The way you've talked about the relationship between you and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, it sounds almost as though it were a little informal – is that right?
I don't think I'd agree with that. The role of the Chief Inspector was clear. He had a remit. He could launch inspections of police forces that were thought to be worthy of such inspection or in need of such inspection. And it seemed perfectly reasonable for the decisions as to what inspections should take place should be decisions in which the Home Secretary had a role. I don't think there was anything wrong with that.

Focusing on operational independence – do you have a sense of where the line is as to when it is reasonable for politicians and ministers to be directing the police, and when it is not?
I certainly fully respected that line when I was Home Secretary, and I think it's a very important line. It is a really, really important issue, because once

politicians have the ability to interfere, intervene in individual cases, that's an end of the rule of law, in my view. This is of absolutely fundamental importance.

Politicians should regard it as a matter of concern for them when there are systematic failures and then, through whatever means they have available to them within the law – and I've described how the Chief Inspector of Constabulary was a very important person in my time – they can and should intervene. Individual cases can reveal systematic concerns. So, to give a contemporary example, you have people who are being arrested or threatened with being arrested for so-called hate crimes, when what they've done is not something that should be a matter for the criminal law at all – these cases regularly feature on the pages of the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail. The reaction to that must not be the intervention of the Home Secretary or any other politician in individual cases. But the Home Secretary does have a responsibility for the state of the law which has allowed such a person to be arrested or threatened with arrest. So it's the systemic problem and feature which is a legitimate concern of the Home Secretary, not the individual case, although the individual case may shed light on a systemic failure which needs to be addressed.

Has that, or has it not, worked in recent years around protest?
I don't think in recent weeks or months it's worked well at all. I think there has been too much reluctance on the part of the police to enforce the law. I'm not sure the law needs to be changed. I don't think the police have been sufficiently robust in enforcing the law as it currently exists. And I think in my time I most likely have had a word with the Chief Inspector. I might have had a word with the Commissioner.

And would the conversation have been about the general approach of how the police are addressing protests, rather than how they dealt with a specific protest?
Yes, you might use an individual protest as an example of the way in which the law wasn't being enforced.

Would that be done privately, rather than in a more public setting?
Yes, I can't totally exclude the possibility that I might have said publicly, "I'm going to be meeting the Commissioner to discuss this". I wouldn't ever have talked about my meetings with the Chief Inspector, but I might conceivably have said, if there was a lot of public concern, "I'm meeting the Commissioner to discuss it".

Were there ever examples where you felt that police chiefs were using the doctrine of operational independence to push back against your interventions as Home Secretary?
No example springs to mind – I always thoroughly respected the operational independence of the police for the reasons that I've given you.

Is there anything that you think is important that we've not covered?
Not that I can think of. When you asked me whether there were other things that were on my mind, one is immigration, which was obviously a very hot topic at the time. I mean, it was a big Home Office, and it covered a lot of very controversial issues. And it was pretty challenging. I always say, when people say, "Did you enjoy your time as Home Secretary?" I say, "Enjoy isn't the word." I think it was very rewarding, because I like to think I've made a difference, but I enjoy watching my team win a football match. That's a rather different experience.

Jack Straw

Rt Hon Jack Straw was Home Secretary between 2 May 1997 and 8 June 2001. He also served as Foreign Secretary, Leader of the House of Commons and Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. He was the Member of Parliament for Blackburn between 1979 and 2015.

You had taken an interest in police governance before becoming Home Secretary – where did that come from?

I started taking an interest in police history by chance, and well before I became Home Secretary. The Royal Commission on the police in the early 1960s is a quite an important starting point. Before the subsequent 1969 police force reorganisations, which then morphed into the 1974 local Government reorganisations, you had some county borough forces which were tiny. Blackburn only had a couple of hundred coppers and Burnley, which was a small freestanding county borough, I think had one of the smallest police services.

One of the other problems with those tiny, particularly city and town forces, was that they became a law unto themselves. Some of the most serious corruption and misuse of power took place in those borough forces. I mean, all sorts of examples – the "rhino whip" case in Sheffield, corruption in Blackpool, corruption in Brighton, as well as difficulties in the Met [Metropolitan Police].

I remember, when I was Shadow Home Secretary, asking a police Superintendent I was visiting about these issues and he said, "Oh, that's in the 'Ways and Means Act'". I asked the same chap, "Your numbers seem pretty remarkable?" And he said, "Yeah, well, I can tell you privately that we 'no crime' an awful lot here. It just makes life easier".

And you had a Private Members' Bill on police governance at one point?

Yes, I had a Private Members' Bill in November 1979 called The Police Authorities Powers Bill, which I wrote and drafted myself. That proposed that police authorities should be required to produce policing plans and that that there should be greater involvement of the police authorities in the appointments of chiefs and also local divisional commanders. It also strengthened the police complaints arrangement. Despite the fact the Daily Express wrote it up as a left-wing take-over of the police – all those things and more have happened. I think that Police and Crime Commissioners were actually given too much power and if I'd proposed that in 1979 the Thatcher Government would have gone crazy.

Given you were the Home Secretary when the governance arrangements for the Metropolitan Police changed – what was the relationship like between you as Home Secretary and the Commissioner?

When I was Home Secretary, throughout that period there were no Police and Crime Commissioners. So, I was dealing typically with the Chairmen and Chairwomen of the police authorities. And in London, until the year 2000 – so for the first three years that I was Home Secretary – I was also the police authority for London, because the change over to the Mayor having partial responsibility for policing in London didn't take place until 2000. Even then, under the original arrangements, the Home Secretary had more authority and the Mayor correspondingly less than was later on acquired by the Mayor's office.

Because I was the police authority, and also because it was the Met [Metropolitan Police], I had a close relationship with the Commissioner and his staff. That was Paul Condon [Lord Condon QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (1993 – 1999)] until 1999. Then after that, I appointed the Commissioner. It was my decision, which went through Number 10, although there was no practice by Number 10 in those days of arguing about appointments, whereas I gather, particularly in the last 14 years, there's been a group of SPADs who have crawled all over these appointments in Number 10, which I certainly wouldn't have tolerated. I appointed John Stevens [Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2000 – 2005)] as Commissioner to succeed Condon. John competed against some other pretty strong candidates.

With the Commissioner, my relationships between the two of them was different. I got on ok with Condon but, as soon as I got to the Home Office I was intent on setting up what became the Lawrence Inquiry. He was very sensitive about that, for reasons I understood, because the murder of Stephen Lawrence in April 1993 had happened shortly after he took over as Commissioner, and it clouded the whole of his period. He'd been resistant to there being some external scrutiny, unwisely, and so had Michael Howard [Lord Howard of Lympne CH KG, Home Secretary (1993 – 1997)] – also, in my view, unwisely, there wasn't any particular politics about it.

I had very close negotiations with him in the first couple of months that I was in office to get Paul Condon to accept the terms of reference that I wanted for what became the Lawrence Inquiry. And Tony Blair [Rt Hon Sir Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2010)] was anxious that, if possible, I should get Condon on board for reasons I entirely understood. That was the background to my relationship with Condon thereafter. And the report from Macpherson [Sir William Macpherson of Cluny] came out in late February 1999.

Earlier, at some stage during the evidence session, Condon and, I think, particularly John Stevens, who was Condon's Deputy, had got a grip of the police response and realised that they couldn't continue to maintain an argument that nothing had gone wrong because it plainly had. And then a

pretty fulsome apology was made. Condon accepted the recommendations within the report. He left in 1999. And things certainly were much more straightforward with John Stevens, who was a bigger figure and, in the jargon of the police, a 'copper's copper' – very good, very bright, and very tough – so I had a very straightforward relationship with him.

How did you navigate discussions on operational issues – particularly given the concept of operational independence?

Because I was the police authority for the Met, I did talk to John sometimes about operational issues. To take a public order example, the 'Stop the City' group organised a big demo in 1999. One of the things they did was to dig up Parliament Square and plant cannabis plants – they were the usual suspects who behaved very badly and it looked as though we had lost control of the streets. The Tory opposition had a great go at me for how this was emblematic of a slack Labour Government and John wasn't happy either with the policing. I had a meeting with him once the dust had settled on that, and I said to him, "Look, the outcome here was really poor, we should have planned it better – I don't think we can have that kind of outcome again".

You could say that was me arguing for a change in operational approach, which indeed it was. He probably would have done it anyway; he was up for a change in the style of policing they were going to use the next time this happened. Well, next time it did happen the police were much better prepared for it. I did not and would not have gotten into this kind of operational detail, but one of the things they decided on was, if necessary, they would "kettle" the core demonstrators and troublemakers. Indeed, that's what they ended up doing on Oxford Circus – and they kept them there for a really long time. Later on, some of these people mounted a judicial review against the Met, and in the end lost. The courts decided it was proportionate policing. That was one example of me taking a direct interest in operational policing.

Another example was over the huge problems we had with the animal rights people. In Oxfordshire there was a facility which, by the time I became Home Secretary, the Home Office had needed to put up security fences and barricades to stop these lunatics from breaking into it. At the same time, Colin Blakemore, who was a leading neurobiologist at Oxford, and his unit, as well as the people running Huntington Life Sciences in Cambridgeshire, were suffering the same. They were being outrageously harassed, including in their homes.

I talked to John Stevens and to the ACPO [Association of Chief Police Officers] leaders, about what needed to be done. I had a Criminal Justice Bill going through, so got changes made in the law. But I also said to Stevens, as the Met were coordinating the investigations, that they had to upgrade the number of officers they were putting in. He could have done it anyway, so you could ask whether it was interfering? It was me saying that this was a really big issue – I'm completely unapologetic about the fact that I talked to him about that and it seemed to be entirely right.

There is an obvious line which you don't transgress, which is over an ongoing investigation where the Home Secretary of the day, and in my case I didn't, in any event must just keep out of that. You may occasionally want information, but you can't get involved in who they arrest and who they interview, who they charge.

Were there occasions when there was tension between what you, as Home Secretary, wanted and what the police were doing?
Not police chiefs in general.

One of our five policy pledges was to halve the time it took to get a persistent young offender from arrest through to disposal. The ACPO people were fine about it, but, obviously, it had to be delivered through individual police services. Most of the police forces just got on with it – it was in their interest, it wasn't going to cost them any money, it's just looking at where the bureaucratic problems are. And they need to get in the room with social workers, education people, court officials and sort out what the problem was.

In Greater Manchester, however, there was a Chief Constable called David Wilmot [Chief Constable, Greater Manchester Police (1991 – 2002)] – there had been a tradition in Manchester of really difficult police chiefs, including his predecessor Anderton [Sir (Cyril) James Anderton CBE QPM, Chief Constable, Greater Manchester Police (1976 – 1991)]. We wanted to prove that after three and a half years we were delivering on this really easy promise and I went up there twice. I would go to meetings at their headquarters in Manchester and there must have been about 30 people in the room, and I just had to say, "You've got to do this". It wasn't me telling them who to arrest – I was just trying to help them – but it was exhausting just to get them to do that.

Other than telling them they had to do this, what other means did you have of getting police chiefs to do what you wanted?
There was money to be saved by not having a system that was completely sclerotic. I didn't have any carrots to offer them but I made it clear in subtle ways that it wasn't going to be career enhancing for anybody if they kept buggering about.

In Wilmot's case, it was all about 'amour propre'. He resented the fact that I was involved; he was the Chief Constable and he wasn't accountable to anybody except the law. And there'd been a long history of chiefs in Manchester 'being God' – and there had been a continuing problem with Greater Manchester Police, at least until this latest guy [Sir Stephen Watson QPM, Chief Constable, Greater Manchester Police (2021 onwards)] got there.

One of the things I was doing a great deal on was anti-social behaviour, with ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) and juvenile crime reforms, and they were working. In Lancashire, they really embraced them; they had good chiefs and they got hold of the issues. GMP [Greater Manchester Police] was absolutely awful – it was so bureaucratic and also the divisional

chiefs, who were superintendents or chief superintendents, seemed to lack authority, because they were scared of what Wilmot was going to be saying to them.

And what was the mechanism you would use to actually get the change you wanted?

The main one was using the Inspectorate. Day-to-day, as well as strategically, they would be really important agents for the Home Secretary. The Chief Inspector of Constabulary was David O'Dowd [Sir David O'Dowd CBE QPM, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary (1996 – 2001)]. I would get David in – his office was only one floor or two floors above mine in the Home Office – and I'd get him down and just say, "I think you need to do something about this force or that force".

And also, in those days, the Home Secretary had to approve the appointment of chiefs – that stopped at some later stage, which I regret. What you were deciding wasn't on the final selection, you were agreeing whether X or Y could go on to a shortlist. In one or two cases, the Inspectorate said, "We actually don't think this person ought to be on this shortlist". I don't think I ever disagreed with the Inspectorate; I would ask why and then say, "Ok.

Were there any other means by which you could enforce what the Government wanted?

We were putting more money into the cops and doing a lot of things that the police wanted: increasing powers and, in some cases, sentences.

The other area was the Lawrence Inquiry. Condon and his colleagues, in the end, and in anticipation of the final report, issued an apology. That was sensible politics by them and was their idea – it wasn't mine. But I was very conscious of the fact that, if I wasn't careful, the implementation of Lawrence would go south, because it would go the same way as the Scarman Report did in the early 1980s. So I set up a working party, which I chaired and which used to meet once a month, to chase progress on each of these things. That worked and David Blunkett [Rt Hon Lord Blunkett, Home Secretary (2001 – 2004)] continued that. So we made a lot of progress in all sorts of areas related to the Lawrence recommendations. Then Charles Clarke [Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Home Secretary (2004 – 2006)] decided to wind up the working party and progress on implementing Lawrence then slackened off. You've just got to keep driving these things. You've got to be driven from the top.

As Home Secretary, how did you approach holding Chief Constables to account for their performance on crime?

Michael Howard [Rt Hon Lord Howard of Lympne CH KC, Home Secretary (1993 – 1997)] will, I think, tell you that I was always very careful not to pretend that things had not started to get better under him. My criticism of his predecessors was that they were far too laissez-faire. Ken Clarke [Rt Hon Lord Clarke of Nottingham CH KC, Home Secretary (1992 – 1993)]

may or may not have been a good Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he was hopeless as Home Secretary. He would say he was more liberal than me – and that's for the jury to decide – but he certainly took the view a bit, even Douglas Hurd [Rt Hon Lord Hurd of Westwell CH CBE, Home Secretary (1985 – 1989)] did, that crime was something that happened, and there wasn't much you could do about it; the best thing was you could sort of manage it, whereas Howard was more interventionist.

In terms of holding the police to account on specific things, we had two sets of targets to cut car crime and burglary. We did a lot with car crime with the manufacturers and with burglary with target hardening, but we gave the cops a baseline and said, "You've really got to concentrate on this". I'd also created powers in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 which required partnerships between police services and local authorities to develop policing plans, so things became more organised.

What do you think about the current debate on whether the Met should have some of its functions hived off?

Given the demands on the Mayor of London and the personalities of the mayors, whoever they are, with the expectation to take a more active interest in local policing, there is now a clear need to split out the Met's national functions from local policing – and have the Met doing on local policing in London and public order to then move out its national responsibilities, some of which, notwithstanding the establishment of the National Crime Agency (NCA), are still there.

There is unsatisfactory ambiguity about who is responsible, for example, for counter-terrorism, between the Mayor and the Home Secretary on national policing. And outside London you've now got Counter Terrorism regional commanders with dedicated officers seconded from individual police services. And there are other national functions – some of which have gone into the NCA. I just think it's work that needs to be completed.

How would you deal with the risks of pursuing such a major reform?

Well, the risks would be pointed at you anyway. You've got to handle any change you make; you need to be really clear about what you're doing, explain why you're doing it and then ensure that it's not going so slowly that things are just going to go grind to a halt, but also not going so fast that there is no operational resilience whilst the change is taking place.

The governance would be clearer because it's slightly anomalous that you have the Met in the lead on counter-terrorism even though counter-terrorism is obviously a national issue. A lot of serious crime has now gone into the NCA. I would keep public order with the Met, with the usual mutual arrangements, not least because you need an awful lot of cops for public order.

How do you think the line on operational independence has been navigated on recent protests?

I think that Suella Braverman [Home Secretary (2022 – 2023)] (a)

overstepped the mark and (b) was inept. The two are separate, but it's really important that you maintain the confidence of not just the senior police officers, but of the police generally – and it's a hard job. I don't know whether Suella Braverman has ever been on a demo, either to witness what it's like being a copper, or as an ordinary demonstrator.

I remember going on loads of demos in my youth and being really annoyed when you've got a tiny group breaking away and causing trouble, and you've got everybody else feeling they'd been tarred with that brush.

And for the Commissioner, he's obviously got to take account of the sensitivity of the Jewish community, and I think he has; but he's also got to take account of people's right to protest, and also just how, particularly these days, London is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious community, and how you maintain consent. You don't do that just by getting out a baton – it doesn't work. I thought she was ill-qualified to do that job. There was even a contrast between her and Priti Patel, who, I think, had a clearer idea about where the boundaries were.

David Blunkett

Rt Hon David Blunkett, latterly Rt Hon Lord Blunkett, was Home Secretary between 8th June 2001 and the 15th December 2004. He also served as Secretary of State for Education and Employment and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He was the Member of Parliament for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough between 1987 and 2015.

What were your priorities when you were appointed as Home Secretary?

I was appointed following the 2001 general election and within a very short period of time the decision was announced that Thompson and Venables, the killers of James Bulger, were to be released from custody. Also, within only a few months, we had the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States which led to a considerable dislocation for about three months, with the need for the passing the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which I took through the House of Commons. That ate up a lot of bandwidth.

But, beyond that the priorities remained as they had been before the general election. First, to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour in general. Second, to deal with the challenge of stopping the flow of undocumented migrants through trucks, the Eurostar and in the boots of cars – that required striking a deal with Nicolas Sarkozy [Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior (2002 – 2004 & 2005 – 2007)]. Finally, the citizenship agenda which included introducing things like citizenship ceremonies through the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

How much time did you spend on crime and policing compared to other areas?

Crime and policing were central, but they were certainly not the only demands on time. Counter-terrorism, particularly post-9/11, required a huge amount of attention, and at that time immigration was increasing in the amount of time that it was taking. The challenge was managing competing demands while ensuring that policing reform and performance did not drift.

How much of a tension was there between being able to focus on the government's priorities and the sort of "fire-fighting" that you describe?

There is a real danger of fire-fighting, particularly in the Home Office, and that allowing you to be blown off course from pursuing your positive agenda. Every morning would have a news story that would be related to

the Home Office, and of course during my time the Home Office included most of what would become the Ministry of Justice with responsibility for prisons and probation as well. So, there were a range of issues which would come up and would need to be dealt with on a day-to-day basis – there is a real propensity as a result to allow your agenda to be reactive rather than proactive.

How did you go about ensuring that you were able to focus on that positive agenda rather than allowing yourself to be blown off course by events?

Firstly, it's necessary to take a view on policy and what your priorities are. Secondly, to ensure that ministers' and advisers' time is focused on those things.

One of the main levers was through the Home Office Police Standards Unit – this was about understanding what was working well and what wasn't working well and trying to understand the data and evidence which underpinned that looking at different police forces and different areas across the country. What was vitally important was knowing that the government and police chiefs were on the same page – that was helped by things like the recruitment of 15,000 extra uniformed police officers and over 6,000 Police Community Support Officers and ensuring those new recruits were being focused on the right things.

Also, there was the use of financial incentives to direct funding, including seed funding, towards our priorities – so for things like the introduction of Police Community Support Officers.

I would also rely on the Inspectorate to identify where police forces were not fulfilling their commitments locally. The Inspectorate would, of course, provide written reports and I would have face-to-face meetings with them where it would be possible to understand more of what was going on. One of the realities is that police leaders have not historically been taught leadership and executive managerial skills – which in a rapidly changing world has been problematic.

Then there were things like the Police Federation conference and the Superintendents' Association conference where I was able to talk about the government's priorities and what we were doing to focus on delivering for the public on crime and policing. It was often more difficult with the chief constables themselves, rather than the Police Federation and the like, because it was difficult for them to be joined up – they didn't always want to collaborate.

Why were chief constables so resistant?

It went back to home secretaries before Michael Howard (Rt Hon Lord Howard of Lympne, Home Secretary (1993 – 1997)] where chief constables were used to a hands-off approach from government – with the approach having been that it was not the home secretary's job to intervene on policing. That changed with Michael Howard, but there was still that view amongst many chief constables.

Did chief constables sometimes practically resist what you wanted as the home secretary and if so how?
It would mainly be a failure to prioritise what needed doing – it might be either deliberate or just inadvertent, sometimes a more passive resistance rather than active. So, it might be not having their officers do a certain training programme for example, or not focussing on what might have been set by government as a priority.

How did you deal with chief constables were there were failings?
Of course, the system was a tripartite structure – between the chief constable themselves, the Home Secretary and the local police authority.

There were examples where chief constables had to go – there was one example where the chief had lost the confidence of his own staff and the public. And particularly the case in Humberside following the Soham murders – on that occasion the chief constable didn't accept responsibility for failings in the case and there was eventually an agreement that he would stand down after I personally said that it was necessary for him to go.

Were there grey lines where you would need to become more involved in operational matters?
There is always a need to recognise the difference between operational responsibility and political accountability.

I spent a lot of time on counter-terrorism matters, not just linked to 9/11 but also linked to Iraq and Afghanistan – particularly related to questions on who could come to the United Kingdom. That required a lot of time and thought. When there were matters – and there was one related to a possible terrorist threat to Heathrow Airport where it was necessary to give a statement in the House of Commons on the security operation – I spoke with the Met Commissioner and recognised I didn't have operational responsibility but was clear that they needed to take a proportionate approach so as not to play into the hands of the terrorists. That required quite a bit of to-ing and fro-ing with the police and security services.

In the main the police broadly get it right – and politicians can provide cover for hard but necessary decisions to be taken. Generally, where there are disagreements, when you have the responsibility of being the Secretary of State, it is right that these things are dealt with behind the scenes, with arguments being made in private and moral support being provided publicly. As Home Secretary, I would certainly never have written an article or been publicly critical of the police – I don't think it's helpful to bring people up publicly.

What is your sense of the success or otherwise of Police and Crime Commissioners?
They have not been a glorious success, but the old system was certainly not perfect. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provided a much bigger role

for local authorities and that is important when it comes to community safety. Police and crime commissioners could have a much greater role across the criminal justice system – that's been the case where mayors, such as in Greater Manchester or West Yorkshire, where they have been able to pull the different strands together.

Charles Clarke

Rt Hon Charles Clarke was Home Secretary between 15 December 2004 and 5 May 2006. He also served as Secretary of State for Education and Skills. He was the Member of Parliament for Norwich South between 1997 and 2010.

What were your priorities on crime and policing when you were appointed?

In my case, I had previously been a Home Office Minister as Minister of State with responsibility for policing between 1999 and 2001. So, I'd had some experience with the Home Office and some of these issues.

I was very informed, in that first period, before I was Home Secretary, by the concept of the Crime Disorder Act 1998. Many police officers at a senior level said to me that it was the most important piece of legislation relating to policing in their professional lifetimes. Why did they say this? They said, because it, correctly in my opinion, located the responsibility of sorting out crime, criminality, public order, not only with the police, but also with a range of other public agencies: local authorities, health service, and so on. This may seem a revolutionary remark, but there was a sense of beleagueredness by the police at that time, that whatever went wrong the police was supposed to sort it out.

But they didn't think that was a true story of public order in modern society; they thought there were a whole set of other factors which needed to be taken into consideration. And they saw the Crime and Disorder Act, built on the concept of partnership, as an acknowledgment of that fact. There were then a set of approaches, which I was personally responsible for in 1999 to 2001, around crime reduction. So, we had crime reduction strategies on a whole set of issues – which could be about drugs, car crime, prostitution, a whole set of issues. The question was, in this partnership concept founded on the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, how did the police work with other bodies, such as social services, to deal with the criminality they were trying to address and which was so disruptive for society?

I was very affected by that approach. We had a whole series of different strategies and a whole series of different types of events which I was personally involved in as the Home Office minister – along with Jack Straw [Home Secretary (1997 – 2001)] who was completely supportive, but it was nevertheless something I was carrying through and doing.

I would say that concept of partnership has been completely lost over the last ten years or more, particularly with ministers in that time saying the police are the only people responsible for dealing with these problems rather than looking at the wider situation. But I thought it was important.

And it was fundamental to my view about policing and of being Home Secretary when I was appointed.

There was also the question of partnership within the criminal justice system. And that was an extremely complicated issue, which as Home Secretary I decided I would try and see if we could work better. So, looking at prisons, probation, the Crown Prosecution Service, the police, the magistrates' courts, the Crown Court and so on – how could we get these institutions to work together, essentially to reduce reoffending, to reduce crime and to try and work efficiently?

I would say I was completely unsuccessful. That was one of my ambitions. Charlie Falconer, the Lord Chancellor [Rt Hon Lord Falconer of Thoroton KC, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (2003 – 2007)], was strongly in favour of it too. Just at the most basic level – communication of IT between different systems just didn't work. The classic example was, in my case, between immigration and the rest of the system, we "lost" the foreign national prisoners data, which led to me having to be sacked by Tony [Rt Hon Sir Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2007)]. There were also all kinds of important cultural issues, for example between the courts and the police, which made these things extremely difficult to operate.

I was very influenced by David Phillips [Sir John David Phillips, Chief Constable, Kent Constabulary (1993 – 2003)] who was Chief Constable of Kent. He made a set of presentations about criminality in Kent – he made a presentation about an estate in Kent somewhere. He said that on a specific estate of around 2,000 people, there were three households where 95 per cent of the crime came from. And in those three households, they all had multiple problems: the children were doing badly at school, there was criminality, there was social security related income problems. So the question really was: how did you deal with these three households, with all the various dimensions of the State moving in to sort them out, be it social workers, the police and whoever? How did you work together to try and ensure that households got to some basic path of sustainability in this situation? The system simply didn't crack it.

My dominant view was to support the criminal justice system as a whole to build this concept of partnership across everything that we were doing. I also had a view of policing operating at five different levels: very locally, at the beat level; then the level of District Council; then the role of the police authorities; then nationally; then internationally. So, how did you build partnerships at these five different levels to make them work effectively, rather than against each other?

Finally, I thought it was important for the Home Secretary to support, not to second-guess, the criminal justice system. So the first thing I did when I was appointed Home Secretary was to invite John Stevens [Lord Stevens of Kikwhelpington QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2000 – 2005)] and one of his colleagues to come into the office and we did a photo between me and them. I wanted to send a message that I would be supporting the police which was, generally speaking, the

Government's view. Tony [Sir Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2007)] was slightly less certain – he was supportive of the police, but he was also interrogating how efficient they were and how well they did.

My experience from being Policing Minister had been that one should support the system and I was totally against second guessing a police judgement or a court judgment. If, for example, a judge handed down a light sentence on a rapist, I did not see that as a matter for the Home Secretary to comment on – that was a matter for that judge. Of course, the media could do whatever they liked, but I thought it was very important for the people to whom I was responsible i.e. the electorate, that I was seen sustaining the integrity and coherence of the criminal justice system in this country. I saw my role as to try and improve it and make it more effective, but I did not see it as my role to go in and say the judge was wrong or the police were useless.

If there were very dramatic cases with the police, that was sometimes difficult to sustain. I don't think I did breach it. My successor, John Reid [Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan, Home Secretary (2006 – 2007)], did breach that, and I thought he was wrong to do so and I said that to him. I thought I should broadly support the criminal justice system, and that was my overall approach. I believe it to this day – I believe it is what a Home Secretary should be doing.

In my case, I had police and probation within the remit of the Home Office. That changed when I went, so some of those issues became slightly more complicated. But I thought if everybody could second-guess the decisions of the criminal justice system, you were in trouble.

Do you think things have changed substantially over recent years?

I would say so, although it varies. More than anybody else, even more than the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary has the job of being the guardian on behalf of the people of the integrity of the criminal justice system. That's not about liberalism or not, nor is it whether you're soft on criminals – it's about how you approach the job.

John [Rt Hon John Reid, latterly Lord Reid of Cardowan, Home Secretary (2006 – 2007)] was different – he was somewhat populist. David Blunkett [Rt Hon Lord Blunkett, Home Secretary (2001 – 2004)] actually, not so much – David was also populist, but he respected many of the points I'm making. John, slightly less so. Jacqui Smith [Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, Home Secretary (2007 – 2009)] definitely wouldn't have gone around second-guessing the criminal justice system. Alan Johnson [Home Secretary (2009 – 2010)] definitely respected the approach I was taking.

Theresa May [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Home Secretary (2010 – 2016)] is an interesting case. I thought she was a very bad Home Secretary and she made a whole series of changes I thought were mistaken – for example Police and Crime Commissioners – but I wouldn't say she would disagree on this. I'd be quite surprised if she'd be against much of what I'm saying. Amber Rudd [Rt Hon Amber Rudd, Home Secretary

(2018 – 2019)] certainly wouldn't be Sajid Javid [Rt Hon Sir Sajid Javid, Home Secretary (2018 – 2019)] certainly wouldn't be.

Then you get to a completely different level when you get to Priti Patel [Rt Hon Dame Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary (2019 – 2022)], who absolutely thought she knew better than the average Chief Constable. Then Suella Braverman [Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP, Home Secretary (2022 – 2023)] even more so. So, you're talking about the last five years of the Conservative Governments, although James Cleverly [Sir James Cleverly MP, Home Secretary (2023 – 2024)] always seemed reasonable. So, I think I'm really talking about Priti Patel and Suella Braverman.

As Home Secretary, how did you transmit the policy change you were seeking into practical changes on the ground?

Certainly, with legislation – although a lot of legislation I had to deal with was post 7/7 and post 9/11 prior to that, so a lot of the legislation was counter-terrorism legislation. That was an issue where the operational independence of the police is critically important. If you start saying, "That chap over there walking down the street, he's a terrorist" – that's hopeless. You can only operate on the basis of a police officer exercising his or her powers to examine that individual and come to the view that he is or isn't dangerous. A politician simply can't do that.

Another example was when chief constables said, "I need a helicopter to do what I'm doing". Was that his vanity playing out, or was it genuinely his operational independence? Did I have a right to ask, "Actually, do you really need a helicopter?" So I did take powers in legislation so that the Secretary of State could set the terms of many of those kinds of tendering and purchasing decisions, where I thought chief constables' vanity was a factor. However, I didn't go around publicly saying chief constables were behaving outrageously in these areas.

Beyond legislation, it was also about rhetoric. With things like neighbourhood policing, for example, which I was strongly in favour of, my junior minister, Hazel Blears [Rt Hon Hazel Blears, Minister of State for Policing, Security and Community Safety (2003 – 2006)] had done a lot of work. There was a lot of resistance to that from chief officers.

However, in terms of public order policing and demonstrations, I was absolutely furious that the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police allowed an encampment in Parliament Square where somebody was chanting away and shouting. I thought he should be removed, but I wasn't a police officer so all I could do is express my frustrations to the Commissioner – and nothing happened.

Did you have those conversations with the Commissioner privately?

Yes, I would never have considered doing it publicly. I wouldn't have done so because it's his job to enforce the law. If I thought the law should be changed to say that someone should not be allowed to demonstrate in Parliament Square, I had the power to come to Parliament with a proposal for a change in law. Now I might have had difficulty getting that through

Parliament, but that's another matter, that's a democratic question. But I didn't see it as my job to say, "Within the existing law, you should be operating in this way to deal with this".

When I was a young man organising demonstrations, the reasons all the demonstrations took place in Trafalgar Square was that there was a rule about not protesting near to the precincts of Parliament. That was correct, in my opinion, because that might be seen as intimidating Members of Parliament while they were exercising their democratic rights; but the law was then changed, so it started to be acceptable to have demonstrations outside Parliament.

But you wouldn't have gone so far as to try and change the law to mandate the police to do something?

I wouldn't, because the whole point of the criminal law is that someone has to use their discretion about when you enforce the law. And that's what your training as a police officer – and about the Office of Constable – is all about; that as a police officer you are given by society the right and responsibility to carry through those judgments as to how and when you enforce the law. And that is as true whether you were a police constable or the Commissioner.

What are the other ways that you would enable practical changes to take place?

There can be funding, for example we put funding in for CCTV. Through the crime reduction strategy in 1999 to 2001 we had funds for particular activities, for example to reduce theft from cars. We had a CCTV programme which we funded to increase CCTV coverage in car parks. That wasn't trivial because it was the police and the local authority bidding together in partnership to reduce car crime.

I think an institution which is very important, and has been somewhat lost, is Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. This was an important role, both when I was the Policing Minister and when I was Home Secretary, because, at the time, it was a very senior police officer – a former Chief Constable. That was a place you could have a conversation, both as policing minister and Home Secretary, where you could say, "So what are you going to do about this?" That was an important channel, because if the HMIC said to his policing colleagues, "Well, he's very serious about this, we had better sort it out", then he could talk to the Chief Constable concerned. It was a very informal type of approach, but that would be the extent of it.

When Theresa May decided to get rid of having a professional police officer as the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, because she was focused on a routine about the inefficiency of the police, that went. I suppose what I've just described could be described as improper, in a way, but I think that was the safety valve for the system. I, as the Minister, could talk to the Chief Inspector, who would then in turn talk to the relevant police officers as a fellow police officer – and that was a channel which could be used.

How did you balance dealing with chiefs who were hostile to neighbourhood policing with holding the line on operational independence?

It is very difficult. To take two Chief Constables, David Phillips from Kent and Ted Crew from the West Midlands: they were both great police officers, but they had different views on this. Ted Crew was very much a neighbourhood policing guy; whereas David very much had a scientific policing approach, focusing resources where they were needed and where they could make a difference. They weren't completely in contradiction to each other, although certainly had different emphasises in the way they went about things.

I saw, taking those two as an example, that it was for them to decide what they did, and it wasn't for me to do that – but I did think I could promote neighbourhood policing. The problem you then come to is that if I said to Ted Crew, "It's neighbourhood policing you need to focus on, but don't forget you also need scientific policing to focus on where the criminality is", he wouldn't disagree. Neither of those two police officers would have had a black and white view of things, but they'd have different focuses on what they were doing. And that is what I see as operational independence; they would decide what was the right amount for their area, but that might also include their own ideology about the importance of neighbourhood policing.

Drawing the line is an extremely difficult thing to do. There was an issue about recruiting police officers. Jack Straw had a strong view, replicated by Boris Johnson when he became Prime Minister, that you have to get more bobbies on the beat. I didn't agree with it because many of the police were saying to me, "Actually, with an extra 20,000 police officers, is that the right thing to do?" The argument from the Conservatives was that you've got to have full-time, trained bobbies on the beat in places, even if they're not using their resources to the best of their ability – Jack took that view in public PR terms to some extent, but I didn't really agree and I never put in a bid for more police officers.

So you didn't think it was the role of the Home Secretary to impose a model of neighbourhood policing or a preference for neighbourhood policing on police chiefs?

I'd say not for the Home Secretary to impose a model, although there was a preference and I went out and argued for neighbourhood policing to the Association of Chief Police Officers and they knew that was what I thought. But the imposition of it is different; I wouldn't go down imposition. Even those I've criticised – Priti Patel and Suella Braverman – don't go to the extent of saying exactly how police forces should organise themselves in that way. But there is a question, for example, on how much time you spend on police officers versus Police Community Support Officers, and the Chief Constable should definitely decide that.

It's complicated now by the existence of Police and Crime Commissioners, but I think what the PCC does is bring into this a question

of how it will be presented to the local media, which I don't think is helpful. It also takes away from the Chief Constable the responsibility for decisions. During my time, the Chief Constable clearly had responsibility for their decisions to the local people. When you put the PCC in, the Chief Constable could walk away from their responsibilities, which I thought was completely mistaken.

I thought we needed to increase the accountability of the police for what they did, so forcing the local police commander to be in contact with the leader of the local council about how he dealt with the problems in that location was a way of increasing that accountability. Having local fora for neighbourhood policing, which I attended on a number of occasions in my own constituency, you would see the local police officers who resented this – they didn't want to explain to the public why they weren't sorting out this problem or the other. But I thought it was necessary.

In fact, some of the local police officers would get aggressive with the public when people questioned them, but what happened after a couple of meetings was the whole tone would change in a positive way. And I think that's the way accountability would play out.

The current trend is for more mayors to take over PCC responsibilities – does that help the partnership working you're talking about?

The important qualification is that it is such an inconsistent picture right across the country as to how the local devolution has gone – that is a massive challenge for the next Government, namely, how to create a system that is coherent.

Section 40 of the Police Act 1996 enables the Home Secretary to intervene – what would it have taken for you as Home Secretary to use that power to direct a local policing body?

You're talking about a complete breakdown of the system, and I do mean a complete breakdown. It's not merely a wrong decision being taken, but a complete breakdown of the system. I don't think anything like that was happening when I was around. For example, take a serious challenge to the Met on its Human Resources policies, or a collapse of public order following a demonstration which got out of hand in central London – would I have stepped in and intervened? – I can't imagine how that would be the case.

It's not just because I think it's wrong to do that in certain circumstances, even though I do, it's because the professional competence of even a weak Chief Constable is far higher than the professional competence of any politician who ends up as Home Secretary.

What about the general performance of a Chief Constable – if a police authority wasn't taking the necessary action – would that have met the threshold?

Well, it's a very interesting question, which I haven't got a good answer for, which is, in what circumstances is it right for the Home Secretary

to intervene to sack a Chief Constable? It's worth remembering first that before I was Home Secretary, it was very, very rare. If anything, it would have been done on the "old boy network" with a private conversation with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary who would then say to the Chief Constable that they should retire early.

I do think this was an informal channel which was a means of raising political concerns in a way the police could handle whilst protecting the integrity of the police. But it could be criticised as being not public. Once you took away the fact that the HMIC was a professional police officer and had all the relationships with the Chief Constable, then that was removed, so then there was no means of sorting the problems out in that way. It would be an informal channel, influencing in a way that wasn't public and wasn't about political point scoring – I think that was a valuable channel, which was removed by Theresa [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Home Secretary (2010 – 2016)].

I don't think I intervened directly with anybody – I may be wrong about that – I wouldn't in principle have been against doing it if I thought the case was really made.

The classic cases were in London, with Boris Johnson [Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Mayor of London (2008 – 2016)] and Iain Blair [Sir Ian Blair QPM, Commissioner Metropolitan Police, latterly Lord Blair of Boughton QPM (2005 – 2008)] and then Sadiq Khan [Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2016 onwards)] and Cressida Dick [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)]. I thought the decisions to get rid of them were completely wrong, and I don't mean they were mistaken somehow but somehow justifiable decisions, I mean that I think there was absolutely no ground for it. And that was done by basically making their lives intolerable. I thought Sadiq was completely wrong to say he didn't have confidence in that way, and I thought Boris Johnson had previously been completely wrong to do the same thing.

So who should have that power in which case?

The only person who should have that power is the Home Secretary – not the Mayor of London. Do I think a Police and Crime Commissioner should have the power to get rid of the Chief Constable outside of London? My answer is absolutely not. There are only forty-three police forces and I think if it is the total lack of confidence which we're talking about, then it should be a matter for the Home Secretary to intervene.

And why the Home Secretary rather than a local directly elected mayor or Police and Crime Commissioner?

Because there are only forty-three police forces and it is such a serious issue. I don't trust the forty-three Police and Crime Commissioners to operate with the judiciousness necessary in these cases. Getting rid of a Chief Constable is such a big public policy question which should only the taken in exceptional circumstances. It is difficult, there have been some very bad conduct cases, which I would say they are dismissible.

A Chief Constable is not the same as the Chief Executive of a local hospital trust, or the chief officer of the local authority. The office of constable and because of their responsibility for operational independence, it's not just another public servant at a senior level. So it should be taken in a different way. I've never accepted that either a police committee or a Police and Crime Commissioner should have the right to sack the Chief Constable.

When it comes to police force mergers, do you think you would have been more likely to be successful had you used primary rather than secondary legislation?

Not entirely. We weren't ready to make it a priority for primary legislation, in terms of time within the parliamentary year. I thought we could do it with secondary legislation – that's why I went down that course. Had I stayed as Home Secretary, I think we would have succeeded by using secondary legislation.

Forty-three forces was always an unwieldy number – if you talked about fewer forces, it is much easier to see how the relationship with Home Office ministers and the police could work in a fairly informal and effective way. That's much more difficult if there are forty-three. I saw the reduction in the number of police forces as a step to that as well.

There was also a very important issue when we looked at serious and organised crime and intelligence of the extent to which local police force and therefore the local Chief Constable could really get involved in those issues properly, if they didn't have the resources available in their own force.

Jacqui Smith

Rt Hon Jacqui Smith, latterly Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, was Home Secretary between the 28 June 2007 and the 5 June 2009. She also served as Chief Whip and is currently Minister of State for Skills and Minister of State for Women and Equalities. She was the Member of Parliament for Redditch between 1997 and 2010.

What were your priorities on crime and policing when you first became Home Secretary?

When I first got the job, Gordon Brown's [Rt Hon Gordon Brown CH, Prime Minister (2007 – 2010)] major policing priority was rolling out neighbourhood policing. So that was the top priority and in terms of crime – quite quickly it became tackling violent crime, particularly in relation to gangs and knife crime. I was also interested in, although we never got to a conclusion on it, how you reform the democratic accountability of policing. So we long struggled over what could replace police authorities and even thought about elected Police and Crime Commissioners, but never quite got that far.

What motivated you to look at the democratic accountability of policing?

It came out of work that we did on how to make policing more responsive to communities, particularly in relation to neighbourhood policing. How do you focus on the police's responsibility to maintain confidence in communities? We made quite a big thing out of it – we called it the Policing Pledge, I think – Louise Casey did some work with me about it.

What we wanted to do was to move away from a whole range of targets; because that was the constant complaint, that there were too many targets. We wanted to move to a national accountability system that focused on responsiveness and engagement. That's why we devised a single national target, and it was something like: the extent to which the public felt confident in the police and that the police are addressing the things that are important to them. This was obviously linked to neighbourhood policing, and it was about incentivising the drive to that type of community engagement.

There was a view that police authorities were pretty staid and a bit that they weren't engaged with communities. The interesting thing was I lost count of the number of meetings where we sat trying to work out what the appropriate way of doing that [introducing more democratic accountability] would be. I had quite a lot of sympathy when Theresa May introduced Police and Crime Commissioners, although I don't think

it's delivered what she hoped it would. I think it's fallen into some of the traps that we thought it might when we were thinking about it the first time around.

So, community neighbourhood policing, and ensuring that there was some consistency across the whole of the country in how that was delivered, was a big priority and the levers around it were one of the things that we spent quite a lot of time thinking about. Hence the single target and doing away with the other stuff and therefore the Policing Pledge.

What was your experience of implementing Neighbourhood Policing – how did you go about transmitting that ambition from Whitehall into police forces?

We worked quite hard through what was then ACPO [Association of Chief Police Officers] to gain high level support, but there was a big distinction between what people felt about it. So then you find the enthusiasts. At the time, Ken Jones [Sir Ken Jones QPM, President, Association of Chief Police Officers (2006 – 2009)] was heading ACPO, and he was pretty keen to work with us to bring chiefs along to do it. We set out very clearly that this was an expectation. We didn't legislate for it, but we did have a programme because I managed it really quite closely. At one point I had weekly meetings where we were tracking how well it was being delivered and where there were areas where there was some sort of resistance.

Police chiefs are a bit like judges – if they think the Government really wants something to happen, they will moan and grumble but they will, in the end, find a way to ensure that it happens. And that was essentially the approach that we took. I don't think we even mandated exactly what a neighbourhood policing team should look like. But we kept an eye on where people were not in line with things, by saying, "Here's my neighbourhood policing team" and it was for the whole of a massive, great big area, when it obviously wasn't a neighbourhood policing team.

How did you approach that? The Police Act gives the Home Secretary powers to give directions, although it is rarely, if ever, used; in fact it's been described as the "nuclear option".

I can't remember a point at which we had to even wave that "nuclear option" around – everybody understood it was there. But we essentially got to the position a year later where we could announce that we had neighbourhood policing teams in every area.

Essentially, we got there through showcasing the good, clarity about what it was we wanted to achieve, building support, going where the energy was and a really strong expectation from the Prime Minister downwards that that was what we were expecting to see. Alongside sufficient funding to enable there to be enough police officers so that people couldn't say, "We haven't got enough police officers, and we're having to prioritise safeguarding and vulnerable people or the development of fraud and online crime". We could say, "You've got enough police officers – and you can't use that as an excuse not to develop neighbourhood policing

teams – and we've invested in police community support officers because that's an important element of your staffing for your neighbourhood policing teams".

Were there areas where you were more directive as a Home Secretary?
We did, I think, in the Policing Pledge. For example, I think it said things like, "You must visit burglary victims". I think we said that at some point or another we expect you to do that and perhaps it will be inspected. That would be another way in which you could bring pressure to bear.

Are there areas where, as Home Secretary, you delved into more operational activities?
There was never a time in relation to a particular area or particular force where I said, "You must go and do that thing", because I think that would have overstepped the mark. But we did say on neighbourhood policing, and things relating to it, "You must do this. And if you're not doing it, you'll be explaining to me why you're not doing it. And what's more, we're going to change the targets so that it measures whether or not you're doing the things that we think you should be doing or achieving the objectives and the outcomes that we want".

The way I saw it was it's completely legitimate for me as Home Secretary to say, "The key outcome that I want you to focus on is building confidence in communities. And what's more, I'm going to set a target – it will be the only target and that will be the target that I want you to demonstrate that year on year you are improving".

Well, it's pretty difficult to avoid doing that if you're not focusing quite a lot of effort on neighbourhood policing and visibility – how would you do it otherwise? So, you could argue that I was interfering in an operational sphere but I never thought that. I think it's wholly legitimate for the elected Home Secretary to say, "My priorities for crime and policing are neighbourhood policing". I set out the first Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy – and there we said, "We expect you to do certain things". There was a clear expectation about what we thought forces should do.

It's pretty clear what it is that you're expecting. I don't believe I ever did overstep the mark – I never got into a row so I don't know what it would have been like had I pushed it to a point where Chief Constables felt that their operational independence was being undermined by me.

Do you have a view on some of the contemporary issues that have arisen recently, particularly over protest and public order?
Yes. If the Home Secretary says, "I'm pretty concerned about the way in which you are policing that protest, or have policed that protest, and what's more, I want to ask the Inspectorate to come in and review it" – well, that's a pretty clear message from a Home Secretary.

When there is something where there is obviously enormous public concern, and you could feel justified as an elected politician in saying, "I

am the voice for this"; I think I would have been reasonably robust about what I expected to happen around that. There's all sorts of options here. If you say, "I'm going to ask for the Met Commissioner to come in and talk to me about this" – well, everybody knows what you're saying when you do that.

During your two years as Home Secretary did you not have any of those sorts of situations?

The only time things boiled over was in relation to the Met Commissioner, when Boris [Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Mayor of London (2008 – 2016)] and I fell out. And that was related to Ian Blair [Lord Blair of Boughton QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2005 – 2008)] going and Paul Stephenson [Sir Paul Stephenson QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police, (2009 – 2011)] being appointed.

But also around when Bob Quick [Robert Quick QPM, Assistant Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2008 – 2009)] got into a bit of trouble. But the reason why I remember this is because I can remember my special advisers saying to me, "You should fire him" and I said, "No, I'm not going to do that". And then Boris essentially pulled the rug out from under him. So, I was really cross about that, because it wasn't my style or my inclination to put a stick about in public – not least because I felt that, with the exception of police pay, which caused me a load of hassle, I felt I had a good relationship with police chiefs. I largely felt they were delivering what I said I wanted as priorities, so I certainly wasn't going to go looking for a public row with them.

What are your thoughts on the dual accountability for the role of the Metropoliotan Police Commissioner, where they are accountable to the Mayor yet appointed by the Home Secretary?

It's an imperfect system, but can I think of a better one? Not necessarily. As long as you have national responsibility for counter-terrorism policing in the Met, the Home Secretary will always want to have a very considerable level of influence over who the Commissioner is. But whilst you have local accountability with the Mayor of London, they will also want to have a say.

Essentially if either of the two withdraw their support from a Commissioner, they're pretty well gone, aren't they? As with Cressida Dick [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)] when Sadiq [Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2016 onwards)] did that. I think it makes it quite hard to be the Met Commissioner, but then it would be quite hard to be the Met Commissioner anyway. And frankly, if you're not balancing, keeping Londoners confident about what you're doing with properly managing the national responsibilities that you have, well, you are going to probably deserve to lose your job anyway. So, I'm not saying there isn't a different way of doing it – I think there is – but I don't think this system is as dreadful as some people sometimes suggest is.

If you were going into being Home Secretary again...
I'm not gonna do a David Cameron [Rt Hon Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, Foreign Secretary (2023 – 2024)] – don't worry.

What do you think about splitting the Met's national responsibilities out and giving those national responsibilities to the National Crime Agency or a similar organisation?
That's the alternative model. I think I'd have to be very convinced that the disruption of the transition was worth it in terms of sufficient benefit. I don't have a strong view either way, I just don't believe there's an easy answer to the challenge that the Met faces. I don't think there's an easy governance or organisational answer. I think it's probably got more to do with leadership culture than it has to do with the fact that it's big. There are advantages in being a big organisation in terms of flexibility of your resource and your ability to specialise – you wouldn't necessarily lose it through the sorts of division that you're talking about, but you would a bit. And there were some people that join the Met because they know that there are a whole range of opportunities within the Met, some of those would go if you took those national elements out.

If you were coming into Government now, would you keep Police and Crime Commissioners as they are?
I think it's possible to identify the problems with the PCC model without necessarily knowing what would be better. It is undoubtedly clearer – to an extent – about where the accountability is now. You have got an individual, they are accountable for the policing priorities in an area; but this is where the real danger of bleeding over into operational independence comes. My understanding is police chiefs hate it. Well, that's not necessarily an argument against it.

Part of the problem is it hasn't turned out to be a job that the best politicians want to do; and it hasn't turned out to be a job that the British public are very enthusiastic about voting for. At the beginning there were a few people who were really interesting and quite good at it. I'm sure there are still some now, but you haven't got your Andy Burnhams [Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP, Mayor of Greater Manchester (2017 – 2026)] and your Andy Streets [Sir Andy Street CBE, Mayor of the West Midlands (2017 – 2024)] – there are not serious politicians that that really want to be PCCs on the whole. And therefore, you get the people who want to fire the Chief Constable for no good reason or don't understand the sophisticated sort of balance that they are supposed to be maintaining between their setting of priorities and the Chief Constables' operational independence and responsibility.

Do you think the move for Mayors to take over from PCCs is a positive trend?
The problem is, of course, that that's not consistent across the country. In my local area, there isn't a Mayor, so therefore there is a Police and Crime

Commissioner. He's alright but, even given I'm genuinely interested in this sort of issue, I couldn't tell you a single thing that he's done. I couldn't tell you what his priorities are or how he's engaged. So, it hasn't quite achieved what I think people thought it might do and then it always has the risk of being quite dangerous. In Birmingham, of course, in the West Midlands, the PCC fought off the suggestion by Andy Street that those powers should go to the Mayor.

How useful were the national senior policing roles in your work with police chiefs?

They were they were quite often very helpful in a way that is possibly sort of dubious in terms of good governance. They could solve problems which was enormously helpful as the Home Secretary. But, is that strictly speaking, legitimate governance? I'm not sure it is. And probably some personnel things, with people going earlier than they might otherwise have done. I've worked ministerially and in other ways in a range of public services and I can't imagine Ofsted or the CQC [Care Quality Commission] doing what the HMIC used to do when I was Home Secretary. And in one way, that's a shame if you're the Home Secretary or the Education Secretary – you would use the inspectors to achieve something, but it would be on the basis of saying, "Now I want you, as the Inspectorate, to inspect this issue as a priority", not "You, Inspector, go and have a word in the right ear", or "Tell the right person what it is you're thinking needs to happen".

Was there something fundamentally different about the Home Office and or the police from the other departments you've served in?

Yes, and I think it was about operational independence and the role and responsibilities of Chief Constables. Essentially, if the Department of Health rings up even a Foundation Trust chief executive in and tells them to do something, they'll do it. Equally, no Head Teacher would say, "I am operationally independent". They might argue that they should be and they should have autonomy over what they're doing in their school, but it's not embedded constitutionally in their role as it is with a Chief Constable and therefore, you always have that in mind. I think you can overstate that, because there are all sorts of sophisticated ways that you can make Chief Constables act on your major priorities.

I think as a Home Secretary, indeed as a citizen of this country, I think it's pretty crucial. As important as I think education is, if a minister tells a head teacher to do something that's not going to take away my freedoms or lead to levels of force being used against me. Whereas if a minister decides they wanted to direct a Chief Constable to do something, that is pretty undermining of some of the basic human rights that I take for granted as a citizen in the UK.

And, you always say, "Of course, I'm super reasonable, and I would never have directed a Chief Constable to do anything unreasonable". But if I could have done that, it would have been wrong.

Did you ever get advice from previous Home Secretaries?

John Reid [Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan, Home Secretary (2006 – 2007)] was my immediate predecessor. One of the things that was beneficial to me was that John had very little to do with police and crime. He was interested in reforming immigration, because it was not fit for purpose, and setting up the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism. So actually, they were quite pleased that they got attention from me.

I asked David Blunkett [Rt Hon Lord Blunkett, Home Secretary (2001 – 2004)], to do some work on the accountability issues. But with ministerial life, people never take advice from their predecessors – it's a dysfunctional way to work.

Alan Johnson

Rt Hon Alan Johnson was Home Secretary between 5 June 2009 and 11 May 2010. He also served as Secretary of State for Health, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He was the Member of Parliament for Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle between 1997 and 2017.

How much of your time as Home Secretary did you spend on crime and policing issues compared to immigration and counter-terrorism?
Less than my predecessors I would imagine. I was the last Home Secretary of that Labour administration; so, in a sense, I benefited from what Jack Straw [Rt Hon Jack Straw, Home Secretary (1997 – 2001)], David Blunket [Rt Hon Lord Blunkett, Home Secretary (2001 – 2004)] and others had introduced. By the time it got to me in 2009, police numbers were at their highest ever and more than they would ever be – 14,000 more than they were in 1997, up to 141,700, so that was a record. Crime had come down; this is the great bit of our record that people in the Labour Party don't often talk about, strangely enough. We halved crime, and violent crime was down by more than that. Domestic violence was down by 68%. So, it was a very, very good time to become Home Secretary, particularly as John Reid [Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan, Home Secretary (2006 – 2007)] had done the heavy lifting of separating away prisons and the justice system.

So, it was counter-terrorism, immigration and policing; and, in my year, counter-terrorism was dominant – because we had the guy who packed explosives into his underwear and got through the security systems at the airport, but thankfully didn't manage to set it off when he landed in America. That created a huge trauma – with questions about: "Are they able to get through our security systems?"; "How many others are there?"

Then there was immigration, which was the issue it blew up to be and is still today, because, strangely enough people claimed we had an open door immigration policy – net migration, incidentally, was 114,000 when I was Home Secretary and got up to a million under the party that said they would reduce it to tens of thousands. But it was still an issue, particularly on free movement in Europe.

So, on policing, I didn't have any bills to take through. Charles [Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Home Secretary (2004 – 2006)] had taken all the flak for trying to merge police forces – it was perfectly obvious that there were too many police forces, it was a no brainer but Charles had been there and Jack had put a toe in the water and rapidly left again. So, I was dealing with the

police on counter-terrorism as the dominant issue.

I was dealing with them on anti-social behaviour, with things like neighbourhood policing established and working well. Jacqui (Rt Hon Jacqui Smith, latterly Baroness Smith of Malvern, Home Secretary (2007 – 2009)] had done an initial bit of research on whether to introduce Police and Crime Commissioners and we had decided it was a bad idea. That was a huge relief to Chief Constables, because they were against it. As far as Chief Constables were concerned, they were happy bunnies because there was very little that you could say where Government wasn't supporting them.

It was a bit ironic because if coppers voted anyway – if you want to colour police officers' voting patterns red or blue – they'd be blue. I used to say to my own protection officers, "You ought to pray to God we get re-elected in 2010 despite your own personal preferences."

We had, and this goes right back to Blair [Sir Tony Blair KG, Prime Minister (1997 – 2007)] as Shadow Home Secretary, a record as being tough on crime and the causes of crime. It had been a very successful period in Government and public satisfaction with policing was at the highest ever recorded.

What were your priorities when you came in as Home Secretary on crime and policing?

The introduction of ID cards and strengthening the DNA database – even though the police already had the advantage of techniques like DNA and CCTV, which was very controversial at first.

Anti-social behaviour was an issue – it had declined, but there was still a real problem. I remember the case of Fiona Pilkington in Leicester. Because of the amount of money going in and the resources the police had, you started to look deeper into how you could tackle the causes of crime.

I remember going to Manchester and seeing what they were doing – spotting that there were criminal families with youngsters, eight or nine year olds, in danger of being inculcated into the same lifestyle as their older brothers, their father and their relatives. What they were doing in Manchester was moving kids away from their families, which is a pretty kind of controversial thing to do, but done with the support of families to try and get to that inherited problem.

So, there were new demands on the police I suppose we were making, but most of my time with the police was spent on counter-terrorism, particularly as the Met led on counter-terrorism.

In relation to antisocial behaviour, were there specific policies you were trying to push into the system?

Not particularly; just to try and encourage the police to use the powers that they had got. Those powers could include, for instance, turfing people out of council houses. This is why it is such a difficult subject for Labour politicians; because in Labour areas represented by Labour MPs

you suddenly get a surge in concerns about this, but nevertheless it was something that was affecting our traditional supporters. Go to any council estate and they were the ones who were experiencing this more than leafy, prosperous areas. But these powers were there, and it was pointing out that the police had these powers and trying to ensure that they were used.

Local authorities were very much part of this. We had these terribly inelegantly named Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Reduction Committees, upon which you'd also often get the chair of the local health board involved. In Hull, the head of our local NHS Trust chaired it, because of the involvement of the NHS with people who were glassed or stabbed on a Friday night going to Accident & Emergency – working out how to draw the line back to stopping them getting there in the first place. Those kinds of partnerships were very much the order of the day.

How did you, as Home Secretary, go about getting the police and other agencies to focus particularly on these issues? What levers did you use?
We met with them regularly. I think Theresa May [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Home Secretary (2010 – 2016)] got rid of it, as she got rid of so many successful initiatives we'd taken. But we had the Chief Constables up to the Home Office. I chaired the meeting. They would all gather at the Home Office, we'd have an exchange of views, and I'd not exactly vent my spleen, because there wasn't a lot to vent about. I'd do regular visits to police forces and whenever I was there I would have a chinwag with the Chief Constable. Now there's a lot of constabularies; that's the problem – getting around them all. I would meet the counter-terrorism policing people from the Met on a weekly basis. We had the regular security meeting. It was about getting to know the people involved and forming a relationship with them.

We also had an initiative, which Theresa May ditched, called the "Policing Pledge". This was about improving police responsiveness – we had this kind of silly tagline that we wanted to be a "police service for the public and a police force for criminals". The "police service" was all part of being responsive, with anti-social behaviour being reliant on police responsiveness for someone to do something about it rather than ignore it, which had gone on for a very long time before these initiatives were taken. The forces all signed up to the Policing Pledge. Although it wasn't compulsory, every constabulary did – that set out what you could expect from your police force, whether in Humberside or wherever you were.

Were there forces that fell behind others on antisocial behaviour and the Policing Pledge, and how did you approach those forces?
Well, there must have been, statistically – but I think we'd got the right people in place.

With me coming at the end, previously there would have been very resistant Chief Constables to this kind of new approach from a new Government introducing this partnership approach where the police had a role to play with the health service, for example. These partnerships

locally required the police to perhaps sit down with people they weren't traditionally sitting down with. And things like the police going into schools, working with head teachers and talking to kids. They all seem to have bought into it, whether that was just a façade when they met the Home Secretary, I don't know, but we had some very bright people out there – they were not the kind of people I was expecting to find. They weren't old timers who were still trying to come to terms with PCSOs, for instance.

I'd heard there'd been a lot of resistance to PCSOs – but each Chief Constable could take on as many or as few PCSOs as they wanted to and they all seem to have realised, and this probably took a bit of time, that they were a crucial part of neighbourhood policing.

So, I can't think of a Chief Constable I had serious problems with in bringing them into the twenty-first century.

You've suggested things went awry following the arrival of Theresa May at the Home Office – what are the specifics about where you think things went wrong?

Once you build a momentum to crime coming down, that momentum carries on. No matter what the incoming Home Secretary does. I still had links with people in the Home Office and I would hear back – not directly – that Theresa May's two special advisers Nick Timothy [Nick Timothy CBE MP, Special Adviser to the Home Secretary (2010 – 2015)] and Fiona Hill [Fiona Hill CBE, Special Adviser to the Home Secretary (2010 – 2014)], came into the Home Office as if they were coming into a failing department. They had that "not invented here" thing, which was part of the problem.

Also, the Conservatives still had a bit of the David Davis [Rt Hon Sir David Davis MP, Shadow Home Secretary (2003 – 2008)] libertarian approach to all this stuff. So, believing there were too many CCTV cameras, control orders were watered down, the DNA database was problematic, and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders went out the window. But worst of all, worse than all of that – Theresa May offered up a third of police officers as her contribution to the age of austerity. She offered it up – she didn't have it forced out of her. I'd already done my deal with Alistair Darling [Rt Hon Lord Darling of Roulanish, Chancellor of the Exchequer (2007 – 2010)] because the general election fell after the budget and we knew where we were going to make savings, including by having police forces work together more closely, which was a big challenge for forces; but no way were we going to cut frontline police officers. That single act of reducing police numbers by a third destroyed neighbourhood policing. I think there's some areas of England, still now, there's no PCSOs and coppers themselves, when I talked to them, had realised the importance of PCSOs including for counter-terrorism, because they picked up intelligence in their local communities and fed it through to counter-terrorism teams. All of that was severely affected by the change of Government.

I was just amazed when ID cards got pulled. It seemed to be a very kind

of libertarian approach that we shouldn't have ID cards, when it was the Conservatives under Michael Howard that proposed it in the first place.

You mentioned Jacqui Smith had looked at Police and Crime Commissioners during her time as Home Secretary and dismissed it – yet the coalition Government brought them in. Why did Labour dismiss them?

She made big mistake. We looked at them, I think twice, maybe under John Reid and then Jacqui Smith. With police authorities, there wasn't a local person you could point to as being accountable, so you could see the logic there, which is why we considered it very carefully. But in the end, the fact that it would interfere with the Chief Constable's autonomy was the most important factor. And there's no question that it did; there is no question it was a waste of money; there is no question that the public never got a grip of it. And so, having been through all that, you still didn't know who the politician was you should go to, because it was such a mess out there. So, she was foolish to go ahead with the idea.

So, without Police and Crime Commissioners, do you think that the old model of a police authority functioned fairly well?

Yes, particularly if you had a strong chair of the police authority who would be a kind of Police and Crime Commissioner but not just dedicated to that, they would have other responsibilities as well – so, yes, it wasn't a bad system. Of course, where there was a mayor, then it made sense that the mayor should be the Police and Crime Commissioner. That was our experience in London, where Boris Johnson [Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Mayor of London (2008 – 2016)] was the Mayor of London when I was Home Secretary – together we jointly appointed the Deputy Commissioner, I seem to remember. But to have a politician just functioning on being on the backs of the police, with nothing else to do, unlike a mayor who had a whole range of responsibilities, was a disaster.

How the relationship between you as Home Secretary and Boris Johnson as the Mayor of London function? Were there tensions or was it an effective model?

It worked all right, there was one tension when he suggested that neighbourhood policing, which had worked really well in London, should have the numbers reduced from one sergeant, two police constables and four PCSOs. I think he wanted to take out one police constable and two PCSOs and that was against the national model that had been adopted everywhere else. I think he backed down in the end. That was the only point of disagreement that I had with Boris.

The other thing which Theresa May did was on CEOP [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre] – the Child Protection organisation run by Jim Gamble. He was a real expert. Theresa May came in, sacked Jim Gamble and broke up the whole operation – I think she merged it with something else. That was inconceivable to me: how anyone could think

that Jim Gamble wasn't a good person to have on board, even if you changed the name of the organisation. I don't know what all that was about – maybe they developed vendettas in opposition.

Did you have much to do with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary?
I didn't really have a lot of problems in that direction, but it wasn't someone that I spent a lot of time with – don't forget I was only there a year, remember.

You'd been a Secretary of State in several departments before becoming Home Secretary. Was there a material difference in terms of being able to implement policies in those departments compared to the Home Office?
Not really – Health was much more complex, and DWP even more so. In a sense it was much easier because it was just the three core issues and easier because, although I'd rather be dealing with fewer than 43 police forces, it was still fewer than the number of NHS Trusts, for instance. The department was well geared up – this idea that the Home Office was unfit for purpose, it may have been at one stage, and it may have been when John Reid said it, but it didn't seem unfit for purpose to me.

The department had some brilliant civil servants. I didn't get on with my Principal Private Secretary, and he had to go – after that, I had a very good woman who came in there. But the Permanent Secretary, David Normington [Sir David Normington GCB, Permanent Secretary, Home Office (2006 – 2011)], who I'd worked with at Education, he absolutely across the stuff. There were very clear policy lines, and we could show huge successes, just like at Health where the waiting times had come down, which got a lot of coverage. Crime coming down, for some reason, didn't get the same level of coverage – I had to go and raise it at Labor Party meetings around the country, because people would not have recognised it. People would say, "Oh, you've done some good things like Sure Start" and I would say, "What about reducing crime? Don't you think that's a good thing?" But it never really registered in the Party. It meant I had quite an easy time at the one Party conference I went to as Home Secretary, unusually for the Labour Party.

So, I think, compared to other departments, it seemed to me to be functioning very effectively, and you knew what where to go to if you had a problem. You knew the person to talk to who could sort it out, even if you would struggle to do it yourself, because you couldn't interfere with police autonomy.

Where did you see the line in terms of that not interfering police autonomy? Did you have a sense of where you could interfere and where you couldn't?
No, it's just common sense, isn't it? I wouldn't have wanted to do their job.

My job was making sure I gave a good account of what they were doing

to improve police morale, because they were doing great stuff. I had to make sure they had a proper financial settlement – that's the same in all five departments I was in – so arguments with the Treasury linked to that. Then, what you did on the floor of the House, how you dealt with Home Office questions, how you were reported in the press over whatever issue was coming up. Fiona Pilkington was the case I really remember.

Relating to the Chief Constables, I can't think of any who would say, "What the Government's lumbered us with is terrible – you should think again". They were all very happy bunnies.

One of the debates over the last couple of years has been on the subject of protest – did you spend much time on that?

There were a few marches – that is another issue about police integrity and police autonomy. People would say to me that we ought to ban a march or assembly – not that you can ban an assembly. Then there were some issues over football thugs and the far right; I don't remember much about the Muslim community. So no, I can't, I can't recall any great controversy there.

Do you think more recent Home Secretaries have got the balance right on intervening with the police on protest?

There's nothing there that's made me think that there was a problem there waiting to be resolved. If I'm going to criticise there are plenty of other things, like reduction of police numbers and the abandonment of neighbourhood policing which seems to me to have been pretty much abandoned.

Beyond the various aspects you've mentioned already about the role of the Home Secretary – giving a good account of the police publicly, securing financial settlements, dealing with questions in the House and handling legislation – is there anything else you think a Home Secretary should be doing?

I think that encapsulates my view – it is about leadership. People treat you with a certain type of reverence; it is of course, one of the Great Offices of State, so when you get there you feel there's a certain history to that department and, possibly a bit overawed by it. Certainly, it wasn't the Ministry of Fun, as there's always something waiting around the corner. But I didn't come away from that thinking, in 2010, thank God we lost the election because I wouldn't want to do that job for very long! On the contrary, I enjoyed being Home Secretary – the counter-terrorism work was a bit scary.

Perhaps the one other thing would be thinking ahead about other legislation we might need to plan for in the future. We had some legislation around counter-terrorism that we were planning had we won the 2010 election – that was reflecting on our experiences, and the gaps that were there and things we could do to solve that. On anti-social behaviour, we were thinking of some measures we could take that wouldn't particularly

require legislation – but some aspects we could have taken further.

If you had advice for the Home Secretary now, what would that be?
Don't listen too much to your Labour colleagues – press ahead. When you're doing something that really needs to be done, particularly on illegal immigration, you always get a kickback, and she's got to carry on.

There are always things which could be amended as the Bill goes through; but the basic point is that you've got to stop this pull factor, and we have a system where there are a number of reasons why people want to come here – predominantly the English language, but coming here illegally and knowing you can disappear into the workforce much more successfully than any other country is one of the reasons.

Also, there's a case for reviewing whether granting someone asylum from a country five years ago is still relevant now – the issue there is about families settling down, and I understand the concerns about that. That is why there could be some amendments as it goes through. But she's right to take the Danish route. The more she listens to her backbenchers, the worse it'll be, because it's a very big issue for the public.

I don't think there's going to be much kickback now on reducing the number of police forces, which she's mooted, quite rightly. She's taken a long run-up at it, and so she should, but I don't think she'll meet the same opposition that Charles [Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Home Secretary (2004 – 2006)] had to deal with. It's a total no brainer that we need fewer police forces. The police accept that, I'm pretty sure.

She should press ahead with Digital ID – perhaps sell it a bit better than the case has been up to now. Not that that's her fault; that's Keir's [Rt Hon Keir Starmer KC MP, Prime Minister (2024 2026)] problem.

She needs to stick to her guns.

Do you have any other final reflections?
The only reflection I'd make is we were always told that we were frightened to talk about immigration, and both myself and my Immigration Minister seemed to think, at times, we spoke about nothing else. We were always speaking about it. So there was this issue where the public thought we were ducking the issue, and actually we were far from ducking it. We were having public meetings all over the country.

Is it your view that senior politicians need to keep talking about it, or do you think we should talk about it less?
Illegal immigration is, of course, a tiny proportion of overall immigration. But pictures of people coming illegally into this country, people feel really, really strongly about it, and it's no good suddenly thinking that, "We've done this to death; let's move on". We need to have the right policies to address it, or someone else will. This is Shabana's [Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP, Home Secretary (2025 onwards)] main argument, "If we don't do it there's a very, very different approach from a very different party and they'll end up in Government".

Theresa May

Rt Hon Theresa May, latterly Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, was Home Secretary between 12 May 2010 and 24 July 2016. She subsequently served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 2016 and 2019. She was the Member of Parliament for Maidenhead between 1997 and 2024.

What were your priorities coming in as Home Secretary, when you arrived in 2010?

The first thing I wanted to do when I became Home Secretary was to understand the issues across all aspects of the role. We did have some specific policy agendas – one was on immigration, another was the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners.

What was at the core of you thinking that the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners needed to happen?

I'd not been shadowing the Home Office, so I came into the Home Office and the policy had been developed by the previous shadow Home Office team. What had driven that, and what drove what I was trying to achieve with the PCCs, was a sense that with local police forces up and down the country, the previous arrangements for overseeing them at local level were inadequate. It was local authority boards – they didn't seem to have any teeth, they didn't seem really to hold Chief Constables to account, and, critically, the public had no idea they existed. Only a very small percentage of the public knew that there was a local authority-based policing board. So, it was to try and get a better connection at a local level between somebody who was overseeing the actions of the local police force and the public – hence the elections for Police and Crime Commissioners.

How did the introduction in 2012 of Police and Crime Commissioners change your relationship, as Home Secretary, with Chief Constables?

Of course, when you go in as Home Secretary, you want to reduce crime and make sure the police were as operationally effective as they could be; the public had to continue to have faith and trust in the police. So, all of those, but there was this very specific policy issue that was going to be introduced.

One of the other things I recognised fairly early on, in terms of the effectiveness of policing, was that one of the things I'd seen as a local Member of Parliament particularly, was that the Labour Government's targets for policing didn't fit all local police areas. So, what my local police

were saying to me in Maidenhead was that they'd got this thing that had been sent down from on high; but actually the mix of crimes that they were dealing with was slightly different. But they were being judged on whether they were meeting the Government's targets rather than whether they were meeting the targets that local people would have had.

There is a big difference between the needs of, say, Maidenhead and the needs of Hackney?
Yes, exactly – Maidenhead itself isn't a rural area – but what a rural part of the country would need would be very, very different. So that underpins this desire to get a more locally elected representation that is known by the public. I think the current Government is about to make exactly the same mistake by going down a much more targeted, from-the-centre route, which doesn't fit policing in every environment.

And removing Police and Crime Commissioners?
Yes, and removing Police and Crime Commissioners.

We always had an example of a mayor having responsibility – through the Mayor of London – who was effectively a Police and Crime Commissioner in all but name until we introduced PCCs.

With areas like the West Midlands, the Government is looking at Mayors taking on these responsibilities; in areas without Mayors, they're going back to something that is very similar to the previous local authority policing boards, and I suspect that will mean even fewer members of the public will have any knowledge of what is being done.

Do you think that's an error, to abolish Police and Crime Commissioners?
Yes. I can see that we've not managed to get significant numbers of people to vote for the Police and Crime Commissioners, and that's been a disappointment. Why is that? You're introducing another election to people. Some people had a sense that there shouldn't be any politicisation, in the sense of political figures standing. But of course, the local authority boards were political figures; the Mayor of London is a political figure and had been a Police and Crime Commissioner. But it's disappointing that we haven't managed to get the excitement for the public in terms of voting.

How did things change for you as Home Secretary with the arrival of Police and Crime Commissioners – particularly your relationship with police chiefs?
I'm not sure there was that much change actually. But, of course, there was only a limited period of time when I was operating under the previous system.

My own view is that the Home Secretary, and certainly I, continued to be able to speak to individual Chief Constables, to meet Chief Constables as a grouping, and to deal with the organisation of Chief Constables, which, of course, we changed to the National Police Chiefs' Council. I also would meet groups of all the PCCs as a group and talk to them about their

interests, what they were doing and what we felt as a Government as well. So, I'm not sure there was a change in the relationship – perhaps there was a confidence that there was somebody, at that local level, looking at the police budgets and those sorts of issues.

What were the mechanisms and levers that you and your Ministerial team could use to translate your policy agenda to make the police more effective?

It's more about the relationship, rather than having a lever – and this is where there's a difficult and delicate balance here. I referenced the previous Labour Government's targets – that was a very direct way of them trying to influence what happened, to be able to say to the public, "We've told the police they've got to do this". But, as I say, it doesn't fit every local area, so you have to have a much more, I think, carefully drafted, more nuanced approach, in terms of the overall requirements that you have, and being clear with Chief Constables what the overall requirements are that you have.

One specific example would be trying to change the mindset – on domestic abuse. But that was not just at Chief Constable level. I remember when I addressed the Police Federation conference and they showed me a video beforehand of all the things the police were involved in that weren't really anything to do with crime, and they included domestic abuse. And I gave a clear message about that – it was about changing a mindset. It was about working with Chief Constables, working with the national police lead for the issue, talking to the police about the importance of the issue, bringing groups together and instilling that sense that this was something they shouldn't be dismissing as "just a domestic", but something they should be paying more attention to.

It sounds almost like a persuasion agenda – one might say the bully pulpit – an element of persuading the system to move in a certain direction?

It's not about beating them with a big stick – if you just beat with a big stick, then you probably don't get the results you want. On something like domestic abuse, it was about a change of mindset.

One of the other things that I did, which is about this relationship, was the creation of the College of Policing. The point of the College of Policing was to say there needed to be a profession, a national body that looked at policing around the country, that identified best practice, that provided training in terms of that, and so was able to ensure that police forces were operating at their best.

Before creating the College of Policing, would it be fair to say that the creation of policing policy was principally through Home Office "diktat", and this was an attempt to move police policy-making to a more police-run body?

I think fundamentally that's right. But it was also about saying to the police,

"Here is a body which you should be proud of" and, "This is a body that will be helping you to do your job better, because it will be identifying best practice." Because one of the issues around forces is they don't often share best practice amongst each other. That's not just a police issue, it's a public sector issue generally – local authorities don't like sharing best practice, hospitals don't like sharing best practice.

So the College of Policing was an aim to say, if one force is getting much better results investigating burglary, for example, what is it that they are doing that the force over here, with very poor results of clearing these cases up, is not doing, and can we share that best practice?

Did the change to the College of Policing lessen the influence of the Home Office?

I think it did, in a sense. The changes to Police and Crime Commissioners also had an impact on the influence or responsibility of civil servants.

You talked about the relationship with Chief Constables; were there examples where you found Chief Constables or forces that weren't up to the job or weren't progressing the policy agenda that you'd set?

You use the words "weren't up to the job"; that's slightly different from not necessarily progressing the policy.

But the way that I operated was in terms of trying to influence the approach that was taken. I think if we had said to police forces, "You've got to have X percent of your cases must be domestic abuse cases, or Y percent must be this", you wouldn't get the right result at the sharp end.

On the question of "operational independence", it seems unlikely that anyone would argue politicians should be able to say to the police that they should go and arrest a specific person. What areas are reserved for ministers and what are the grey areas?

I'm a great believer in operational independence. I think it's hugely important – I quoted it in the chamber recently in response to David Hanson [Rt Hon Lord Hanson of Flint, Minister of State at the Home Office (2022 onwards)] when he did the Police Reform Statement. As I said in the Chamber I was in the House of Commons in 2008 when the police went in to search Damian Green's parliamentary office without a warrant, reportedly under pressure or influence from Ministers. My point was that that was wrong, and I fear that the new police reform measures could lead us to more influence from Ministers over operational matters.

Less than a month after I became Home Secretary, we had the shootings in Cumbria, when Derek Bird went on the rampage and killed a dozen people and injured others. Some of my own political advisors were saying, "Are you going to speak to the Chief Constable?" I said, "No; I don't know how to chase an individual who's been shooting people at random around the countryside. This is an operational matter for the police. I will speak to him later to make sure they've got the resources they need and the support they need, but I'm not going to interfere in what is a very fast-

moving, immediate operational issue". There were some journalists in the Home Office that day, and apparently – and this is third-hand – one of them said to one of my special advisers, "Why hasn't Theresa been on the phone telling the Chief Constable what to do? That's what Labour would have done." That's so wrong; you have to leave the police to have their operational independence.

On the other hand, during the 2011 riots there was an issue about the police watching people looting and not going in. The public were rightly getting annoyed about that. David Cameron [Rt Hon Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, Prime Minister (2010 – 2016)] and I had the then Acting Commissioner of the Met in with one or two others and talked this through with them. This was not operationally saying, "You must do this", but talking through what the response of the public is, why are the police doing what they were? And I think I'm right in saying they were doing what they were because the approach to public order had been set by the previous Government, and they were following that rather than doing what operationally might make sense. And in, fact we then saw them being much more active, going in and arresting people.

What's the reason for the distinction in your decision in Cumbria and the decision around the London riots?

The distinction is partly about public concern and partly about that the riots weren't an immediate event – Cumbria was an immediate operation; this was happening, they were looking for the individual and trying to stop further people from being killed or injured. So not getting in the way of the police, in an operational sense.

Stepping back from the two examples – which are about operational events – are there instances where the police stray into the political or policy-making area, such as when they engage with certain groups, for example?

One would expect the police to engage with community groups – the public are the police, and the police are the public – so their relationship has to be a strong one at local level. So, you would expect them to be doing that.

What about where police forces are engaging with groups on policy matters – beyond pure community engagement?

One recent example where people might question that is probably over the Maccabi Tel Aviv-Aston Villa football match. Of course, it's right that the police engage with particular communities, but they mustn't engage with particular communities to the exclusion of everybody else. And that's where there will be issues.

When you're talking about particular communities, you might be talking about the people living on a particular estate, for example. So they might want to engage with people living on a particular estate, because there's been an outbreak of burglaries or there's been anti-social

behaviour, and so they engage with them as a means of ensuring that they can be most effective at a local level.

Another example of perhaps this balance between operational independence and the role of the Home Secretary was perhaps stop and search. The Inspectorate had shown that just over 25 per cent of stop and searches were conducted unlawfully. As a result of that, they were alienating a particular community, which meant that at local level you probably wouldn't get so much information from that community, which means it's harder for you to police. So, it didn't make sense. So, introducing a Code of Conduct to ensure that police officers conducted those stop and searches lawfully. Now the police seemed to think that I was telling them that they couldn't do it at all – that wasn't the message. The message was: do it properly. I remember going to Greater Manchester Police and they had a very good example of where they had worked with a local community. They'd explain to them that they're going to increase these stop and searches on an estate and the reason why – and they got the buy in from the community and it was very effective. So, it's about how you do it and doing it lawfully.

What were the mechanisms by which you then translated that policy agenda into Chief Constables delivering on that?

We produced a code of conduct and asked police forces to sign up to it; but it's interesting – you describe what I was doing as a policy, I'm not sure I would describe it as a policy. I would expect it to be natural for the police to operate within the law. And saying to them, "You've got to operate lawfully", to me is not a policy, it's just pointing out the obvious.

How was the Code of Conduct produced and were there other means that you got what you wanted in terms of stop and search?

The Code of Conduct will have been worked on with the police. So, the Home Office working with the police, following discussions at a senior level with the police. That was the main lever that we used.

How did you see Her Majesty's Inspectorate operating, particularly in relation to you as the Home Secretary?

Very much at arm's length removed. I think people need to know that the Inspectorate is not under political influence. They have to be able to look properly into police forces from that operational effectiveness point of view. The Inspectorate developed new measures, new ways of ranking police forces or comparing police forces with each other. So again, trying to give the public more information about what was happening in their local area.

We also set up a website: police.uk with local crime maps so that people could see the crimes in their local area. We were trying to set a scene for members for the public; because often, if you ask people about crimes in their area they completely overestimate the level of crime. So, the crime maps were to show what is actually happening in your area.

On the Inspectorate, you described it as "arm's length" – was your sense that, prior to the reforms you introduced and prior to Tom Winsor's appointment, that was the case?
No, I'm not able to say that previously I thought that was the case; but I thought it was important that they were independent. And I thought that the appointment of somebody who was not a chief police officer was also important, because it brought that independent voice into the Inspectorate.

Are there areas which you think should be definitively reserved to Ministers and Home Secretaries, which Chief Constables should not be getting involved in – beyond obvious examples such as legislating?
It's difficult to raise specifics – operational independence is hugely important, but it's also, in a sense, a delicate balance between the two.

Setting overall strategy – in the sense of there being an area where we think that in the past not enough attention had been given, so let's talk about how that can be managed in the future, I think is right for the Home Secretary. Chief Constables can raise issues certainly, if Chief Constables feel that the legislation is lacking, that they're not able to do something because the legislation fails them in some sense, then it's important for them to raise that with Government.

But I was tempted to say not straying into issues which are essentially political issues.

Is there an example?
It's difficult, because there are some areas where it's right for them to say, "What you, the Government, are proposing, we do not think will work from an operational point of view". Is that getting into political matters or not? I'm not sure, but there's a validity in pointing something out if it's not going to work, so maybe I'm being too hard and fast.

There's quite a large grey area here – with Ministers having conversations about the operational, and then Chief Constables not straying into political areas, but nevertheless advising, based on their expertise, on certain issues. Would you say there is a significant grey area in the middle which is difficult to define with any real precision?
I think the Government will find this because they've said they're going to bring greater definition to operational independence. I think they will find that it is harder to bring that greater definition.

During your time as Home Secretary you undertook substantial reforms of the system – with the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners, focusing on priorities such as domestic abuse, the creation of the National Crime Agency and the College of Policing and so on. In contrast, not every Home Secretary finds that they are able to do the same – what was different in your case?
A lot of what I did came not from a, "Right I'm here to do these things"

approach, but from listening and understanding what was happening. So, the National Crime Agency was prompted by a speech by the then Commissioner of the Met, Paul Stephenson [Sir Paul Stephenson QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2009 – 2011)], where he said that the police were only touching on about, I think he gave a figure of less than 20 per cent of organised crime. And so the question was: why? What is it that we're not doing? And that's what eventually led to the National Crime Agency being set up.

So, it was very much about listening.

The work with the Department of Health on mental health to try to ensure that people in mental health crisis weren't being taken to police cells – that police officers weren't always the ones who were expected to be there first on the scene dealing with people in mental health crisis; that came because, going around police forces, Police Constables were saying to me that, "This is one of the hardest things we do, we're not trained for it, we don't know how to deal with somebody in mental health crisis, it's a real problem for us". So, it was about creating an agenda which was driven by the realities and the practicalities of what was happening out there, in an effort to ensure that we could improve policing.

Most Home Secretaries would probably say they spent time listening to officers and would probably claim to have done all the things you've just described, but my sense is there's something different about your time in office. Of course, you were the longest serving Home Secretary for a very long time, so perhaps longevity may be part of it – but my sense was there may be something else here?

I think it's important in Government to realise that governing is different from simply being in politics. And you have to have an eye to the politics, obviously – you are a party political person, you're in a Government which is party political – but governing is a different, let's say, skill set. You have to approach governing not in the sense of: what's the political agenda? What's going to make the headlines? What's going to do X, Y and Z.

One of the things as Home Secretary I wanted to try to achieve was to keep the Home Office off the front pages because, in the Home Office, you're dealing with things constantly. I used to say to the staff, "It is a great department of state. It matters because every day you are dealing with issues that matter out there to people in their daily lives, and that's about ensuring that you're working for those people and not working for the headlines. And that's about governing rather than just being involved in politics."

If you had been at the Home Office for longer, what would have been the next stage of reform?

