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Do women make better riot police?

In London, women commanders are tasked with keeping the peace amid five days of protest by environmental activists. In April, G-20 protests turned deadly.

By Ben Quinn | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

LONDON

After months of taking a beating over allegations of heavy-handedness, Britain's largest police force is trying a new tack: handing women commanders the reins.

In a bid to maintain control of a potentially explosive situation, the Metropolitan Police Service is taking a "softly, softly" approach this week as environmental campaigners undertake five days of action against targets ranging from government buildings to the offices of multinational mining firm Rio Tinto.

The hope is for an outcome sharply different from that of London's Group of 20 conference in April. Scotland Yard's reputation took a hit after sharp clashes between hundreds of riot police and protesters – many of whom accused the police of unprovoked attacks – resulted in the death of a newspaper vendor who was simply trying to make his way home.

The move is based on the theory, according to some experts, that policewomen often view their work as a public service, while policemen approach their task from the perspective of "control through authority."

But beyond repairing policing's image, the handling of the event by the two women is also regarded as a landmark moment for women's progression in policing.

"Until relatively recently, we simply did not have enough women at higher ranks to be able to make a judgment about their leadership at these types of very high profile events, so this is relatively unusual," said Jennifer Brown, a professor at Britain's Surrey University who has closely researched gender issues in policing in Britain, where 25 percent of police officers are women, and elsewhere.

"In a way, it's rather hard for the officers who are in these positions of leadership this week because it's being seen not only as a test of the Metropolitan Police Force's capacity to effectively police events like this, but it has now put the women in a very visible position."

PEACEFUL MARCH

This week, activists were permitted to make their way peacefully from assembly points around London to this year's Camp for Climate Action at a south London park, whose location was kept secret until the last moment and then publicized by mass text message.

On the orders of the policing operation's female tactical commander, Superintendent Julia Pendry, only a handful of police officers were on scene – supervising from a distance and with not a baton or helmet in sight. A Twitter account is being used by the police to send operational information to anyone taking part in the camp.

The camp was later paid a visit by Officer Pendry herself, who drank tea with activists, including some she hosted last week at a police riot-training center.

Pendry, who once agreed to an out-of-court settlement with the force over alleged sexual discrimination against her, has also reportedly chosen another woman, Inspector Jane Connors, as her deputy, saying that she was "reasonable, sensible and able to communicate."

A cynic might conclude, says Professor Brown, that by placing women in such positions now, others could claim "it was the women who screwed up" if events took an unwelcome turn.

Alternatively, could this be the future?

In terms of differing styles of leadership, Brown points out that men, by and large, approach their roles in "task focused" ways, adopting a "telling" type of leadership to get the job completed. Women, generally, adopt a "selling" style, involving facilitating and building relationships that might be useful in the long run.

She says that the police service in Britain has been giving a lot of thought to leadership styles and the difference between "transactional leadership – a leader saying, 'This is what I think we should do,' " – and the much more negotiative, "transformational" leadership.

A woman has also provided the public face and voice of the police operation in the media.

Speaking to the BBC Wednesday, Chief Superintendent Helen Ball promised a "neighborhood policing style."

"It's always important to learn from the experiences that have gone before, and we have been very careful in listening to the reviews, listening to recommendations that have been made, and working to make sure that where possible we can be as light touch, if you like, in our policing, as possible. I think it's also important to work with the [camp's] organizers."

Critics of the police and many activists remain suspicious of a failure by the police to rule out the use of the controversial tactic of "kettling," in which large numbers of demonstrators are corralled for hours on end, as well as the intensive use of photographic and surveillance tactics that Britain pioneered.

Frances Wright, a former lawyer and member of the Climate Camp legal team was one of those who

met Pendry.

"She appears able to listen, at least," she says. "But the police have got themselves in a position where they have to police this camp well."

STAKES ARE HIGH FOR POLICE

As he waited on Wednesday under the gaze of a handful of police outside the headquarters of the Bank of England with other activists to learn of their camp's whereabouts, student Henry Burch said the "Met" couldn't afford another public relations fiasco.

"I was at the G-20 when people were just peacefully protesting by sitting on the floor, and the police came in and started pulling people away by their hair," he said. "Then we had to walk through a kind of tunnel of police who were shouting abuse at us as we were coming out."

On Tuesday, a survey published by the YouGov market-research firm served as the latest reminder of just how high the stakes may be for Scotland Yard. The poll found that 50 percent of adults believe the police are too heavy-handed when dealing with protests.

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