

The Degeneration of Public Administration

by Theodore Dalrymple



In 1829, Sir Robert Peel, then home secretary (and later to be prime minister), established the Metropolitan Police Force in London, often considered the world's first modern police department. He did so according to nine famous principles, then without precedent and thought to have been written by the two joint commissioners of the force being established. The principles laid down the function and conduct of the new force:

To prevent crime and disorder, as an alternative to their repression by military force and severity of legal punishment.

To recognise always that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour, and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect.

To recognise always that to secure and maintain the respect and approval of the public means also the securing of the willing co-operation of the public in the task of securing observance of laws.

To recognise always that the extent to which the co-operation of the public can be secured diminishes proportionately the necessity of the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives.

To seek and preserve public favour, not by pandering to public opinion, but by constantly demonstrating absolutely impartial service to law, in complete independence of policy, and without regard to the justice or injustice of the substance of individual laws, by ready offering of individual service and friendship to all members of the public without regard to their wealth or social standing, by ready exercise of courtesy and friendly good humour, and by ready offering of individual sacrifice in protecting and preserving life.

To use physical force only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient to obtain public co-operation to an extent necessary to secure observance of law or to restore order, and to use only the minimum degree of physical force which is necessary on any particular occasion for achieving a police objective.

To maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are the police, the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.

To recognise always the need for strict adherence to police-executive functions, and to refrain from even seeming to usurp the powers of the judiciary of avenging individuals or the State, and of authoritatively judging guilt and punishing

the guilty.

To recognise always that the test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, and not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.

To an extent rare in human history, these ideals were achieved for many decades—of course, always with that gap between aspiration and achievement consequent upon human imperfection. The admirable clarity and concision of the principles must have played a large part in their success.

Let us now move forward by nearly two centuries, to Sergeant Nathan Walker of Okehampton. Okehampton is a small and pleasant, if somewhat down-at-the-heels, town in Devon, in a rural setting; nevertheless, it recorded one violent crime per 50 people in the year from November 2019 through October 2020.

On October 19, 2020, the *Okehampton Times* noted concern in the town about vandalism in the local park, where the park staff felt intimidated by young people. The town council called for more policing, and the paper's reporter asked Sergeant Walker of the Okehampton police, "How often are you able to patrol the park? Which times do you choose and why?" Walker replied:

At present we recognise that there is an increased interest in the use of the park and the behaviour of young people while they are there. As a result we have created a tasking plan which aims to prevent crime and reassure people using the Simmons Park throughout the day. We are specifically targeting times during the afternoon following increased reports during this period. This is a whole team effort for the West Devon policing team, all of the teams including my own neighbourhood team in Tavistock and Okehampton are briefed every day on the issues that are reported and we are all working together to address this challenge. You will see us in the park discussing the issue with park users and encouraging people to report their experiences, you will also

see us talking to the young people. As part of our response to this challenge we are working closely with Okehampton College, the local Space youth service team, our own youth intervention officer and the youth offending team in an effort to provide lasting solutions that help young people recover from their poor decisions and prosper as adults.

Suffice it to say that we are at some distance from the intellectual and moral clarity of Peel's principles. The reporter's question was straightforward; the policeman's answer consisted of evasive verbiage, whose meaning one could glimpse only as a shape is glimpsed as it approaches in a thick fog, and by the end of which the questioner had probably forgotten what she had asked. Not only did the policeman fail to answer the question; he also revealed his underlying belief that police were a therapeutic organization, with a task of helping people to "recover from their poor decisions," as from a bout, say, of pneumonia—helping them other than by deterring or apprehending them, of course. An *Okehampton Times* reader left a comment to the effect that she had seen the police in the park—but in the morning, when nothing ever happened. By contrast, they were not present when the school bullies and drug dealers prowled the park, soon after dark. The implication was that the police deliberately avoided real work in favor of the appearance of work.

The more ineffectual the police become, it seems, the more menacing the manner they adopt toward the public and the more militarized they look. They are no longer the bobbies of old but more and more like the security detail of some vile authoritarian movement. They frighten everyone except the criminals, and the description of them by the journalist Peter Hitchens (brother of the late Christopher) seems ever more apposite: "paramilitary social workers, jingling with clubs, Tasers, pepper sprays and often guns, schooled in political dogmas and vigilant for political correctness."

The journalist went on to ask Sergeant Walker whether, the town council having called for more police, he felt short-staffed, and whether more police would help. He answered—if what he said can be called an answer:

The staffing of our beautiful county is carefully considered by Devon and Cornwall Police and there are many factors that influence the decisions that are made. At present West Devon is proportionately staffed for the demand on our service and I am pleased to say that we have a very positive and proactive team but I am aware that numbers of police is a very emotive subject. I am really encouraged by the teams' approach to all of the challenges we face as an organisation. It is important that we remember and focus on the pressures faced in specific areas of the community but as a policing team we also need to take a broader view of the difficulties faced across a broad range of issues. We work really hard to do this and when specific challenges are identified we take action and seek support from other teams to help. At the moment the Okehampton neighbourhood team are focusing on the park and the anti-social behaviour because the public report this to be a significant challenge.