Well, there were one or two things that I did want to do that I didn't manage to do. I wanted to take counter-terrorism policing out of the Met and put it into the National Crime Agency – which, to be fair to the Government, they are proposing to do. I wanted to take the investigative

part of the Serious Fraud Office out of the SFO and put it into the National Crime Agency – by and large the NCA is better at investigating than the SFO.

Probably following through in making sure that the College of Policing was able to really set the standards for policing. Nick Herbert (Rt Hon Lord Herbert of South Downs CBE, Chair, College of Policing (2021 onwards)] has been Chairman of the College of Policing recently – he was my first Policing Minister, so has had a very clear agenda on that, but making sure that the reforms that were put in place were actually working and operational.

And then there's things that I would have had to have looked at where I'd introduced something with the best of intentions and the unintended consequences were not good. So, the classic one was removal of police officers – I thought that actually a panel with an independent chairman looking at these cases would be more likely to take action against police officers who had misbehaved, but in the end it was the opposite. That's why Mark Rowley [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner Metropolitan Police Service (2022 onwards)] rightly said we need some changes here, and those have now been put through.

Over the last couple of years, there's been a lot of commentary on protest and to what degree ministers should intervene – do you have a sense of that?

Yes, I have. I'm probably on the slightly less interventionist end of the things. I think we've seen perhaps too much of a desire from Home Secretaries to want to intervene. It's been particularly difficult, obviously around the Gaza protests, that's been a particular difficulty. But I think it's right that we allow people to express their opinions. Obviously there are circumstances in which a Home Secretary can intervene at the request of a Chief Constable to stop a protest and stop a demonstration, which I did, and I think getting that balance is right. But that is as much down to Chief Constables determining whether they require that intervention as it is about the intervention from the Home Secretary.

Ultimately, the system you put in place is for Police and Crime Commissioners to hire and fire, rather than ministers?

Yes, and of course that's going to change now because the Government's proposing the Home Secretary will have greater powers.

I think the other element in relation to PCCs that I think was, again, slightly disappointing, which was that they tended, not in every case, but tended to appoint Chief Constables from within their own force; whereas actually, what you really wanted was a good selection. Top cops are quite interesting – what I discovered at an early stage is that often very few of them apply for vacancies because they reckon they know who's going to get it, or who's most likely to get it; and if it's not them, they don't put their name forward. Whereas, what you want is a good competition and Police and Crime Commissioners being able to choose from a good

set of candidates. And there's been a tendency to recruit from within the same force which means you're not getting people with different ideas, different approaches coming in.

Following the introduction of PCCs did you ever say actually, "That Chief Constable is just not up to the job", and intervene?
I think even with PCCs, it was possible for the Home Secretary and/or the Home Office to have conversations with PCCs.

Amber Rudd

Rt Hon Amber Rudd was Home Secretary between 13 July 2016 and 29 April 2019. She also served as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. She was the Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye between 2010 and 2019.

What were your main priorities around crime and policing when you were appointed as Home Secretary?
Violent crime, particularly in London, and how we were going to reduce it.

How did you go about transmitting that objective from Whitehall down to things changing on the ground in London with violent crime?
So much comes down to leadership – and Cressida Dick [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)] was appointed early on, and she had as her priority violent crime. She felt like the right person to do it and it felt to me that the Met was seized by the fact that she was going to be a good leader – they wanted her and she felt like a good leader.

So how did we do? We went hammer and tongs with what legislation we could to try and reduce what we thought might be the drivers of violent crime. I think I was the first of about ten Home Secretaries to announce making zombie knives illegal. And then the last thing I did, actually, two years later, was set up a Violent Crime Task Force – I got together David Lammy, the local MPs, National Crime Agency – a big round table of everybody who could have any sort of impact on reducing violent crime, because it hadn't got better, it felt like it got worse right at the end. And we were trying to community action.

It's a fair question and it goes to the heart of what you can actually do as Home Secretary on policing: try and get the police more money, try and get better settlements, try as Theresa May did to stop the Fed [Police Federation] going off with everybody else's money and try to get them the support they want by making sure the legislation was in place for body worn cameras which were being rolled out.

There weren't many pieces of legislation we did, but there was quite a lot of haranguing and using the bully pulpit. I did quite a lot on domestic violence, because that was one of my personal priorities and had been Theresa May's as well – so I did a lot of convening, we did a lot of tracking of recruitment of black and minority ethnic people in policing.

You can only do three or four things, so you just have to decide where

you're going to focus. And policing is only one of the three things that the Home Secretary is doing.

We also had a very bad year in 2017 of terrorism, so I worked very closely with the counter-terrorism unit under Mark Rowley [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Assistant Commissioner Specialist Operations (2014 – 2018)] and making sure the police and the counter-terrorism and the violence units were all working together was an important part of prevention.

After I left as Home Secretary, I went to see a few people and asked, "What should we have done?" I went and saw the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Tom Windsor, and he and a number of other people think the business of 43 separate police forces is madness. And one of the reasons it doesn't work is that it means you don't get good senior people, because the forces are too small to bring up senior people to top jobs. And if you are an excellent leader in the police force, it's difficult to get a top job and not have to move too far away.

With regards to police accountability, what is your view on Police and Crime Commissioners?

They were an excellent idea which should have worked, but it hasn't. Nobody understands who their Police and Crime Commissioner is, nobody understands why they are based with a political party. And I think we should admit it hasn't worked and look at doing something else. And I think one of the reasons it hasn't worked is that the calibre of Police and Crime Commissioners has not reflected our expectations and hopes. I think everybody – even the people who've been enthusiasts for it – slightly look around going, "Well, that was a good effort. But I'm not sure we pulled it off." It takes a certain amount of courage to say it didn't work, and easier to do when you're no longer in Government.

So, what should be there instead?

We all know the intent was about accountability and visibility, and I don't think we achieved that at all. The system was a little sluggish, because people didn't know who their police boards were – I don't know what the solution is, but I don't think we added to the situation that was there. I think it was an idea that had good intentions, as did, for instance, having regional and city Mayors, which has been very successful, but you have to get good people. I was interested to see that Katy Bourne [Katy Bourne OBE, Police and Crime Commissioner, Sussex Police (2012 onwards)] got re-elected. I don't know how much that has to do with being Sussex, because it is of course quite blue, but she was always by far the outstanding Police and Crime Commissioner.

Where is the line for the Home Secretary to be able to grip policing to focus on doing what you want it to do?

I don't think you can and I don't think that's your job, either, as Home Secretary. You have to duck and dive a bit. Everybody longs for a clear line, and it's not like that. The operational independence of policing is

well documented. And, of course, it's an essential part of our democracy.

A Home Secretary would never say, "Go and arrest Mr Blob", although the security services will tell you some fairly shocking stories of the notes they kept on certain Labour politicians 40 or 50 years ago – so, it's not born out of craziness, it's born out of experience. It's not for the Home Secretary to do that, but nor is it for the Home Secretary to say, "I think you should not do serious violence, you should do something which some people might consider trivial". So leadership is not just about setting the law, it's about making sure that you can win people over. It's a relationship, as well as setting priorities.

I definitely got the impression as I left towards the end that the Met, the National Crime Agency and the College of Policing – they all felt under-supported by the Home Office and Home Secretary. And what they got from us was not enough leadership. I think that you could have better, stronger leadership without trying to tell them what to do, but just supporting them and then not agreeing with them when you don't, but I think we could do better. And I also think that the division between the Home Secretary and the Mayor of London is a tricky one – I don't think it's impossible, but it is tricky.

Where you felt police performance wasn't what you would hope for it to be, was it your conclusion that it wasn't part of your role to do something about that?

At the time, that wasn't my view. The trouble with serious violence and knife crime that was taking place in London is that there wasn't a solution. I would talk to leadership, which in this case was Cressida Dick [[Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)], and she would explain to me what she was doing. I didn't know what the answer was – I couldn't say, "You should do more of this or more of that".

I did have a slight issue with money because we had made some cuts in 2010 to 2015. And so, a lot of conferences I went to for policing, or for issues to do with policing, if Sadiq [Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2016 onwards)] was there or his Deputy of Policing, they would say, "Well it's all disastrous because you haven't given us enough money", which is quite tricky.

I can't remember ever thinking, "I wish the police would do that". Because I felt that they were doing their best with what they had in a difficult situation. One of the things that I remember examining is what else we could do, for instance, to limit young people's access to violent videos and music that was seen to be part of what was incentivising them to go into gangs and killing each other, or hurting each other – drill music, in particular. That was the sort of thing the Home Office can look at – in the end there wasn't anything we could do. There was stuff we could do about county lines, which required legislation, which we did something about.

I think you're constantly looking for opportunities – you should have

good police leadership and, if you have, you're constantly looking for opportunities for how you can support them.

Is it fair to say the perception of the Home Secretary as being all powerful when it comes to responsibility for crime and policing does not align with the actual levers that you're able to pull?
I don't know whether those levers belong in the Home Secretary's hand. I think a lot of politics is about being the show pony for the executive of the Government. So when there's a big Home Office related event – for instance, an act of terrorism – you are the one who has to go into Parliament and communicate how what has happened is being addressed in the best way we can. You have no idea really whether that is the case; it turns out a lot of the stuff that you do say immediately to reassure the public through Parliament, as the voice, is often not the case. In Manchester, for instance, there were a lot of errors made, but you don't, coming back to policing, you are not a policeman, you do not have knowledge of what's going on. But if there is a major policing issue and you're asked – I used to get asked a lot about what we're doing about knife crime – I will talk about the things that we were doing to support the police to do it. But you don't have the levers yourself; and nor should you really.

For instance, one of the things I thought that we could have done more of is set up youth centres, because the whole narrative that we hadn't done enough with youth centres I think was fairly compelling. But for that I needed to get money, and I didn't get the money – I tried to talk to the Chancellor about it but I couldn't get the money to do it. So, you have certain levers, but they're not to do with deciding how policing operates.

What about when it comes down to setting the priorities? Were there examples where you thought that police forces should be focusing on something, and they disagreed?
Culturally, there's often a bit of that – I found that with domestic violence, some forces were better than others. I would host events where the Chief Constable would come. I prioritised it so people were accountable, so they had to report, so they spent more time on it, but that's the level of your influence. I think it is right, because domestic violence is important to me and I think we should be doing more culturally. We bought some additional stalking legislation, so I put my emphasis there. If the Home Secretary does that, the police forces up and down the country have to respond, so will participate. If there's a major sort of terrorist event taking place or something else, they have to decide how to use their resources.

What are your thoughts on the recent public debate around operational independence, protest and public order policing?
I think it's about leadership – I think Mark Rowley is very good and he's been bold too about going on the radio, talking to people and explaining his position and supporting his force. I think that having a good head man or woman makes a huge difference.

I think it's incredibly difficult. I come back to this idea that there is a red line somewhere – there are things you can do and things you can't do – and I think we have to rely on the police to have a bit of judgement. And sometimes they're going to get it wrong. They are much watched as a force because everybody films everything they do. So, I think that it's an increasingly public job in everything they do, and I think the protests have tested that, but I don't see any particularly egregious mistakes.

The big one for me was the Sarah Everard murder during the pandemic. That combined so many things that each on their own were pretty shocking, but pulled together: the nature of who the murderer was, how Sarah Everard had been murdered meant that it required a full report, which we had from Louise Casey [Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB] and the shocking cultural revelations.

Where police forces or Chief Constables do get it wrong, perhaps in an egregious way, what is the Home Secretary's role in dealing with that?
The Home Secretary can call it out and make it impossible for that person to stay in their job – as Sadiq Khan [Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2016 onwards)] did to Cressida [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)]. That's the pulpit.

Also, if you've spent some time with the police, you do grow an enormous amount of respect for them and for the UK version of policing – compared to France, Germany, Italy or Spain. We get many things wrong in this country but our attempt to have community policing – we are them, they are us; local people; no guns – is absolutely right and it is envied. So I think it is right that the Home Secretary's default position is to stand up for the police.

The one that used to drive me mad was Notting Hill Carnival. The police have to police it, and they get spat at and treated abysmally. There's always some injuries, and the organisers know this. It is a police job, but they dread it. And it is a great night or day out for local people, but for them, it's just an endurance test and it just seems so hard on them.

Is there anything, particularly on the operational independence question, that you think is really important for me to note?
We live in a world where institutions are being menaced by populism and populism does go after institutions. If we want to preserve our democracy, we need to make sure that we are very clear about the fact that a democracy isn't just a vote every four or five years; it's looking after those institutions. And having operational independence, I would say, is at the core of one of the essential parts of protecting our country and our democracy.

Sajid Javid

Rt Hon Sir Sajid Javid was Home Secretary between 30 April 2018 and 24 July 2019. He also served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. He was the Member of Parliament for Bromsgrove between 2010 and 2024.

What were your priorities when you became Home Secretary?

My main priorities were not policing itself, I could not say that it was my major priority going in. I would have loved it to have been in some ways, but my priority was Windrush, because that was the context in which my predecessor had resigned and it was a crisis point for the Government at the time.

There were also a number of things related to Brexit. We had the Brexit negotiation going on, my department was an important one in that process, not least because of immigration, but there were also other elements regarding security and intelligence, which touched on policing. As a result of Brexit, the EU Settlement Scheme was a major priority, as was the post-Brexit immigration system overall, including developing what we eventually called the "Points Based System". And there were the post-Brexit arrangements involving policing, security and intelligence.

The other priority I'd add was counter-terrorism – in the couple of years before, we had an awful year of three terrorist incidents on the UK mainland. We also had the threats from Syria and ISIS, so there was a heightened concern about terrorism which took a lot of my time.

Within crime and policing, were there any areas specifically that became a focus for you?

Yes, there was. The first of my priorities surrounding policing was improving the relationship between the Home Office and policing in general, but especially rank-and-file policing, probably represented by the Police Federation. There had been a deterioration in the relationship between Government and the police, especially during Theresa May's time. She took quite a, let's say, combative attitude. Amber Rudd [Home Secretary (2016 – 2018)] was trying to repair that, but didn't have much time to focus on it given Brexit.

I thought it would be easier to work with the police and get things done if there was a more positive, confident, trusting relationship – so I had a number of initiatives around that. One was engagement, both police

officers and police forces – being out there, making visits and talking to as many people as I could. The second was using the set piece opportunity for any Home Secretary of speaking at the annual Police Federation conference. I was very keen to use that as an opportunity as one of my first outings in front of so many police officers to build relationships, and I did that. One of the ways I did that, I can probably say unashamedly, was to use my link to policing through my brother, who had been in policing for 25 to 30 years. He was a senior officer in the Met by then and had previously been in the West Midlands Police and Avon and Somerset Police. I talked a bit about that family history and that when he was a police officer I'd been in a patrol car with him when I wasn't even a politician – just to demonstrate that I was really interested in policing and issues like law and order. I think that worked; the reception was really warm. A lot of civil servants said after that my relationship with the police had completely switched, and that I had got a lot of confidence and goodwill from police officers.

I also thought I would prioritise police spending. One of the responsibilities of the Home Secretary is setting the budget for policing – including setting the precept that can be added to local authority bills. I told the police I would prioritise that, and I did. I pushed it to the absolute limit with the then Prime Minister, Theresa May. She had been given an envelope for a lot of these settlements, especially on police pay. Theresa May didn't want to meet it because she thought we couldn't afford it. I really held out and refused to agree. I remember that, in the last 24 hours, we had a call on the Sunday where she said she was going to announce it the next day and I completely dug in. She was getting very annoyed with me that I was not agreeing. In the end, we compromised, but I got a much better settlement for policing than otherwise. I think the police recognised that I had gone out of my way.

Another priority was police powers. The police would often tell me that a lot of political correctness was getting in the way – one of the top things that kept coming up was stop and search. Theresa May had pretty much stopped stop and search. I felt that that was a politically correct decision – and the wrong decision. And I wanted to bring it back. There was a lot of back and forth with Theresa May and her team, and I managed to get my way. I wrote to police forces to bring back stop and search and I made a big speech around it at the time, addressing why it was important. I mentioned, for example, that while people often criticise stop and search, saying more black people get stopped than white people, black people are also more likely to be the victims of knife crime. And it worked.

Linked to that, I also allowed police officers to start using spit vests again and also to start using vehicle contact in stopping mopeds. I told them that if a motorcyclist takes off their helmet, the police could still go after them, which they really appreciated. These are small things, in a way, but it was allowing them to police again and taking away some of the political correctness.

Using stop and search as an example, what were the practical things you did as Home Secretary to make that change?

One of my priorities was knife crime – which had been set as a priority by my predecessor Amber Rudd [Home Secretary (2016 – 2018)]. She had set out some popular new policies and I really took that to the next level – especially in terms of cross-Government engagement.

So, first, I would want to gather evidence. That would be asking my policy officials to prepare a submission, a report on the pros and cons and the actual facts, because we had a period where there was stop and search and then it had been stopped. So, what were the differences that stop and search made on knife crime?

Second, I would make a point of asking Chief Constables and other police officers for their views on it. One person in particular that was very important to that was Cressida Dick [[Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)]. She was very clear that stop and search was positive, that it made a lot of difference and was a tool she'd love to have back. That mattered to me, because I thought if I give the top officers what they want, then there would be no excuses and I could hold them accountable.

Thirdly, I went out with the police. On one occasion in London, I spent a couple of hours with a unit using stop and search. They were showing me how it worked and how they did it. That was all important for evidence gathering.

As the Home Secretary, I couldn't decide this in a vacuum as it is a Government decision and, in this case, the key person was going to be the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister happened to be the former Home Secretary, but also the Home Secretary that had stopped stop and search. She was also feeling a lot of pressure on Windrush, which was linked back to some of her policies, or the way she approached them as Home Secretary. So she was feeling under pressure, I think it is fair to say, from me and my department at the time. It took me a lot of convincing of her. Ultimately, because I worked with her chief of staff, Gavin Barwell [Rt Hon Lord Barwell, Chief of Staff, 10 Downing Street (2017 – 2019)] at the time, he and the civil servants around him agreed with my position. We persuaded her by saying changing the policy was a pilot. In reality, I had no intention of making it a pilot, but she felt more comfortable to say it was a pilot that we were going to test.

So those were the processes – although legally it actually didn't require me to make any regulatory changes other than just issue a letter to the NPCC (National Police Chiefs' Council) to say that this is a policy that the Government is now comfortable with again.

Were there occasions where you found you weren't in agreement with Chief Constables – either because you wanted to do something and they didn't or vice versa?

No, I can't recall that.

What was your role in holding police chiefs to account for performance on crime?

Clearly the Home Secretary has overall responsibility for policing in England and Wales and has a set of powers. But the power and tools at the Home Secretary's disposal are limited.

You can set overall policing strategy, but that is not an annual thing – the last time the Strategic Policing Requirement was set was 2023. Then there's obviously the Home Secretary's support for any changes in law, overseeing and setting regulations either directly or indirectly. Then there is funding – including the grant and the precept – through the budget, you have some control or say in things.

There are also various arm's length bodies that are independent, but have a degree of influence on policing, and the Home Secretary has a degree of influence on those – not least by selecting the Chief Executive or trustees and setting their guidance where relevant.

In terms of the restrictions that you face, there are some obvious and some are less obvious. Clearly the police are operationally independent – and that's as it should be. No minister should be making decisions on how the police conduct an investigation or who the police investigate – that's a decision for the police. And in a democracy, that clearly shouldn't be any different. That was never under question.

You might have moments where you see something and feel the urge to intervene, like we've seen more recently with some of the demonstrations. But even if you had the urge, you might come into the office and say, "Oh my God, I can't believe they let that happen! I can't believe that police officer was dancing with those environmentalists on Westminster Bridge". But, in my case, you always restrain yourself and say, "That is not my job".

So, the most I would do is, if I saw something or heard something that didn't feel right, I would ask questions. That would be particularly in London as the biggest force and because the Commissioner has a line to the Home Secretary as well as the Mayor of London. So you might ask questions like: "Did you know this had happened? What do you think? Do you think it's appropriate?" And they might get a sense of your view, but you never interfere.

Would you ask those questions directly of the Chief Constable or, in London, the Commissioner?

Yes.

There are other things I think limit the influence of the Home Secretary and, in my view, should change.

Firstly, the police forces in England and Wales are very fragmented, there's 43 of them – we have far too many. If you were designing a policing system for England and Wales today, you absolutely would not start with 40-odd police forces. It clearly leads to big inefficiencies and waste. But most of all, it leads to poor outcomes in terms of fighting crime – of that there is no doubt.

For example, my constituency is Worcestershire, by West Mercia, which is next to Birmingham in the West Midlands. It is next to Warwickshire, which has a tiny police force. It duplicates all these systems. Criminals that come from Birmingham into Worcestershire, or vice versa, don't think, "Oh, the police force has changed, you need to act differently". There's a lack of co-operation, there's different systems, and it's a no-brainer. It's just too fragmented.

I don't know what the correct number is – I'm not saying there needs to be one national police force at all – there needs to be some regionalisation for obvious reasons, but maybe it's like five or six forces. For example, in policing we have ROCUs (Regional Organised Crime Units) to coordinate over larger regions on organised crime – maybe that is the basis for future forces.

The second thing is Police and Crime Commissioners. PCCs, in my opinion, were the wrong decision, a complete waste of time and money – all they've ended up doing is muddling accountability. Whether it's the Mayor of London, or the PCCs in different areas, is the Chief Constable responsible in terms of accountability to that person, or to the Home Office and the Home Secretary? So it allows people to sort of take advantage of the muddle in accountability if they wanted to.

PCCs, in general, and there are exceptions to this, are poor quality. They're often not very high-calibre people. It's not a big enough job for someone to leave the top of their game to become a PCC, which is an important job in a local community. So you attract poor quality people, and the public also just doesn't take much interest – look at the turnout for elections. People just aren't interested, which leads to poor quality people and poor choices.

Then lastly, policing is not above politics in the sense that ultimately it has got to be accountable to democratically elected ministers, but I think PCCs bring in too much politics. If you're a PCC, with one or two exceptions, you're going to stand on a party-political banner and you're going to be bringing party politics into it – bringing in whatever you think people want to hear, rather than being led by the facts. It's just too much politics it's short-termist. I was against PCCs originally and always have been. If I'd had my way at the time, I would have tried to scrap them. But I think I would have had a hard time given that it was Theresa May who introduced them. They have been an utter waste of time and have led to poor outcomes.

What would you replace Police and Crime Commissioners with?

I'd go back to a system like the old police boards. I'm not saying that they were perfect but compared to what we've got today it would definitely be a better outcome.

Is there anything else on the accountability issues that you would highlight?

I felt like you were always left with the nuclear option but there's not

enough in between. The nuclear option being that it's pretty hard for any Chief Constable to continue in that job if the Home Secretary said they'd lost confidence in you – so you always have that up your sleeve.

It doesn't mean that you'd use that to threaten officers, but there was one police force where everyone thought the Chief Constable was rubbish, and everyone was telling me that. So I said to the Police and Crime Commissioner, "Your Chief Constable's got to go and, if he doesn't, I'm going to find every way I can to fire him and make it public." And then the Chief Constable goes, and we can bring in a replacement. But it was pretty much a nuclear option.

If we draw the parallel with the NHS, where if it was a failing Trust, I could meet with the Chief Executive of the NHS and say, "It's obvious that these trusts are failing on these outcomes. Clearly, there's a problem. Either you get a grip and send in a SWAT team, or you fire the chief"; and they would pretty much have to do that, it would be hard to disagree with you.

Was there a big difference between the way that you as Home Secretary could directly influence policing, compared to, say, the influence you could have as Secretary of State for Health?

Yes, there was a difference. There were some similarities in the sense that in terms of clinical decisions, the NHS is completely independent, as it should be. Also, like with the police forces, you have lots of trusts. So the similarities are there.

But I think one key difference was that in Health you have a "centre", and that centre in the NHS has quite a high degree of influence and power – and that is NHS England. NHS England sets the national guidelines, can change them quickly, can intervene on issues, sets the budget and so forth. So, what it meant as a Secretary of State, you could get a huge amount done or have a much more joined-up approach, especially if you worked together with and had a good relationship with NHS England.

There is no equivalent in policing. Yes, you have the National Police Chiefs Council but that's almost like a voluntary body, that's a talking shop. I'm not saying it's not important. But any Chief Constable can pretty much ignore what they said. There's no overall boss of policing. Yes, you've got a top officer in the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, but if you're the Chief Constable in the West Midlands or Manchester, you don't care what the guy in London says because it's not your force. So there's no equivalent of a centre. I think that that made a difference, which goes back to my fragmentation point.

Did you work closely with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary?

No – I saw that role pretty much as an independent role. I felt that while you might have conversations and updates, ministers shouldn't get involved; the same goes for the IOPC [Independent Office for Police Conduct].

Did you work closely with other departments and ministers?

When it comes to fighting crime, obviously the lead department is the Home Office. But one thing I learned in Government, and it's not rocket science, it is obvious, but we just don't take it seriously enough, and this applies to pretty much any department, is that a lot of what's required is cross-Government work. The importance of that is just not taken seriously or understood sufficiently in Government.

So for example, take the criminal justice system. To fight crime, it is no good just having police officers going out and arresting people because unless you've got enough CPS prosecutors, the right prosecution powers, courts that aren't overburdened, prisons spaces so you're not letting people out early, it becomes self-defeating.

So you have the whole criminal justice system, and I'm not arguing that it should all be in the Home Office, but it's just not joined up enough. Yes, the relevant ministers used to meet regularly every three or four months. But each has got their own priorities and stuff, and I think you really need a Cabinet subcommittee that is always chaired by the Home Secretary as the most senior minister in that group and the one that is ultimately responsible for dealing with crime.

Secondly, to fight a particular crime or cause of crime, you need much broader cross-Government co-operation – a really good example would be knife crime. Knife crime was a priority of mine, and to fight it we needed a cross-Government approach. I set up a cross-Government ministerial unit on knife crime – for that to work I needed the education department, Department for Work and Pensions, and the health department. A lot of the people committing knife crime might be drug addicts, they might need support with drug rehabilitation or have a mental health problem. If they go on to commit some crime, the police often were there as social workers looking after them when they should be out on the street. And that's because the health department or the education department aren't able to pick up their responsibilities, so you need cross-Government co-operation.

Was there anything particular about Brexit and its impact that you think is worth mentioning?

It is blatantly obvious that Brexit, the new Brexit deal, has lessened police capability. I've made the case time and time again that because of Brexit, we were leaving the Schengen Information System, and the police were very clear that this is going to massively reduce our intelligence capability. But the Government was pretending we would be going to use Interpol, but that's like going from digital back to old school analogue. And also, you are losing the arrest warrants, and we were one of the biggest beneficiaries of the European Arrest Warrant, because we had a lot more people arrested in Europe than we arrested. We still don't have any of that data, we don't have the arrest warrants and nothing ever replaced it. But it's a real-life consequence of Brexit, and has probably led to more crime. So we lost all these tools and that was a trade-off.

Is there anything that we've not covered that you think is really important?

In Government, one of the things which ministers don't recognise enough, or they wish to avoid, is that making decisions is about accepting trade-offs. So whatever decision you make in Government, there will be a trade-off – you can't have everything. And a lot of politicians don't like that. Every minister will say these are my priorities, but they never deprioritise anything – now everything cannot be a priority. So ministers will say, "Keep working on this, keep working on that, but I also want you to do this". That's just not how things work – to be a true priority that means deprioritising something. Also not making a decision is a decision and a lot of ministers don't understand that.

I'll give you an example that should be a live debate when it comes to policing and that's the increased use of technology, like Artificial Intelligence, facial recognition and digital IDs. Let's say we use a lot more AI, a lot more CCTV, a lot more facial recognition, more integrated data access for the police – that would lead to better outcomes in terms of finding criminals. But there are trade-offs: civil liberties trade-offs, financial trade-offs. But we're not good, as a political system, about having a proper debate about these trade-offs. So, for example, if a Government says, "I'm not going to allow mass use of facial recognition and AI systems", then you can accept that, but if you're going to keep fighting crime, with a growing population, with more complex crime and more cross-border crime, then you're going to have to have more police officers. So you've got to fund those officers if you're not going to have the technology. Both are legitimate – but you have to choose – my point is that we're not really having these debates because some of these areas are considered too sensitive.

Priti Patel

Rt Hon Dame Priti Patel MP was Home Secretary between 24 July 2019 and 6 September 2022. She also served as Secretary of State for International Development. She has been the Member of Parliament for Witham since 2010.

How much was crime and policing the priority for you as Home Secretary versus other areas such as immigration and counter-terrorism?

We were clear in the summer of 2019, following the transition from Theresa May [Rt Hon Baroness May of Maidenhead, Prime Minister (2016 – 2019)] to Boris Johnson [Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Prime Minister (2019 – 2022)], that we were rolling the pitch for what became our 2019 manifesto for the general election. This was to become the post-Brexit general election and a significant shift in my portfolio towards restoring the Conservative Party's credentials as the party of law and order.

I was appointed on the 24th July 2019 and I was immediately aware of the duties and responsibilities of the role of the Home Secretary, when on my first morning in the role there were several headlines on Radio 4's Today programme referencing the Home Secretary and key aspects of our agenda we were putting forward in Government. This one radio headline contextualised so starkly the depth and breadth of the responsibilities and work of the Home Secretary.

On my first day, the Prime Minister and I visited the West Midlands on our first policing visit where Dave Thompson [Sir David Thompson QPM, Chief Constable, West Midlands Police (2016 – 2022)] was the Chief Constable there. It was my first policing visit outside of my constituency; and we arrived with a significant entourage of policy teams and media representatives. On arrival, the Chief Constable took control of the visit to brief and inform us about policing, with much focus on his national responsibilities on the National Police Chiefs' Council. Both the Prime Minister and I were super keen to have the chance to meet officers, to talk to them and listen to them about their experiences of policing, which is what the Prime Minister and I cared about.

I was a front-line Home Secretary, always keen to hear from our professional officers on the front line. I wanted to understand what was and what was not working in policing, what they needed to do the job well and how I could support them and strengthen their ability to do the job. I recall the Chief Constable telling us about all his national responsibilities (part of his National Police Chiefs' Council portfolio responsibilities). While listening to this, I was very conscious that my pre-visit briefing

informed me that crime in the West Midlands was rocketing, with guns and weaponry on the streets and murders within the community, and that the national roles and responsibilities were not translating into lower crime locally. I left that visit thinking there was an amazing opportunity to do things differently in policing.

Policing was very high up on the agenda because Boris was adamant it would be. I was supported by an excellent policing minister [Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP, Minister for Crime and Policing (2019 – 2022)] who brought his London policing experience and insights into the role. Our policy was to recruit 20,000 more police officers and this would be a dynamic period in policing; after years of reduced investment in policing, we wanted to invest and grow the next generation of police offices.

As the former Mayor of London, the Prime Minister had been successful in cutting crime and he was robust and challenging on our delivery for change.

I was determined to restore ourselves as a party of law and order. At every level, from tackling county line drug gangs, to a whole litany of serious offenders, we would have policies and laws in place to go after corrosive criminality, by empowering our police and law enforcement, through tougher sentences and taking direct action against various crime types and their causes and, in the long run, restore public confidence in policing.

What were the levers that you were able to use as the Home Secretary to influence what the police did?

To understand the resources and the tools required to support law and order, I engaged with policing and police chiefs, and I respected their professional experience.

In my first party conference speech in 2019, I made it abundantly clear that we would resource policing right from our commitment to deliver 20,000 more police offices to providing them with the tools for them to do the job. From safer streets funding, to tasers, to backing the police, these were significant measures because, for the first time, there was a Home Secretary investing in the frontline: in police training, in their career development and in their protection. I wanted to turn the tables so that the frontline would have a direct relationship with us – and they knew we had their backs during good and bad times. I went on to introduce the Police Covenant as a measure to protect our police from harm, which was essential following some of the most horrific attacks on and murders of our officers. No one can imagine the abuse officers experience and the distress felt by the families of our officers.

Did you find that Chief Constables were actively trying to block you from some of the things that you were trying to do?

No – I can't say that.

When I became Home Secretary, I felt the department had a lack of ambition and an indifference to law and order. They had become

institutional over time and, from conversations I had, the department had effectively delegated all policing to Police and Crime Commissioners. I was told that, when it came to the real issues and challenges, it was a case of "Get it off our desks". That was effectively the mindset of the Home Office – don't bring it back into the department. And I did.

In doing so, I created new funding streams for Police and Crime Commissioners, including the Taser Fund and the Safer Streets Fund. I don't think it was the intention for me to put my hand into operational policing force by force; but certainly through Police and Crime Commissioners I provided them with the tools they needed to strengthen on-the-ground policing, enhance skills and capabilities across the forces and empower PCCs through the resources provided to them, which shaped their policing plans and enabled them to set the strategic policing priorities needed in their areas.

What was your view on the role of Police and Crime Commissioners?
I originally questioned their role, fearing they may become another layer of bureaucracy. I soon grasped, by working with some exceptional PCCs, that they had the ability to shape, integrate and deliver right across the criminal justice system. Some of the most significant improvements on law and order came from them.

For example, Operation Soteria was a police-led initiative that enhanced the way police forces in England and Wales investigated rape and sexual offenses, with a focus on prioritising the victims of crime and supporting them through this process. This is one example as to where, at a national level, we were aware of the failures within the criminal justice system to support the victims of these crimes and not enough prosecutions of those crimes were taking place, resulting in women losing confidence in the system, which was unacceptable.

Another example of a national priority becoming a focus of PCCs and local police forces was county line drugs and the need to tackle the drug gangs, the recruitment of young people and the appalling cycle of crime and human misery associated with this scourge.

The Prime Minister was a firm advocate of PCCs from his own very successful period as Mayor of London, where he championed crime reduction, stop and search and protecting Londoners from crime and the causes of crime.

I wanted to cascade that and make Police and Crime Commissioners much more visible, much more accountable.

We conducted reviews on Police and Crime Commissioners and sought to make Chief Constables more transparent and more accountable to elected Police and Crime Commissioners. I worked alongside Police and Crime Commissioners to make sure that they were delivering on policing priorities.

During my tenure the country experienced the most appalling and egregious breaches of public trust and competence in policing. From the tragic and appalling murder of Sarah Everard, which resulted in the

inquiry led by Dame Elish Angiolini [Rt Hon Dame Elish Angiolini KC, Chair of the Angiolini Inquiry (2021 onwards)], to policing scandals, to the Daniel Morgan report, to failing police forces and to the dismissal and sacking of Cressida Dick [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2017 – 2022)], which was subject to a review by the police Inspectorate.

All very different issues, some of which affected the largest police force in England and Wales, the Metropolitan Police. It was self-evident that when the largest police force in the country is facing challenges and declining in reputation with poor performance, breaches of trust and questions around poor policing, this would have an effect nationwide across policing – and it did.

As a result, I had quite a spiky relationship with Sadiq Khan [Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2016 onwards)] and I apologise to no one for holding him to account, pressing for reforms within policing and ensuring he was using his large police budget from the Home Office to do the job effectively.

This was the same with another large police force and Andy Burnham [Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP, Mayor of Greater Manchester (2017 – 2026)], the Mayor of Manchester, when he sacked his then Chief Constable over a wide range of failures, which I supported. The Home Office and the mayor worked together to bring in new and effective leadership with a new Chief Constable, Steve Watson [Sir Stephen Watson QPM, Chief Constable, Greater Manchester Police (2021 onwards)]. It was quite clear that I wanted to see a leader who would crack down on crime, change the institutional failures within the force and rebuild the reputation of the force. We had similar problems in Cleveland, where they had an appalling track record, which resulted in me putting them on notice by bringing in His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to evaluate the performance of the force and put them on a performance plan.

How far did you go in terms of involving yourself in operational matters?

Every day felt quite operational when it came to policing because of the issues we faced at the time. The Covid-19 pandemic changed the face of policing and of our country with new guidance on how we should all conduct ourselves, live our lives and even when we could go out.

Through the entire pandemic, I had calls every day with UK policing and our security and crime agencies. We would work through situational reports from across the country, discuss practical measures, ways of working and best practice, while being part of a national response to the pandemic through new policing guidance that went as far as to stop the British public from living their lives freely. This was challenging and difficult, but we all worked together and had a very operational way of working which meant that, as Home Secretary, I had an open channel to speak directly to any chief, PCC or agencies at any time on relevant

matters.

This was an unprecedented time and I had a much more operational way of working across policing than any other Home Secretary. This was important, as I was known for my support and backing of police officers, often in difficult circumstances. I was intolerant of abuse and violence towards our officers which, during the pandemic, was rife, but this also meant we were able to problem-solve and confront challenges together and call upon the leadership of the National Police Chiefs' Council to work alongside the Home Office daily. I think it is vital for any Home Secretary to be able to have open and frank dialogue directly with police chiefs, which I did every day, and my approach enabled my department and I to plan ahead and where possible mitigate possible problem scenarios and concerns which could have wider consequences for public order and law enforcement.

One of my biggest fears during the pandemic was public unrest and protest. I remember the 2011 London riots, and I effectively said from the start of the pandemic, "We can't have a situation like that, where the public are locked down and then we could have civil disobedience and anarchy gripping our country".

The Chief Constable who held the national responsibility for the Public Order Brief was BJ Harrington [Ben-Julian Harrington QPM, Chief Constable, Essex Police (2018 onwards), an outstanding public order leader who was very focused on providing the insights and advice I required to make decisions and plan when protests did arise. Within the Home Office, our Scientific Officer in the department – Professor John Aston [Sir John Aston FRS, Chief Scientific Adviser and Director-General for Science, Technology, Analysis, Research and Strategy, Home Office (2017 – 2020)] from Cambridge University – was an excellent support, and Sir John provided thoughtful contextual insight on the wider COVID discussions, which enabled us all to plan for all eventualities based upon a range of scenarios we could anticipate from the public.

Chief Constable BJ Harrington knew from the outset, through my work with him, what my objectives were. His work would provide proactive and practical insights and considerations on what I would need to consider as Home Secretary based upon the trends and scenarios that were taking place and the recent undercurrents, including crime trends that we should be concerned about.

The pandemic was a dark time. In policing, we had several concerns affecting vulnerable people, and in particular women and children. Due to the pandemic, with people at home, my concerns turned towards the awful issue of domestic abuse, child abuse and harms which could go unnoticed and were therefore hidden harms.

Due to this, I was forthright about the need for our officers to go directly to the known vulnerable households in their communities and knock on the doors of known domestic abuse victims throughout the pandemic. We launched a campaign called 'Ask for ANI' (Action Needed Immediately), which was a codeword scheme to help victims of domestic abuse.

The scheme was developed by us with the help of partners including the domestic abuse sector, pharmacy associations and the police. It was launched across the UK on 14 January 2021 and helped us to shape the strategic priority of violence against women and girls. My team and I were very hands-on every day. I consistently had a very practical, open and honest relationship with my Chief Constables and the hierarchy in policing, and I think it gave the police confidence that they had a Home Secretary who was working with them, investing in them and supporting them to deliver, rather than undermining them and just being a commentator about policing issues.

What were the discussions that took place between you as Home Secretary and the police on protest?

We were never short of protest activity. From Just Stop Oil to Black Lives Matter, police forces across the country were under immense pressure due to these protests.

During the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests were difficult and a test of policing, both in London and nationwide. I had very good dialogue with both Steve House [Sir Stephen House QPM, Deputy Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2018 – 2022)] and Cressida Dick [Dame Cressida Dick QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2018 – 2022)] and also through the National Police Chiefs' Council – as these were national protests.

We had some weekends where police forces across the country were operationally activated, covering in excess of 150 protests across the country. I have explained the operational calls during the pandemic, and these applied to protest activity too.

We had one awful one in London, in Whitehall, which resulted in mass violence and thuggish violence.

Before all protests, as these were taking place during the pandemic, the National Police Chiefs' Council and I would issue firm statements that to join and participate in protests was unacceptable and would not help to reduce the spread of Covid, and that action would be taken against those who would break the law and threaten police officers.

During this protest, police officers were subject to violence, resulting in one officer being thrown off her horse as a bicycle was thrown at her. She was hospitalised and had dislocated her shoulder. This was appalling. Within days, I visited several officers who had been on duty that day and met with the husband and daughter of the injured officer.

Just Stop Oil was also another category of aggressive protesters who sought to bring civil disobedience and economic harm and disruption through their reckless activities. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill sought to address issues associated with the disruption we had experienced. Even the weekend before the second reading of this draft Bill, we had public order issues and protests in Bristol, resulting in a police station being attacked and police vans being burned.

I was unapologetic in my position on the Bill, but also on what police

officers needed to do in response to public order issues. My main objective that night, when I spoke to the Chief Constable, was to ensure that the people responsible for violence and disorder should face the full force of the law and the police had to find them.

It is worth noting that during the passage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, our proposals in relation to the measures in Part 3 of the Bill on public order and protest were defeated on 31 occasions in Parliament. There were 17 defeats in the House of Commons and 14 defeats in the House of Lords across all Bill stages, with Labour and other opposition parties (including the Lib Dems, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens) voting against on all occasions.

It is fair to say that opposition parties were the blockers of much-needed powers and reforms which would have strengthened policing across England and Wales.

Did you ever feel it necessary to use some of the harder power levers available to the Home Secretary – such as section 40 of the Police Act 1996?

I commissioned advice on the powers that I had as Home Secretary covering policing and the ability to take action against significant direct failures within policing. It was not unreasonable to commission such advice, as I was never going to wait for a crisis before I looked at what my levers were.

I was aware of the levers at my disposal and would always take and consider official advice, including advice from the Chief Inspector of Constabulary (Sir Thomas Winsor, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (2012 – 2022)], who was very knowledgeable and professional in his advice. As Chief Inspector, he was a critical eye, almost the 'tough cop', constantly pressing for better standards in policing with a focus on outcomes. I worked with him on a few areas. On police failures, I never hesitated in having tough conversations, framed in a way that would assert the authority of the Home Secretary, making it quite clear that I'm the one having to be publicly accountable, whether in Parliament or discussing these issues on the airwaves, and therefore we had to work to achieve the right outcomes.

Were there examples where, in being direct on what you wanted, Chief Constables would push back on that?

The Just Stop Oil protests were an absolute menace, causing endless disruption and excessive costs to policing. They infuriated me with their selfish arrogance and disregard of others when they sought to bring the country to a halt – whether stopping ambulances, people trying to get to medical appointments or get to work. I had many direct and robust conversations with police chiefs and I had push-back on issues as to what action should be taken against these protesters.

The damage they were causing, alongside additional police time, was astronomical, and my ministerial colleague Michael Ellis [Rt Hon Sir

Michael Ellis KC, Attorney General (2021& 2022)] pressed the police to secure injunctions via the Department for Transport to prevent these protesters from 'locking on' to the road network and motorway bridges and signs. Police chiefs pushed back at this, so Michael Ellis and I went on to develop our own work across Government to secure an injunction despite the Department for Transport originally being quite hesitant.

