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This idea was silly at the beginning and is sillier now

CAROL PEARSON



The election for police commissioners takes place on November 15. As silly ideas go, it remains a pretty silly one – the brainchild of someone who watched too many American cop shows in their misspent youth. I'd still put money on Teresa May calling the whole thing off.

Some commissioners will, of course, turn out to be conciliatory, experienced and successful. But there's the potential for an Olympic scale wrestling match between commissioners and chief constables without the benefit of a referee. It's a blank slate, untried and untested.

Imagine the following scenario: new police commissioner, elected on an anti-speed camera platform, meets experienced chief constable for the first time. They shake hands, pour coffee and sit down.

"Right," says the commissioner waving a copy of his manifesto. "These speed cameras. How soon can we switch them off?"

The chief constable frowns. "Well, there's a lot of evidence they cut road deaths..."

"But I campaigned to get rid of them. So that's what we're going to do."

"And the income from speed awareness courses?" inquires the chief constable mildly. "It's quite considerable. How do you intend to replace that?"

The elected commissioner shrugs: "I think that's your problem, isn't it?"

And, of course, if the relationship breaks down entirely, the commissioner can always remove the chief constable from office (as long as legal procedures are followed). Boris has already done it twice in London.

Modern British policing was the creation of Robert Peel. In 1829 he replaced military institutions with a service that brought together the protection of property and the protection of rights. This became policing by consent: discretionary powers wielded by one free citizen over another. The office of constable is a constitutional one; they are not employees but servants of the crown. For almost 200 years this has protected policing from outside interference and political control. The arrival of commissioners alters all that and chips away at operational independence.

Last week the Electoral Reform Society warned that the election process itself was beginning to look



CHANGE: After November 15, our police force will be under the control of an elected commissioner.

like a "perfect storm". They cited low voter turnout and poorly thought through legislation.

"Those pulling the strings haven't done their homework," said the society's chief executive. She predicted a complete shambles.

There are 41 police authorities. Of the selections to date, about a third are likely to be straight Labour-Conservative fights. The results will mostly depend on the standing of the government at the time of the election. Anyone inclined to deliver a good kicking to the coalition will vote accordingly.

As for the remaining two-thirds, the LibDems have yet to declare their intentions and there is a shifting and unpredictable population of independent candidates. I say shifting because several contenders have already faced disqualification.

Serving magistrates were ruled out a couple of weeks ago – and then ruled back in. Who didn't think that through during the parliamentary stages of the bill? Then there's the problem of minor criminal convictions acquired several decades ago when grown men – who now hold down important jobs – were sowing their youthful wild oats. At least three well-placed and high profile candidates have been excluded on this basis.

On the other hand, Kevin Carroll from Luton, co-leader of the English Defence League, is still in the running because his public order conviction was never classed as an imprisonable offence. The good judgment of the Bedfordshire electorate is going to be needed to sort that out.

Norfolk will probably have at least one contender who's an Independent. In what is reported to be a messy selection, the Conservative party settled for an ex-military man, James Athill.

At the hustings, candidates were

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apparently asked how they would handle a situation in which the police were telling them one thing and the public something else. Three of the applicants spoke about complexity and balance. The fourth, Mr Athill, said: "I will be answering to the public." In these difficult times commissioners are going to face stark choices and some decisions will require the judgment of Solomon. Being an inexperienced newcomer to the world of policing won't be particularly comfortable. And it won't be enough to argue slavish obedience to public opinion, because public opinion isn't always right. A decade ago, you may recall, there was a national campaign to introduce Sarah's Law aimed at naming and shaming sex offenders. Residents in Portsmouth took to the streets in an outbreak of violence and vigilantism.

A doctor from South Wales was targeted by people who thought paediatricians were the same thing as paedophiles.

I mean, what do most of us really know about the subtlety of the law or about serious and organised crime or about rape detection rates?

The government claims its planned cuts of 20pc will still protect front line services. But much of the hard work of policing goes on out of sight behind the scenes. It's intelligence led – the methodical piecing together of strands of information over weeks and months to guarantee a successful drugs bust or a well put together fraud case. There's never going to be a public or press-led outcry about intelligence led policing. "What do we want? More intelligence led policing. When do we want it? Now!" Does it sound plausible to you?

Chief constables have been balancing this stuff for nearly 200 years. My personal instinct is we should let them get on with it.

PETER TRUDGILL



They don't know their Rs from their elbows

In February last year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a play in the Afternoon Drama slot which was called Children's Crusade – Memoirs of a Teenage Radical.

It was widely thought to be a good play. And it was set in Norwich.

Afterwards, the BBC was inundated with complaints sent in by Norfolk listeners. These complaints found their way to the office of the Radio 4 programme Feedback.

They contacted our very own Keith Skipper, who then referred them to me. They sent me a recording of the programme, and I was invited to go down to the BBC studios at the Forum and record a segment for the programme.

I was interviewed from London by the amiable presenter, Roger Bolton, who was very sympathetic to the Norfolk complainers' case. Their objections, as you will have guessed by now, were to the accents the actors had used. What did I think, asked Roger. Had they got the Norfolk accent right?

I said not only did the actors not get the accents right – they didn't even seem to be trying. If they had tried and got it wrong, at least we could have given them credit for that. But anyone turning on the play half-way through would have been certain that it was set at least 200 miles away from Norwich, probably in Dorset.

At the end of the segment, Roger read out a statement from the BBC saying: "We are keen to vary the settings of our dramas, and some accents are more difficult to find than others. There are numerous considerations when going through the casting process, but we always start by looking for authentic accents. We know we didn't get it right this time, but hope this did not spoil listeners' enjoyment of the play."

Roger concluded "Good grief! That's a Feedback rarity – a BBC apology!"

But of course it did spoil Norfolk listeners' enjoyment. And we have to wonder why this sort of thing keeps happening. Roger asked me if perhaps there was something especially difficult about the Norfolk accent. But there isn't. Trained, professional actors can master any accent they set their mind to, with the help of trained, professional dialect coaches. Just think of Meryl Streep.

The fact is that when it comes to imitating East Anglian speech, most actors – or, more likely, their producers – just don't care. They say to themselves that the accent isn't Scottish or Welsh. It's not Northern. It's not Midlands. So it must be some kind of southern accent. And since it isn't Cockney, then any old thing that sounds southern and "rural" will do.

The actors then try to signal "ruralness" by things like rolling their Rs in words like cart and farm and yard. If you listen to The Archers, you can hear actors trying so hard to sound "rural", they put in Rs even where they don't belong – "Elizerrberrth", for instance.

If the BBC Drama department had more respect for regional accents, then they would try harder to get things right. But I suppose we shouldn't be surprised if they don't try, because this is part of a general pattern of lack of respect for local cultures and local ways of speaking. I have more than once heard people who have moved to our county from elsewhere say that they love living here – but if their children come home from school speaking with a Norfolk accent, they will be horrified.

■ Peter Trudgill is president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect.