

Will the government solve the permacrisis of British policing?

*British police has been suffering from a legitimacy crisis following a series of scandals, scrutiny over apparent misconduct and accusations of “two-tier policing” during the recent riots. **Jonathan Jackson, Emmeline Taylor and Ben Bradford** argue that if the new Labour Government is to restore trust in the police force a series of reforms are needed, including a change of the current culture, leaning heavier on the use of technology and a shift of leadership style away from “command and control”.*

A catalogue of recent scandals has plunged British policing into a legitimacy crisis. Shocking incidents like the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving officer and the conviction of David Carrick for serial sexual offences have ricocheted through long-standing cultural assumptions about the ability of the police to maintain public safety, and the authority and legitimacy of the institution itself.

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It is difficult to imagine a more volatile and agitated context for policing than the current climate. At the time of writing, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) have been the focus of intense scrutiny (and an investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct) following [footage](#) of a police officer armed with a Taser kicking and stamping on a man’s head as he was lying face down on the ground at Manchester Airport. Amid escalating far-right violence across [England](#) during the first week of August, some groups have sought to fuel the unrest, by claiming that white protesters are the latest victims of a “two-tier policing” system that treats them more harshly because of their race and political views.

Public confidence in the police has been shaken as recurrent scandals have laid bare the deep-rooted cultural flaws, particularly within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), the largest force in the country. Dame [Louise Casey’s review](#) revealed the extent of pervasive issues like sexism, racism, and homophobia, and culminated in the demand

for “a root and branch overhaul to the system” if public trust is to be restored. As hard-hitting and uncomfortable to read as the Casey review is (particularly for the current Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley whose efforts to address the issues she subsequently described as “not good enough, must try harder”), some commentators argue for even more radical action to “defund” the police by limiting its remit and diverting resources elsewhere.

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As recent events have highlighted, the legitimacy crisis isn’t limited to London. Nationwide, police forces are grappling with budget cuts, their own scandals generated by serving officers, shifting crime dynamics, allegations of “two-tier policing” gaining traction through far-right social media networks, and an unstable political environment, leading to what some describe as a “permacrisis”— a state of constant instability created as police forces career from one catastrophe to the next at ever increasing speed. As the new Government settles into office, halting the eruption of these recurrent challenges requires a fundamentally new approach to policing that addresses the “tinderbox” of issues that the police have come to embody and represent.

A special issue of The Political Quarterly journal entitled “[Policing the Permacrisis](#)” offers a beacon of hope against the bleak background of an apparently outdated and overwhelmed police service.

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Despite a police service under significant pressure, there are new and diverse ideas for improving policing, and some optimism about what might be achieved. This can happen by improving the **internal culture** of the police, including diversifying the workforce to better reflect the communities which they serve; the enhanced use of **technology and data** to deliver more efficient and effective policing; and significant **leadership reform**. What is needed is “smarter policing”, which involves rethinking the police role, using data and evidence more effectively, and recognising the ability of other agencies to

deliver social care and control. Enhancing diversity within the force and strengthening the relationship between the police and the communities they serve is also a necessary ingredient for an improved police force.

Simply increasing police activities won't fix deep-seated problems. Instead, there's a call for "doing less, but better". This means focusing on more effective methods and redefining police responsibilities. This means narrowing role of police and an emphasis on collaboration with other public services to address complex social issues. In many cases, it is other services that are best placed to take the lead on crime reduction and prevention as recognised with the implementation of the [Right Care, Right Person](#) operational model.

Police cultures that tolerate misconduct, resist change, and marginalise women and minorities must be overhauled. Leadership needs to shift from rigid "command and control" to more compassionate and inclusive practices. Stronger leadership and better training are essential to combat ingrained issues, including sexism and racism, and to foster an environment that supports diversity and transparency.

Cultural and leadership reforms are critical. Police cultures that tolerate misconduct, resist change, and marginalise women and minorities must be overhauled. Leadership needs to shift from rigid "command and control" to more compassionate and inclusive practices. Stronger leadership and better training are essential to combat ingrained issues, including sexism and racism, and to foster an environment that supports diversity and transparency.

Harnessing technology and data can further aid in smarter policing. Modern crime challenges can be met with advanced tools and data analytics, but these must be deployed with careful evaluation and ethical considerations to ensure they contribute effectively to crime prevention and public safety.

Many of the current issues facing police—such as racism, sexism, poor leadership, and the rise of new crime types—have long histories. This recurring nature of problems underlines why the term "permacrisis" is fitting. These aren't new problems, but their persistent recurrence creates a cycle of crisis and reaction that needs to be broken. The likelihood of achieving these reforms remains uncertain. Some suggest that a major

reorganization, like a Royal Commission, might be necessary for meaningful change. Without such efforts, the police risk being trapped in a cycle of crisis response that detracts from the more strategically radical shifts in operational practices required to police modern Britain.

As the new Labour government takes charge, policing will be just one of many pressing issues. The broader criminal justice system—including courts, probation, and perhaps especially prisons—also demands attention due to their current conditions. However, the central role of policing in public perception of crime, disorder, and community relations means it will continually be a focal point for government action.

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The UK's police face a complex array of challenges. By adopting a smarter, evidence-based approach, focusing on cultural reforms, and narrowing their role, the police can navigate this legitimacy crisis and work towards restoring their effectiveness and public trust. A fundamental review, possibly through a Royal Commission, could help to put the brakes on the permacrisis and open up space to consider the comprehensive reform needed to meet these challenges head-on. It remains to be seen whether the new government will be willing to 'try harder' to make the required changes to contemporary policing and finally win back public confidence.

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Image: Prime Minister Keir Starmer visits the Police Service of Northern Ireland College where he met police officers involved in the recent riots. **Credit:** Simon Dawson / No 10 Downing Street [on Flickr](#).