I also wanted the police to support us in bringing forward compensation orders against these disruptors whereby they would have to pay for their damage. On protests of this nature, I always questioned and challenged the police, asking them what they required – asking, "Tell me what powers you need? What are the gaps in the powers? What arrest powers do you need? What are they doing that basically is stopping the police from arresting them?" These were often difficult conversations. I also challenged Government lawyers and the Attorney General's Office department, who were often very slow at being forthcoming and more often than not did not provide solutions to the legal challenges we faced to empower and support our work and the police.

How would you redefine the concept of "operational independence"?
My mission was to make Police and Crime Commissioners much more accountable on the delivery of policing and the protection of our communities. That meant having policing plans that were locked into our priorities at a national level: the recruitment of 20,000 more police officers, the skills and development of our officers to tackle ever-changing crime picture and crime types, safer streets, shutting down county lines, pursuing hardened criminals responsible for violent crime, and ensuring that chiefs were held to account and focused on the people's priorities on law and order.

I do think there was a degree of 'politicisation' going on behind the scenes in the policing, which came from the top of policing through the National Police Chiefs' Council, on all the identity politics and what we would now term "Diversity, Equality and Inclusion" approaches, which became a distraction within policing from doing the proper job and getting on with the policing mandate.

This was increasingly emerging during my time and post-pandemic it became more of a visible issue which Police and Crime Commissioners should stop.

How would a Home Secretary deal with a specific individual within policing if they seemed determined to extend their role into a more political rather than operational dimension?
Question and challenge it.

What are the areas where a Chief Constable should be able to say something is a matter of "operational independence"?
A Chief Constable should never be able to tell a Home Secretary to keep out – that is just unacceptable. The Home Secretary of the day is accountable

to the public and Parliament and the relationship must be constructive, with the ability to challenge, question and be critical behind closed doors. My way of working is to find solutions to problems and not just cave in with those who resort to saying, "it's all too difficult". That is not an acceptable position for anyone to take in a position of leadership.

A Chief Constable is a national policing figure in the same way in which the Home Secretary is there to keep our country safe, and to give leadership to national policing and national security. The role of the Home Secretary is to give national leadership and direction.

Following the murder of Sarah Everard, I spoke to Dame Cressida Dick every day, some days we had more than one call to discuss what the police were doing on this case. This was harrowing as increasingly more detail emerged of the atrocities that had taken place.

Every Home Secretary should be in that position; and every Chief Constable should expect the fact that you could get a call from the Home Secretary any time of day or night on any pressing issue. I did the same when Just Stop Oil brought our national newspaper supply chains to a halt overnight when they locked themselves onto dangerous contraptions they had constructed on the sites of newspaper centres. I called Andy Cook [Sir Andrew Cooke QPM, Chief Constable, Merseyside Police (2016 – 2021)] at ten o'clock at night and two o'clock in the morning. I did the same with Charlie [Charlie Hall QPM, Chief Constable, Hertfordshire Constabulary (2016 – 2024)] from Hertfordshire and they were all highly professional in their responses, as were their teams who dealt with this challenging issue throughout the night and kept me directly informed with all updates.

As to whether there should be a red line on involvement – I can't say operations because this will always be subject to circumstances. I was always engaged and read all operational briefs that came to me and would always questions and ask for further calls or information.

I was never told to butt out and I had a good professional dialogue with PCCs and police chiefs.

Of course, there were occasions where I may have been told, "Sorry Home Secretary, we can't do that for very good reasons". Also, it might be areas where major counter-terrorism operations are underway and deployments are taking place within seconds, which is both operational independence and exercising professional judgement.

How did you as Home Secretary interact with the wider criminal justice system?

The Prime Minister, Boris Johnsion, was no nonsense when it came to law and order and also working with his secretaries of state to identify failures within the criminal justice system. He established the Crime and Justice Taskforce to bring together the Crown Prosecution Service, the Ministry of Justice, police Chief Constables, including PCCs, into one forum to work to change the delivery and outcomes of key aspects of the criminal justice system.

We covered the failure to get cases to court in a timely way and the lack

of justice for women on sexual crime, including rape prosecutions. I have mentioned the important work of Operation Soteria as one outcome that started to change ways of working, resulting in integrated case handling by the police and the CPS, all vital to secure prosecutions, but also how new technology, such the ability to download mobile phone content in such cases, was brought into many police forces. We were working together to reform the system and give victims their right to justice after many long-term failures within the system, which for too long has let the victims of crime down.

Suella Braverman

Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP was Home Secretary between 6 September 2022 and 19 October 2022 and 25 October 2022 and 13 November 2023. She also served as Attorney General. She has been the Member of Parliament for Fareham and then Fareham and Waterlooville since 2015.

What was your experience of the debates over police "operational independence" during your time as Home Secretary?

I don't think the current system is working. It would be very hard for a sitting Home Secretary to question the arrangements whilst in situ. I think the current arrangements are fundamentally broken. Ministers are elected and accountable for public safety, law and order, and ostensibly the police. Yet I would describe ministers as, to a large degree, powerless. So we have a real disconnect between the public's perception, between a mandate that you may be elected upon to deliver, and the operational reality. Because no Home Secretary, or even a Prime Minister, can direct a police officer or Chief Constable to do anything really. And the situation we're in now is that the police community – by that I mean the various forces, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing, the Inspectorate – they are all essentially hiding behind the shield of operational independence, vis-à-vis ministers.

My experience was that they would regularly pray in aid of operational independence when ministers were seeking better results, whether at a strategic level or otherwise. There are many examples during my tenure where that really played out, largely behind closed doors – but then it spilled out publicly with the issue of the pro-Palestinian marches.

And were there examples beyond the pro-Palestinian marches too?

Yes – to take an example of something fairly non-controversial: anti-social behaviour. Complaints about anti-social behaviour and complaints about the police failing to tackle anti-social behaviour sufficiently are perennial and very prevalent. As a local constituency MP, by far the biggest complaint I get from local people in regards to the police force is in relation to anti-social behaviour. As Home Secretary, when I went around the country and talked to victims of crime, and to rank and file police officers as well – although interestingly not police chiefs – they would say we know that people are really concerned about anti-social behaviour.

Whenever I was in conversations about how we fix this problem, the refrain would always come back from the police, "We need more powers", or, "We need more resources" and, "You cannot, Minister, direct me as a

Chief Constable to go and start arresting more perpetrators of anti-social behaviour".

They would say, "You're not allowed to direct me like that and even if you did I wouldn't follow it, because I am the lord of my manor, and I am the one who's responsible for my constabulary, and I am the one who will make the decisions on how we allocate resources and how I direct my teams and how we prioritise the way my police officers will respond to crime, and it's my view that we are a high harm force, and we are going to focus on more serious crime and anti-social behaviour is not a priority. We don't have the resources and the capacity to deal with that. So we don't really care about your new priority or what you've been elected on".

They wouldn't say it in such vivid terms, but this was the kind of sentiment that I would get and it illustrated the problem.

The Prime Minister and I were very interested in anti-social behaviour. We worked very closely with police chiefs to come up with an anti-social behaviour action plan. We consulted them. We said, "If we can't get you to arrest more people who are vandalising the public realm, what is it that we can do?" They replied, "You can change the powers on Public Spaces Protection Orders, or you can give us more money for neighbourhood policing and hotspot policing, or you can invest some money into youth services."

These are all important things. They were all part of our anti-social behaviour action plan, which we launched in the spring of 2023. But nowhere in that plan could we say every force is going to arrest, or is going to target, or is going to focus on anti-social behaviour. We would never be able to look at the data and say, "In this force anti-social behaviour has risen by 50% in the last year, so we want a target of a fall of 50%". We were never able to couch strategy in those terms; that was considered to be too directive and would have, according to the police, tied their hands far too much and would have been an encroachment on their concept and notion of operational independence.

So what we were left to do as ministers was give more resources and give more money for hotspot policing – which I believe in, as I think hotspot policing can work if it's used properly – so we did ramp up hotspot policing. The police were therefore given more funding from national Government to invest in more shifts and more officers to target difficult areas, but that's where it ended. That was money and resource without any accountability as to what the results would be. So, it was very difficult for us to really force improvement. If we were to have been judged on the success of that plan, I think it would have been difficult to measure success because of the shield of being operationally independent that the police hide behind.

That's one example where, when you're trying to as a minister deal with a national priority, it can be very difficult to mandate, direct and set targets whereby success can be measured.

Another example is drugs. I had a very keen interest in cannabis – I very much wanted the police to crack down on possession of cannabis,

much more, but there was nothing I could do. I was basically powerless in my fight against cannabis. I would talk to every Chief Constable and I would say, "Why aren't you arresting for possession?" and, "Why aren't you taking a tougher line on cannabis?" We'd already reclassified it to being a class B drug. Yet cannabis usage has now become practically decriminalised because people know they can get away with it. Yet all I could do was talk to the police – I could not direct. I could not change it.

With the example of protests and public order – was this something you discussed with the police, even before the pro-Palestinian marches became an issue?

Public order and protests was an example where operational independence became an unhelpful obstacle from the point of view of ministers. There's a mixed picture if you look at my tenure as Home Secretary when it comes to public order. At the beginning of my tenure, when I assumed office in 2022, the main public order issue we were grappling with was eco-protesters and Just Stop Oil. In the autumn of 2022, Just Stop Oil had adopted more bizarre tactics of slow walking and we were getting very regular incidents and complaints that were going viral. The protesters were slow walking in the street, causing huge traffic jams, and I considered it crossing the threshold into serious disruption.

The police were being criticised for not responding proactively enough – they were standing on the sidelines, not arresting quickly, they weren't interrupting the protest activity. There were also more extreme tactics by Just Stop Oil, where they blockaded the M25, hanging from the gantries and causing traffic jams for miles. There was concern about the approach that certain forces had taken. The police were being asked, "Why aren't you jumping in more quickly? Why aren't you arresting these people?"

They would say that there were two issues. First of all, that the law wasn't on their side. They would say, "You need to change the law. The threshold for what constitutes serious disruption is far too high and we believe just walking slowly in the middle of the road would not constitute a breach of the law under the Public Order Act, and therefore we don't feel we have a lawful basis on which to arrest".

Added to that was the College of Policing guidance, which was convoluted, complicated and totally ineffectual. It set out a multi-stage process of guidance on how the police officer should approach these situations: to inform the protester that they may be in breach of the law, to give them an opportunity to consider that, to let them exercise their human rights, to ensure they had another opportunity to consider whether they might find an alternative means of expressing their views, and so on.

Although heavily criticised at the time, Chief Constables would cite a lack of legal coverage and the College of Policing guidance, saying it made it very difficult for them to move more quickly. From a public perception perspective, as ministers we didn't look as if we were getting a grip of the issue, and there was a lot of public pressure on us as ministers to direct the police, to hold the police to account, to read the police the riot act, and get

them to step up, to pull their fingers out and do a better job.

There's nothing tangible there behind that, in terms of a tangible lever that a minister can pull to actually get the police to change their tactical approach. If the police take a view that the legal threshold is not met, even if, as a trained lawyer and former Attorney General, I presented a contrary legal view, they would not accept that. They would go to their lawyers or the Crown Prosecution Service, all of whom are generally quite risk-averse and very conservative in this area.

That might also be a consequence of litigation in the public order sphere, which was an abomination in relation to the Colston statue case or the Ziegler judgment – public order case law has been very unhelpful for the police.

The police would hug their very cautious legal advice closely, and no other view would be entertained. I thought that was an unreasonable position that they would generally take. When you're talking about questions of law, if you're getting a contrary legal view they at least need to consider that.

Were you able to present the police with alternative guidance or legal advice that might support a different approach to the one they were taking or would they would reject that?

On Just Stop Oil I didn't, I didn't get a full written opinion from a challenger lawyer, but I did consult my own internal lawyers at the department, and did get different advice which I presented to the police. Even having given that to the police, it didn't make any difference to them. They'd take it and they'd read it, but it didn't change anything.

They humour the process, and they go through the motions, but they wouldn't actually think, "Maybe it's more arguable than we thought, maybe we should take a chance, or change our risk appetite". They would be very loyal to their own internal advice.

With public order we changed the law – but I didn't have any other option to try and get the police to change their approach, so they won that battle. I wanted to solve the problem and said, "I'll do whatever I need to do. We will change the law and to try and give the police more powers and more scope". Which we did by secondary legislation. It's now very satisfying to see that Labour are adopting my policy, defending the Home Office position.

How did things change with the pro-Palestinian marches?

That's where you could say it worked well initially, albeit with a lot of work on the part of ministers. I did present the police with a formal, written alternative opinion, challenging their view on various things. At the outset of the marches, I wrote a letter to all of the forces, saying these are very serious public order matters. I said, "You must know that I'm behind you all the way to intervene, to maintain the peace and to arrest those who are criminally liable. Antisemitism is the same as racism. From the river to the sea, is a call for genocide, and it is hateful. It's racist. It's

just as bad as any other racist language that you're familiar with. My view is there should be zero tolerance."

I met with Mark [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 onwards)]. Mark Rowley was on holiday when the marches started so I also met with Lynne [Dame Lynne Owens QPM, Deputy Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 – 2025)]. I said to her that we needed zero tolerance – that we needed to make amends for the failures two years prior, when the convoy had gone through North London and there had been lots of antisemitism and Islamism shouted and paraded, and the Jewish community had felt very abandoned by the police.

The police felt chastened by that, and they said to me at the outset that we know we've got that wrong in the past. We really want to make it right, and we don't want to repeat that and we want to work with you and the community. So the police's original intentions were correct and I supported that. We were all on the same page.

As it transpired, week after week after week, particularly in London, marches were getting bigger; they were getting more aggressive, and particularly those first few weeks. We had the chanting of "jihad" by hundreds of people with the police taking no action; chanting "from the river to the sea" with the police taking no action; the firing of flares and fireworks with the police taking no action; scaling of scaffolding and war memorials with the police taking no action.

There were a few incidents where they arrested girls wearing the parachute logo, for example. A lot of the arrests were being done retrospectively – nothing in real time – thanks to the use of CCTV and investigations afterwards. The police had to apologise for someone on their strategy board who was involved with an extremist mosque and they were having to apologise for taking advice from someone who was a dubious character.

It was getting more and more fraught within Government. The Prime Minister himself was very alive to these issues. We were having regular meetings in the Cabinet Room in Downing Street, chaired by the Prime Minister, including the Met Commissioner, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Attorney General, the Ministry of Justice, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing. Everyone was trying to work together – including COBRA meetings about it.

Policing was increasingly being seen as a security issue because of the extremism elements involved during the marches, but ultimately it was impossible for ministers behind closed doors to get a change in approach from the police. Mark Rowley [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 onwards)], I think, went into the media and said something like, "I'm not going to enforce against bad taste, I'm here to enforce the law". And he would hide behind the shield of operational independence, but also the law needing to be changed. He would say: "The law needs to be changed. If you want me to go and arrest them for chanting "jihad", you need to change the law, Minister". That refrain was made again, and ministers were powerless. We were not able, right up to

the Prime Minister in the Cabinet Room in Downing Street, with all the top ministers from the country – the most powerful people supposedly regulating and managing this issue – no minister was able to secure a change of approach from the police. And the approach that they wanted to take was that they were entitled to take without any kind of challenge or questioning or suggestion from ministers.

It came to a head over Armistice Day. There is a power in the Public Order Act for the march to be banned – this had been used previously by Theresa May – in relation to an EDL march in the 2010s. The process in the legislation is one that preserves operational independence.

We were looking at France – because in France, the interior minister had banned marches in the run-up to the end of October and I think in a few other European nations as well. There was a lot of public clamour and public pressure on me personally – and on the Prime Minister – to ban the marches.

The Jewish community were feeling more isolated and victimised. Antisemitism was skyrocketing and there was a very intense atmosphere of disappointment and dismay with the politicians and the police. We were having daily meetings on the subject with the police but the shutters would come down, and operational independence would be the shield behind which the police would retreat. So, we were left to only be able to ask questions about the policing plans. If a march was coming up that Saturday, we would ask questions and probe the plan, the route, whether there were sufficient police resources, the conditions the police were going to impose. We could never suggest or instruct which conditions to be applied. We'd be updated subsequently of any arrests; but ministers were emasculated and we were able to voice our disappointment. I remember one particular meeting when most of the Home Office Ministers joined that meeting, and it was a very difficult meeting for the police. All of the Home Office Ministers were really frustrated, disappointed and quite angry with insufficient response by the police.

What is the change that needs to be made?

I don't know what the specific answer is, but ministers do need to have some increased level of directional power over the police. Because, at the moment, it's so extreme that ministers have zero power – other than money and changing the law, there's nothing that a minister can do to direct or encourage different kinds of outcomes.

I'm very conscious of that being used in the wrong way, so this is why I don't have the clear answer to the question, because obviously a wholly politicised police force that was at the beck and call of a minister is not the right answer either. But the current situation is not working.

In relation to the banning of the march, the legislation says a march can be banned but that process is such that it has to be instigated by the Chief Constable. He has to consider whether there might be a risk of serious violence and that he wouldn't be able to sufficiently police the march to prevent that. On that basis, he must then ask permission from the Home

Secretary for the march to be banned. So it's not right to say the Home Secretary can ban a march. I would have to wait for that request from the Met Commissioner to come to me. I believe that should have been reversed. My proposal was that the law should have been changed to allow a minister to initiate that process – if they, in their opinion, considered that a march posed the risk of serious violence.

The Home Secretary has the power to direct a local policing body (usually the Police and Crime Commissioner) under Section 40 of the Police Act 1996, did you ever consider using that power?

The first thing I asked when I went into the Home Office was, what are my powers, what are my levers, what can I actually use to force change and secure outcomes? That Section 40 power was presented to me with a very clear health warning: that it has never been used, it's a nuclear option – it is basically declaring war on a police force and saying you have absolutely no confidence in that police force, and you are basically putting it into special measures. And there has to be a very compelling case for wholesale failure in that police force, and there's no other option but for you to go in and intervene.

And did you ever consider using that?

I did consider using it. I did ask whether the thresholds had been met. I looked into it in quite a lot of detail in one incident. But it was considered to be the nuclear option – wholly radical. I was told that I wouldn't want to be the Home Secretary who goes down in history for using this power. The orthodox view in the Home Office and policing was that that power is an in extremis power that requires a very high threshold of necessity and disaster before it is deployed.

How were you as Home Secretary able to hold police to account for crime performance?

There is the National Policing Board where the Home Secretary can bring everyone around the table. I would chair those once a quarter and it's all the main players: Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, National Police Chiefs' Council, College of Policing, Independent Office for Police Conduct, National Crime Agency, the Metropolitan Police and various NPCC spokesmen for their issues. That's where you can set your strategic priorities and check in on where you are on previous priorities. But again it's only words – warm words or strong words, perhaps.

For example, with violence against women and girls and looking at the levels of investigations of rape – the numbers being so low, the time it's taking is too long, prosecutions are taking far too long and conviction rates are really low – this all has to change. You can set out quite a detailed plan and you can keep urging. You can say, "This is what I really care about, I'm going to check in next time and I'm not going to be very happy if we haven't shown improvement" – but that's it. It's words and it's formalities and it's lip service.

Is that the same as the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR)?
There's no obligation on them to do anything specific about the SPR. You can't set goals, you can't set targets, you can't set any consequence for failure to meet targets.

So I would be very interested in something that gave ministers more directional power to mandate, if necessary, to say, for example, this force is failing on knife crime – they need to start using their stop and search powers, we're going to track the use of stop and search powers, we need to see them achieve some kind of goal on this.

Do you think that needs a legislative change, or that Government could just do that?
A suggestion like that would provoke howls of anguish from the police and it would be criticised for intruding upon the sacrosanct notion of operational independence, so I think you would need some form of legislation to give it legitimacy.

How long do you think it will be before the new Government will face issues similar to the ones you faced?
Well, look at the summer 2024 riots. They are a very interesting experience for this new Government. They were frustrated, I think, with the police – just from the commentary and Mark Rowley's reaction. I think he got quite tetchy publicly about it all. If you look at how the police responded, there were very swift arrests, there were high numbers of arrests, and there was very swift resolution of the cases. It seems to me that the policing and the criminal justice system have responded very keenly to Ministerial sentiments.

Why do you think that is?
I don't know why that is. Is that because it's a new Government, and everyone's very keen, and they will want to work with this Government well, and they want to really take the sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary really seriously? Or is it that there has been some kind of direction that we've not been aware of publicly? Or is it actually independent of ministerial input, and is it just the natural inclination of the police to respond more quickly and robustly to these kinds of riots? I don't know.

There has been a shift – a difference in the relationship operationally, because the ministers have come out saying there needs to be a very swift and robust response to these incidents, and the police have responded in kind.

Now that didn't really happen for several years under the previous administration. Ministers would come out and say, well, the Just Stop Oil marches and the Extinction Rebellion marches are very bad and these need to be improved. And nothing's changed.

They've come out and said violence against women and girls has to be tackled more seriously, nothing's really changed.

Ministers have come out time and time again saying knife crime and stop and search need to be prioritised – knife crime statistics are not in a good state and stop and search needs to be used. Yet nothing's happened on the ground.

Ministers have been saying one thing and the police have not been responding in the desired way. Yet the first example here, we've got ministers sending out clear objectives and what they want and their consternation; and the police have stepped up. I don't know what is behind that dynamic.

Did you have a sense of you having, as Home Secretary, a police chief who acted as a chief policing adviser on policing?

I had a good relationship with Andy Cooke [Sir Andrew Cooke, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (2022 – 2026)] and I liked him. I know he's criticised me recently, especially in relation to operational independence, but I actually thought that he was very much aligned with my objectives of getting back to basics and of focusing on the bread and butter law and order issues. I felt that he was someone who had a lot of experience and I did talk to him quite a lot.

