



Marianne Colbran

May 19th, 2023

Sorry shouldn't be the hardest word if the Met is to regain trust

0 comments | 3 shares

Estimated reading time: 6 minutes



In the wake of a spate of arrests of anti-monarchy protesters during the Coronation, the Metropolitan Police Chief defended a response that many criticised as overly heavy-handed. Marianne Colbran discusses whether this was a well-judged response and contrasts it to how the Met has previously responded when its failings have come to light.

Once again, the Metropolitan Police have come under attack. This time, they face criticism for their policing of the Coronation of King Charles III, during which **64 arrests were made**. Those arrested included Graham Smith, the CEO of Republic, the UK's leading republican movement and three volunteers for Night Stars, an organisation run by Westminster City Council in partnership with the Metropolitan Police to keep people safe at night.



Under Commissioner Rowley, the Met has renewed its commitment to positive reform, but seems to be struggling to confront its problems.



The Metropolitan Police Commissioner Mark Rowley has defended the actions of his officers without an apology, despite widespread criticism and the launch of an inquiry by MPs. Under Commissioner Rowley, the Met has renewed its commitment to positive reform, but seems to be struggling to confront its problems while under intense public and press scrutiny.

The way the Met responds to its mistakes is an important influence on the way people perceive it. To move forward, the Met should learn from its past, but first it is worth revisiting the way the Coronation incident unfolded.

How the events unfolded

On 3 May, the Met tweeted a severe warning to would-be protestors: “Our tolerance for any disruption, whether through protest or otherwise, will be low. We will deal robustly with anyone intent on undermining this celebration.” On the same day, it was also announced that the Public Order Act had been given royal assent, further extending police powers to crack down on public protests.

On 6 May, Graham Smith, the CEO of Republic, and seven other organisers were arrested as they were unpacking placards outside their hotel, to be used later in their protest. This was despite the fact, as Smith later told *The Guardian*, that for the past three months he had been assigned a Metropolitan Police community liaison officer. He had **several meetings** with the officer in which he stated Republic’s plans for the day of the Coronation and was told that “if you turn up and protest peacefully, there’s no reason why there should be a problem”.

It then emerged that three Night Stars volunteers were arrested in the early hours of the day of the Coronation. The Night Stars programme is run by Westminster City Council and their volunteers are a visible presence to try to help women feel

safe at night in areas like the West End. The programme is run in partnership with the Met, and volunteers have Metropolitan Police printed on their high-viz vests.

News of the arrest of Republic protestors nearly overshadowed the start of the Coronation, and the steady leak of details of the arrest of other groups further fanned the flames with criticism coming from across the political spectrum. Speaking to the *Evening Standard* on 9 May, Sir Mark Rowley defended the actions of his officers, saying that he had been “extremely concerned by a rapidly developing intelligence picture”. He backed his officers’ actions and stated there were reports that protestors had been planning to use rape alarms to scare police horses, to throw paint at the procession and to “lock-on” at key points in the procession.

A very different approach to police mistakes

Following the phone-hacking scandal of 2011, one of the problems highlighted by the Leveson Inquiry into the ethics of the relationship between the police and the media was the secretiveness and defensiveness of the Met, especially when facing criticism. Eleven years on from the Leveson Inquiry, it would seem very little has changed.

Yet, while the Met’s response here might seem all too familiar, when speaking to police press officers and crime journalists who had been active in post during the 1980s and 1990s, I found that in the past a very different strategy had been pursued.

One press officer, who worked at Scotland Yard during the 1980s, gave me an example of this. On the morning of Saturday 28 September 1985, a group of police officers raided Cherry Groce’s house in Brixton, searching for her son, Michael Groce, a suspected armed robber. During the raid, the police did not find Michael Groce but Cherry Groce was shot and seriously injured, triggering riots in the Brixton area.

Instead of issuing a statement defending the officers’ actions, **the press officer recalled how** he was told by the then Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Newman (Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 1982 to 1987), to apologise for the shooting in a press release:

We put out an apology on the Saturday morning and in *The Guardian* on Monday, there was an editorial, “fresh winds blowing in Scotland Yard, for the first time they’ve apologised about something they’ve done wrong”.

A crime journalist, active in the 1990s, told me how Newman’s successor, Sir Peter Imbert (Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 1987 to 1993), also pursued an open-door policy with the press, with the aim of presenting the Met as a transparent and accountable institution. He **told me:**

For years, I’d had this vision of the Met as this impenetrable fortress. But when Imbert took over, he wanted genuinely to know what was wrong. And during his time, I wrote a long piece about racial violence and was taken out in Southall by the Chief Superintendent, openly saying, “I don’t know how to talk to these people and I know that’s a problem for our force”.

The Met is a large and unwieldy police force with more than 43,000 officers and staff; it alone takes 25 per cent of the total police budget for England and Wales. Change is always going to be difficult, but the tone from the top really matters, as the preceding examples demonstrate.

What should happen next?

We must not pretend that policing an event like the Coronation is easy. If there had been a serious breach of the peace, if a protestor had managed to throw paint at the procession or scared the horses, Rowley would have faced serious criticism and backlash from politicians, the media and the public, and rightly so.



At a time when confidence in the Met is at an all-time low, the Met must get better at acknowledging its mistakes.



Indeed, as the crime reporter [Danny Shaw points out](#), the Met may well “regard the arrest of a handful of innocent people and a row about protestors’ rights, however uncomfortable it might currently be, as a price worth paying for the occasion to have passed off without incident.”

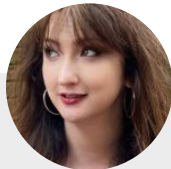
But at a time when confidence in the Met is, as the [recent Casey Report found](#), at an all-time low, the Met must get better at acknowledging its mistakes or it will continue to alienate its supporters and, more importantly, the people of London.

Officers must make quick decisions on the ground in high-pressure circumstances. They will sometimes make mistakes, and the Met should be able to defend those officers and explain itself. But these are not binary opposites to acknowledging mistakes, and those defences and explanations would carry more weight if they were sometimes prefaced with “We’re sorry, we could have done this better...”.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: Photo by CGP Grey, [Creative Commons – Attribution 2.0 Generic – CC BY 2.0](#)

About the author



Marianne Colbran

Dr Marianne Colbran is a Visiting Fellow at the Mannheim Centre for Criminology at LSE. Previously, she was a Research Associate and M.Sc. Tutor at the Centre for Criminology, Oxford. Prior to becoming an academic, she was a television scriptwriter and a staff writer on the long-running British police show, *The Bill*.

Posted In: [LSE Comment](#) | [Police](#) | [Society and Culture](#)

Read Next