To judge from these utterances, we should not expect Sergeant Walker to exhibit Sherlock Holmes-type clarity of mind in the pursuit of wrongdoers—if, indeed, he believed that such a person as a wrongdoer existed, rather than a victim of society in need of succor, consolation, or cure. The blockhead provincial policeman is a familiar figure from detective novels of the so-called golden age of British detective fiction, the 1920s and 1930s, but even he knew the purpose of policing and sometimes displayed a rough-and-ready common sense, which Walker has squeezed, or had squeezed, out of him.

Sergeant Walker's muddiness of mind and inability to speak in a direct manner did not arise from any natural incapacity but is highly trained and even programmed—for no one, even the

most inarticulate, would speak spontaneously in the way that he spoke. On the contrary, it takes a certain skill and much practice to produce an effortless flow of this socio-managerial gibberish, which constantly approaches, but never quite reaches, meaning. If you don't believe me, try to speak it for yourself.

Far from impeding his career, Walker's trained inability to speak in plain language and to answer straight questions with straight answers is a precondition of such advancement. The imposition, adoption, and mastery of this type of language is the means by which ambitious mediocrities gain control over bureaucratic organizations. It drives people of higher caliber, who might otherwise pose a challenge to them, elsewhere.

I predict, then, that Walker has a brilliant career before him—if by that, we mean rapid advancement up the hierarchy and early retirement on a generous pension. Unlike the park vandals and bullies, he will have no poor decisions to recover from.

This kind of intellectual rottenness in the police—the chief constable of Manchester has just had to stand down because his force last year failed even to *record* a quarter of the crimes reported to them, let alone try to solve them—is a profound cultural phenomenon in Britain. It exerts the effect on the public administration that termites exert on wooden-framed buildings.

Here is another example, from a different sphere: the arts. Maria Balshaw is currently director of the Tate Galleries, one of the most important positions in the visual arts in the country, responsible for the national collections of both British and modern art. This is a post whose appointee requires the prime minister's approval—in this case, from Theresa May.

Before her appointment to the Tate, Balshaw was director of the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester University's splendid art gallery, and then of the Manchester City Art Gallery. I take as my text the transcript of a video talk that she gave while still director of the Whitworth. This has the advantage both of brevity and of illustrating to perfection the type of person who now rises to the top in British administration.

Her manner is one of self-satisfaction so great that she makes Mr. Podsnap seem as self-questioning as Hamlet. She begins by telling us one of the important functions of a director of an artistic organization: "I think taking large artistic risks is part of the job of a good director of any artistic organisation."

Artistic risks? The purchase of an unattributed painting, perhaps? Or of an artist previously unknown? And *any* artistic organization? What "artistic risks" are the directors of the Prado and Uffizi, for example, supposed to take—or do those galleries not really count as artistic organizations in the Balshavian sense?

Balshaw expands autobiographically: "But if I think back to moments where I experienced that as a really acute and intense feeling of fear and even of horror at the level of risk we were taking as an organisation, it boils down to an experience of watching a really marvellous artist, Kira O'Reilly, rolling very slowly down the stone stairs of the Whitworth Art Gallery." The risk was obvious but the artistic nature of it less so. Balshaw tries to explain:

It was part of a big project that we did in 2009 with the performance artist, Marina Abramovic. Now it was an amazing project to work on, she's an artist who I've admired throughout my working life, throughout her career she's taken extraordinary risks with her own body and with the environment she operates in and with her artistic reputation. She made her name in the 70s by being on absolutely the far

edge of the kind of risk an artist would be willing to take with their own body and their own art. So when I was offered the opportunity of working with her . . . I said straight away that the Whitworth, the whole organisation, would relish the opportunity. And what the project became was a performance experiment where fourteen live artists were given the whole of the Whitworth Gallery, we took away all the art collections and gave the spaces to them to make new work that would respond to the building, that would take them to a new level of creative and artistic experiment, and Kira devised a piece that was a nude descending a staircase, a kind of gorgeous relationship to the history of art and the way that women are represented.

Thus, the guardian of the national artistic heritage: clear out the artworks in a venerable gallery—presumably, quite an undertaking in time and labor, including the need to put them back—to make way for a naked woman slowly rolling down the stairs and other such “pieces.” Velazquez and Vermeer are not our artistic heroes, apparently, but Harry Houdini and Nadia Comaneci, the famous Romanian gymnast, are. And what does “new work that would respond to the building, that would take them to a new level of creative and artistic experiment” mean? What does “a kind of gorgeous relationship to the history of art and the way that women are represented” mean in this, or any other, context? One would hesitate to ask Balshaw, for fear of being subject to a torrent of frivolously earnest verbigeration.