What do you think about the broader role of the Home Secretary around crime and justice?

Independence from ministers is also an issue in the context of the Crown Prosecution Service and the Attorney General. They jealously guard their legal independence. You've got the most senior lawyer in the land in the form of the Attorney General and then you've got the Director of Public Prosecutions.

On any given matter, the Attorney General cannot provide a challenging legal opinion to suggest to the Director of Public Prosecutions that they should take a different view. That would be seen as not having confidence in the DPP. That would be seen as undermining the role of the DPP and breaching the notion of their independence. I saw that as Attorney General. I disagreed with the DPP at times on certain issues, but I had to respect his legal view and I was not able to take a different view or to look behind his legal opinion on any incident.

And, again with the judges – judges are an empire of their own, and woe betide any minister who seeks to look behind decisions made by a judge on individual cases, and I would agree with that. I don't think ministers should go behind individual judgments. But that notion of judicial independence has vastly expanded, so that even on the issue of listing, for example, which is absolutely critical to the functioning of the criminal justice system, they even claim judicial independence on that issue. The minister might be paying for the courts budgets, but is apparently not to dare come and say how listing cases should be done. They would not take any instruction or guidance from ministers on how they allocate resources to hear cases, and that was one of the reasons why we haven't been able to get through the backlog in the Crown Court.

Is there a sense in which operational independence has prevented ministers being involved in areas which are explicitly political?
Yes, for example, I could ask, "Why do you have all these community networks?" I wanted a report on these groups. I wanted the police and officials to go through them. So we started a piece of work on those groups – I wanted proper vetting and I wanted to shut down a lot of them. The police pleaded operational independence with that and they said you can't come in and tell us which groups we set up in a police force and whether we engage with this minority group or not. That's crossing the line. So that's why I had to go to the Inspectorate. They take about a year to do a proper report, so it's very hard to get and wait for recommendations to come out from an inspection review and then on the back of that take action. But that was my only lever, because I could direct the inspector to complete a report. So you can make a bit of noise about it, you can signal that this is something you're not going to be happy with.

If you talk to Andy Cooke, he would say the Inspectorate should have more powers because he says he's written hundreds of reports with thousands of recommendations but nothing happens if the recommendations don't get done. So that's an illusion, because it's only a semblance of a lever. Admittedly everyone's a bit agitated with being inspected and being in the spotlight – they pull their socks up and make sure they're on their best behaviour. And a report will come out, there might be a few headlines and a few reports or some discussion – even criticism or a bit of embarrassment. But no one's being sacked on the back of an inspection report.

Perhaps the question is, what would Chief Constables not consider to be operational independence?
Well exactly. The way Chief Constables view the department and the minister is as a source of cash and someone they can lobby to change the law. And in their eyes that is what we are there for. But that's not obviously how one would see it as a minister – you go in saying, "I want to tackle anti-social behaviour and I want to tackle violence against women and girls. I've got to work with the police and we're going to set a plan; we're going to get some targets and we're gonna meet those targets. I'm gonna hold them to account."

Is there a perception amongst the public that the Home Secretary should be capable of doing something more than you're describing?
The problem with this situation is that you are still held to account, because no one's going to call the Met Police Commissioner up. He has some panels and there are various committees that will question him, but they won't sack him, they can't withdraw his funding – they can't really hurt him. You might get a few negative headlines here and there, but ultimately, as long as he commands the confidence of the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Mayor, then he's safe. So, he can get away with it.

Again, with another force you need quite a big falling out, a big problem before a Police and Crime Commissioner will dismiss a Chief Constable – or if their term just comes to an end they don't renew it.

So, the Minister is hauled periodically to the despatch box and criticised for falling rates of prosecution – for conviction rates for rape or increasing anti-social behaviour – and yet you are powerless. You are accountable, but you are powerless.

But you also need to mitigate against an overzealous Minister, who then politicises the system and says, "I want the Met Commissioner to go and arrest, for example every gender-critical woman?" That could be the consequence of a change – so I don't know what the answer is, but something definitely needs to be talked about and explored on how we fix it.

James Cleverly

Rt Hon Sir James Cleverly MP was Home Secretary between 13 November 2023 and 5 July 2024. He also served as Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for Education. He has been the Member of Parliament for Braintree since 2015.

As Home Secretary how much time were you able to spend on crime and policing compared to other priorities?

I'm conscious that I wasn't Home Secretary for very long. The two big topic areas that dominated whilst I was Home Secretary were a relatively even split between: border control – typically small boats and illegal migration – and the policing side of the portfolio. Obviously, there were lots of other bits of the portfolio – including counter-terrorism – that had a significant part of my attention; but they were the two really big areas.

Border control, because it was very much in the news and in the lead up to a general election it dominated the conversation – and it was something that, quite understandably, the Prime Minister and Number 10 team were very focused on. That was something that the country is very focused on, and when everyone's concentrating on it, obviously, as Home Secretary you have to concentrate on it too.

Then on the policing side, there were a number of things: the pro-Palestinian protests and the ripple effect of issues emanating from those; the trial, which didn't resolve until after the general election, of the police officer who had been involved in a fatal shooting and a lot of concern amongst police officers about use of force.

So, we had the Use of Force Review and the Criminal Justice Bill that we were putting through the House, with a whole load of stuff in there about police accountability after the Couzens misconduct issues. There were a cluster of policing related things that were quite acute, on top of focusing on policing the crime types that people care about.

How did your work interact with that of Chief Constables?

For a number of completely legitimate reasons, my relationship with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner was the most regular and most intensive. Some of that was driven by the circumstances, because the protests were predominantly happening in London and there was a lot of political chatter about the nature of the policing response to those protests, and I wasn't always happy with how the Met were dealing with those protests.

I found myself interacting with the Commissioner as a result. I've known Mark [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police

(2022 onwards)] from old, before I became an MP, having been on the old Metropolitan Police Authority in the London Assembly, so I'd seen him earlier on his career, and I knew him. I think we trusted each other professionally. That doesn't mean we always agreed, but we knew each other, and I think we had a good working relationship which then meant that I worked with him more regularly than I probably would have done with other Chief Constables.

Of course, the Home Office is in London, and the Met are the dominant UK police force and a whole lot of non-territorial national policing functions sit within the Met, so I would have a much more regular set of conversations with Mark as the Commissioner of the Met that I would with any other Chief Constable. And then there were other Chief Constables who I would meet through their role as a various portfolio holder in the National Police Chiefs' Council. The portfolio lead on public order policing, the portfolio lead on armed policing and the portfolio lead on counter-terrorism are people that that I met with quite regularly. And then we had periodic round tables which were driven predominantly through the National Police Chiefs' Council.

Had I been in the job longer, I'm sure I would have had the opportunity to kind of work through all the various constabularies and would have, at least in part, had some face time with perhaps all of the Chief Constables eventually. But because it was a relatively short period of time, and because of the dominance of certain issues, I'd find myself talking to certain Chief Constables more than others – less to do with the geography and more to do with the portfolios.

When you weren't content with the police's actions on protest, how did you address this?

We'd have fairly regular meetings, so Mark [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 onwards)] would come into the Home Office – probably half a dozen times during my time. We would quite often talk on the phone. It wasn't always me being critical, but it was a constantly evolving situation.

To be fair to the police, they were dealing with a fairly unprecedented set of circumstances: protests at that scale that were regularly putting huge pressure in terms of managing the workforce in terms of leave and mutual aid. Some of it was just about the logistics of how you keep the policing function for the country going when so much of its attention, not just of the Met but of the forces providing mutual aid, was directed to these very large-scale protests.

Some of it was just logistics, in terms of what I could do as Home Secretary to help manage those pressures. Some of it was feeding back the responses that I'd been getting, some of the criticisms – from political colleagues, community groups, Jewish groups, local residents that came into me as Home Secretary – that I was then translating to feedback to the Met. And some of it was just my personal views on what they were doing right and what they were doing wrong – where they got the emphasis

wrong, where I thought they should put more focus.

I had a good relationship with Mark [Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police (2022 onwards)] and a relationship good enough that I felt I could speak very frankly with him and vice versa, and that we wouldn't end up reading each other's words in the papers the following morning. And I've always felt that is a much, much, much healthier way of doing it. My instinct has always been to praise publicly and to criticise privately. You can't always be a purist about that, and sometimes you have to be critical publicly, but my view is on the occasions where that had to happen again the police officers involved, whether it be the Met Commissioner or whoever shouldn't read about it first – they should be aware that I'm going to be critical of this.

When you said things should be done differently did you see a change in the police's operational approach?

This is an interesting exercise, because in the strict chain of command or formal accountability chief police officers do not have a formal line of accountability to the Home Secretary. You've got Police and Crime Commissioners and in a number of the big metropolitan regions, it's done through the mayor's office.

But, the reality is the Home Secretary is regarded as being accountable for policing in the UK, and that is totally appropriate, and therefore you have to manage some kind of relationship whereby, without stepping on toes of the formal lines of accountability, I'm able to say, "That is going well, or that is going badly, that is going differently." But ultimately, the Chief Constables are constitutionally well within their rights to turn around and say, "Look, that's very interesting, but you are not my boss".

And did you ever have occasions where that was said to you?

I never tried, because I was very conscious of that relationship. I never tried to direct the Chief Constables, because I knew that I couldn't turn round to a Chief Constable and say, "I am ordering you to do that thing or to stop doing that thing". And I knew that they knew that. What I was able to do, and what I did do, is to say, "You are seeing this from a particular viewpoint – an operational policing viewpoint – and you are the expert in operational policing, I am not – but you should also listen to friendly, critical voices like mine when we are saying that you're seeing it wrong, or we think you're doing it wrong. Take that on board, because it comes from a good place. It comes from a collective desire to improve the performance, the trust and the confidence in policing and to reassure communities or individuals who currently are not feeling secure".

Framing it like that meant that I was able to have direct, robust conversations because I didn't have that command relationship. It's not as if everything I said automatically became new policing policy, and that wasn't what I was trying to achieve. But I did highlight some things that I thought were lacking, some risk appetite that I thought was wrongly calibrated. And over the time that I was Home Secretary, I saw a

demonstrable change in the policing response, particularly to the protests – and we saw the police being more robust, more willing to make arrests, less willing to allow very distasteful language to be publicly chanted.

If I had my way, I think I would have wanted them to go a bit further still, but nevertheless, I could see the direction of travel was what I thought was in the right place. And in general, the public feedback was positive. I don't think I was trying to push the police in the wrong direction and it seemed that the public response and the political response to that change of tone was generally positive. So, I do feel vindicated.

What are the other mechanisms that you used as Home Secretary to influence what the police did and what they focused on?

One of the things about being the Home Secretary is that when you make public statements, the leadership of UK policing listens to what you say, in whatever forum you say it – whether you say it at the despatch box, or a speech to the Police Federation or the National Police Chiefs' Council, or even just in the round table meetings that we'd often have with senior police officers. That cascades through policing. I was quite impressed by how quickly the things that I was saying as Home Secretary were then being fed back to me by police officers saying, "I know you feel very strongly about this issue", because I'd said it in a speech or an article.

You don't have an instant ability to affect how policing works – it's a series of very large organisations and big organisations always take time to change. I was very impressed by how quickly people would say, "I know you are very focused on this, and I know you're prioritising that". That cascaded through the system very quickly, which I found quite positive.

Was that more the case than other ministerial roles that you had?

Well, it's difficult for me to compare because my ministerial career has predominantly been in the Foreign Office. With the diplomatic network you're tending to talk mainly about the external rather than the internal – so when you're foreign secretary or a Foreign Office minister, you are talking about America, or you're talking about China, or you're talking about Africa, or you're talking about the Middle East. So you're talking outwards rather than inwards. As Home Secretary, I could make a speech about criminals, but really the people I'm talking to are those inside the tent – I'm talking to senior police officers. So it's hard to make a credible comparison in terms of the influence you'd have on the organisation.

At the Foreign Office I would say, "This is my priority", and the diplomatic network would very, very quickly get on top of that, because, of course, it's their job to amplify and rebroadcast your words internationally. So, it's their job to listen carefully and repeat externally. That's not the job of police officers, and I was quite pleased how quickly they understood what my prioritisation was about.

Should the national counter-terrorism functions stay with the Metropolitan Police, or should those functions be split off elsewhere?
The need for cross-border coordination on those issues is absolutely key. Seeing these operations play out, it was very integrated; and when you see that happening it reinforces one of my beliefs, in that you can get obsessed with structures and sometimes miss the opportunity to just to recognise that relationships work. If the people on the payroll of the different organisations had been very compartmentalised, those operations would not have been as successful.

When you witness good levels of integration, you realise: am I tripping over myself to rework the structures? Because organisational change always impacts delivery in the short-term, there may well be medium to long-term benefits, but in the short term there is always a price to pay. But that said, particularly when resources are tight, and a lot of the national policing functions that the Met holds can put financial pressure on the territorial policing side of the Met, I can absolutely see the argument for saying, "Let's have London's police force policing London", and then national police functions coming together in one organisation. I can see the arguments in both directions.

I'm unconvinced that a structural reorganisation would be the silver bullet that some people think it would be, because I doubt very many counter-terrorism officers would start their policing careers within a national function. They're going to be coming from the constabularies around the country. So, you have this national organisation in brackets, "poaching" people from the Metropolitan Police or Greater Manchester, or the West Midlands, or South Yorkshire. You will have boundary frictions – an awful lot of the activity of a national CT function would be in London, Manchester, the West Midlands or South Yorkshire, and so that national function would have to develop a close working relationship with those forces in particular, and that already happens. I can see some real benefits in tidying up financial accountability and other areas, but I'm not convinced it would be the silver bullet that some people think it would be.

If the inter-relationship between specialist functions and regional forces started to fray, then the argument for a ring-fenced national organisation would enhance.

The final point on this is governance. If you build a national force around the National Crime Agency, who would have the direct line of accountability? Would it be straight to the Home Secretary? Would you then need to create a day-to-day governance function in addition to the other functions of the existing constabularies?

I can see some benefits, but I'm not convinced it would be the slam dunk road to improvement.

What were your dealings with Police and Crime Commissioners?
I had a fair bit of dealings with them – some more than others. I think the public understanding, even though they've been in place for a while, of

the role of Police and Crime Commissioners is still not great.

Taking the Met, for example, my inbox and the comments sections of my social media would be filled with comments that indicated that people felt that I basically had political control over the Metropolitan Police.

And I kind of get it, but there were a number of times when I felt like shouting at the television, or responding to interview questions saying, "The Mayor of London is the directly responsible politician for the Metropolitan Police".

Was there the same expectation with other forces?

A bit. Ultimately, when something big happens the expectation is the Home Secretary is all over that. If it's a big story or an important issue then the spotlight swings to the Home Office and the Home Secretary and I don't think you're ever going to be change that.

Given the Government's plans, what should replace Police and Crime Commissioners?

You definitely have to have local accountability. I was a fan of Police and Crime Commissioners. I thought we should have done more to make it better understood what their functions were. Ultimately, our system does not have the Home Office running police forces. If someone wants to make the argument that UK policing is run out of a series of offices in Marsham Street [the location of the Home Office Headquarters building in Westminster] then good luck with making that case, because I'm not at all convinced that would be the right answer.

You've got to have some local structure. The pre-existing police authorities really had no credible accountability. If your police force was doing well or doing badly, who do you reward or punish? You vote for your local county councillor who may or may not sit on that force's police authority? There's nobody, and for me the golden thread in democracy is that it should be clear who has done a good job or who has done a bad job at a political level; and you should be able to reward or punish someone at the ballot box. That did not happen with the old police authority model.

Because the rollout of Mayors is going to be much slower than the Government thinks, we're going to have this weird period of time where voters have no idea who is responsible for the political leadership of their police force, and that can't be a good thing. Even though that might not be for very long, if something catastrophic happened in the police force area and the people in that area said, "This is unacceptable. Whose neck is on the chopping block?" And someone stands up and says, "Well, nobody"; I think that is corrosive for public confidence in the system. That's why I liked Police and Crime Commissioners. Because even though they weren't well known, if something happened the spotlight swings to the Police and Crime Commission and the bottom line is that is where the buck stops.

If you can't say that with clarity, that puts us in a difficult situation. Having the points of accountability jump straight from Braintree High Street to the Home Secretary's desk is just not credible, so you need that

local accountability.

As Home Secretary what did you have to do with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary?
I probably had six meetings with him over my nine months as Home Secretary. I had a good relationship with him. I think that's an important relationship. The inherent contradiction in his role is if it was perceived by UK policing that he was the Home Secretary's spy in policing, that would make it very difficult for that role to function properly. By the same token, it is his job to make sure that the Home Secretary has a really accurate idea of what's working well and what's working badly.

Having someone from a strong policing background in that oversight function is important. That needs to evolve so there is more of a seamless relationship between the Inspectorate and the Home Office and simultaneously maintaining that close working relationship between the Inspectorate and forces.

There is much more pressure on the Home Secretary to be seen to be intervening with policing functions and I'm not sure that's a good thing. I'm not sure you can reverse that, but I think that potentially disempowers Police and Crime Commissioners, if the Home Secretary feels compelled to bypass them to get a grip. If a journalist says, "Why isn't the Home Secretary dealing with this?" it's not a credible response to say, "There's a Police and Crime Commissioner, it's their job". The right answer is that it was my job to make sure the Police and Crime Commissioner was doing their job, and it was their job to make sure the Chief Constable was doing their job, and it's the Chief Constable's job to make sure the frontline officers are doing their job. Whilst that is absolutely true, if the Home Secretary stood up and said this people would be very critical.

So, the times of the Chief Inspector of Constabulary having a quiet word with the Chief Constable; it is just too slow and diffuse – it's of a different age.

It's a really important relationship. It would have been very difficult to do my job as Home Secretary, effectively, if I didn't have a good working relationship with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary.

The end of your time as Home Secretary coincided with the General Election, was there any kind of handover with your successor?
It's a funny system. We think it's normal, but our transition of power in the UK system is not normal. It is very weird compared to international comparisons. I knew the exact point at which I had been replaced as Home Secretary because the mobile phone provided to me by the Home Office did a remote hard reboot.

I recognised, "Oh, I am no longer Home Secretary", because up until that point, if there'd been a need for an emergency warrant, I would have still had to do that right up to when my phone did the reset. At that point Yvette Cooper became responsible for everything that I had been responsible for.

I've always got on, on a personal level, with Yvette [Rt Hon Yvette

Cooper MP, Home Secretary (2024-2025)], and when we came back to Parliament I made a point of congratulating her and recognising it's a tough job. I wished her all the best because every single one of us has a vested interest in the Home Secretary doing a good job. I said that she would have lots of people giving advice and, "If you need to pick my brains on anything I would be more than happy to".

Having that continuity of the civil service is an important part of our system that doesn't exist in a lot of other systems.

Is there anything that we've not covered that you think is really important?

It feels like the role is becoming more intense, with an expectation that the Government, as personified in the Home Secretary, needs to deal with kind of everything. I used to joke the contrast between being Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary is that, for the Foreign Secretary lots of things are your problem, but very rarely do people think it's your fault. With the Home Office, you get blamed for everything, and it's really striking how things that I had no control over as Home Secretary, if something's happened in the UK, it must be your fault. That drives a drive to be on top of everything all the time.

If you try and be hands-on with everything, you're constantly responsive and you're never proactive, and that cannot be the right answer. By the same token, if you try and say, "This is not for me to deal with, this is for others to deal with", you look detached and uncaring. I don't think there's an obvious sweet spot between not being so run ragged that you become ineffective and not being so strategic that you feel as if you're detached. Had I been in the job longer, maybe I would have found a balance point – I'm not convinced I got that balance quite right. I don't think Yvette [Rt Hon Yvette Cooper, Home Secretary (2024 – 2025)] got that balance quite right. I'm not sure Shabana [Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP, Home Secretary (2025 onwards)] is getting that quite right. Maybe it's just not possible. Maybe that's the nature of the job.

Appendix – Dates of Interviews

Kenneth Baker: 12 January 2026

Kenneth Clarke: 28 April 2026

Michael Howard: 24 February 2025

Jack Straw: 29 May 2024

David Blunkett: 1 July 2024

Charles Clarke: 7 May 2024

Jacqui Smith: 10 May 2024

Alan Johnson: 23 March 2026

Theresa May: 10 February 2026

Amber Rudd: 8 May 2024

Sajid Javid: 23 April 2024

Priti Patel: 4 April 2024

Suella Braverman: 10 September 2024

James Cleverly: 13 January 2026

Appendix – Dates of Office as Home Secretary

Kenneth Baker: 28 November 1990 – 10 April 1992

Kenneth Clarke: 10 April 1992 – 27 May 1993

Michael Howard: 27 May 1993 – 2 May 1997

Jack Straw: 2 May 1997 – 8 June 2001

David Blunkett: 8 June 2001 – 15 December 2004

Charles Clarke: 15 December 2004 – 5 May 2006

John Reid*: 5 May 2006 – 27 June 2007

Jacqui Smith: 27 June 2007 – 5 June 2009

Alan Johnson: 5 June 2009 – 11 May 2010

Theresa May: 12 May 2010 – 13 July 2016

Amber Rudd: 13 July 2016 – 29 April 2018

Sajid Javid: 30 April 2018 – 24 July 2019

Priti Patel: 24 July 2019 – 6 September 2022

Suella Braverman: 6 September 2022 – 19 October 2022 & 25 October 2022 – 13 November 2023

Grant Shapps*: 19 October 2022 – 25 October 2022

James Cleverly: 13 November 2023 – 5 July 2024

*: Those Home Secretaries not interviewed on the record for this collection.

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