Like a fly to a rotting corpse (in this case, the Western artistic tradition under its guardians in a corporatist state), Balshaw alighted at once on Kira O'Reilly's proposal: “It was wonderful from the first moment that she uttered the idea; myself and Maria and Alex said that it just sounds fantastic, we've just got to make this happen.” The great day came for the creation of the “work”: “And all she did, really, was roll very, very slowly down the stairs in a series of

tumbles, choreographed movements that replicated what would have happened if she'd fallen at speed to her death at the bottom of the staircase. But it unfolded over four hours, so bits of it were painfully slow to watch."

Balshaw unwittingly makes an admission that brings to mind James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* of 1941, as applied to modern cultural institutions: "She was descending stairs that were not usually open to the public, but a beautiful Edwardian staircase." What had the mere public to do with beautiful staircases? (It is also revealing that the staircase is the only context in which Balshaw mentions the quality of beauty—suggesting that, somewhere deep within her, some faint aesthetic feeling survives.) Now comes the terror that Balshaw experienced as a result of the risk she had taken, or seemed to have taken:

Nothing had been rehearsed. Everything had been worked through very carefully and risk-managed in the best way that we could, but Kira hadn't rolled down the staircase until the first time that she did it in front of the public, and I was sitting at the bottom of the staircase as she undertook a particularly difficult bit of movement. She was on her shoulders and lowering her legs down and her hands were twisted sideways around the banister of the staircase and her legs were inching down to reach the next step down, and she didn't look as if she was going to make it, and she was kind of tensed and then relaxed into the most difficult part of the movement, she locked eyes with me, and as I looked and held her gaze, I thought she's going to break her neck. . . . I don't know how she's going to get out of that movement safely, and in that moment a kind of adrenaline rush and fear happened for me and I felt physically sick and I know I went white as a sheet, but I knew I had to hold her gaze. And I was sitting there thinking I really love Kira, she's a fantastic artist, and had become a really close friend of mine by that stage, and she's really going to injure herself

and I am responsible for this, and I let this happen, and why on earth didn't I think that it would be dangerous to do this, and how on earth am I going to explain to the University of Manchester and the International Festival and everyone that an artist died on my watch.

Luckily, Balshaw was made of sterner stuff, though she seems not quite able to make up her mind whether she saved the artist's life, or whether there really had been a risk to it:

But I still held her gaze and after what felt like hours but was probably under two minutes, she just shifted her weight ever so slightly sideways so that one foot did connect with the lower step, and very gradually started to unravel. And when she got to a definitely safer and more comfortable position, I left and went to the ladies, and stood in the toilets shaking for a good ten minutes, thinking all of this, actually, is too much, what were we thinking of?—until I kind of recovered my sense of myself, and remembered that actually there were method statements in place for every single one of these pieces and that many people more than me had looked at the issues each of the live art pieces raised, and that Kira has some of the best yoga and core strength training of any person that I know and that actually she was scared at that very moment but that she knew that she wasn't going to break her neck, and all she needed was to kind of hold my gaze to keep her confidence. And when she finished, and we talked about the piece, she walked right up to me and said the moment when you held my gaze just gave me the strength I needed.

The incoherence of all this, except for its consistent thread of egotism, hardly needs pointing out. There was a terrible risk, there was no real risk; the artist was in terrible danger, the artist was never in danger; I did nothing, I saved her life. But it was just as well for Balshaw that the artist

didn't die, for then the problem of having to explain her death to the University of Manchester would have arisen. Undoubtedly an awkward moment.

Balshaw is nothing if not a learner from experience:

What I learnt . . . was that . . . I hadn't really let myself contemplate the level of risk that we were taking, because I knew that if I did in advance it would be too scary, and that it was good that I didn't really let myself go to a bad place of fear because, actually, collectively we'd shared the management of the risk, and everybody had the right bit of attention, so that it was safe to do something that was extraordinary, and that it taught me a really important lesson about how you need to be scared sometimes, because out of that comes really magnificent art.

This makes Sergeant Walker seem like Descartes. Balshaw could not have reached her prominent position without an entire bureaucratic apparatus of like-minded—or, at any rate, like-opinioned and like-feeling—persons behind her. The whole public administration, from police sergeant to prime minister, is intellectually corrupt. The former prime minister cannot escape blame because, in assenting to Balshaw's appointment, she either nodded it through because she couldn't have cared less, in which case she was a philistine; or because—perhaps worse—she actively approved of it. After all, the upper echelons of British politics and administration share similar taste in music: asked by the BBC to name their favorite music, former prime minister David Cameron chose, *inter alia*, The Killers, and Balshaw chose Stormzy (a British rap singer).

The degeneration of the public administration puzzles me because in all walks of life, from plumbers to electricians, locksmiths, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, surgeons, cardiologists, research scientists, and so forth, I meet capable, intelligent, honest, and talented people. The

explanation of this strange divergence, I suspect, is ultimately in the way that the humanities, or inhumanities, are now taught in higher education.

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