

Witness: Lynne Owens
Statement No: 1
Exhibits Referred to: LO/1, LO/2, LO/3, LO/4, LO/5, LO/6,
LO/7, LO/8, LO/9, LO/10
Date Statement Made: 26 January 2012

The Leveson Inquiry into the Culture Practices and Ethics of the Press

This is the exhibit marked 'LO/2' referred to in the statement of Lynne Owens,
dated this 26th day of January 2012.

"One of my first tasks was to reflect on the violence and disorder which marred otherwise peaceful student protests in London over the last few months and ask what we can expect in 2011. Regrettably, any assessment of what is already being openly said by protest groups leads me to a sombre prediction; more of the same, or maybe worse.

A new generation of young people want to express their dissatisfaction through protest. Peaceful protest is healthy in a democracy but we fear a number will be sucked into violence and disorder.

"Recent events demonstrate that we will have to plan for waves of peaceful demonstrations and build in the capacity to respond to serious disorder.

"This situation has major repercussions for ordinary policing. Public order operations on the scale that we have seen over the past few weeks require us to bring large numbers of officers into the centre of London and other cities, sometimes from outside forces. They are taken away from visible, local policing.

"The way the Met and other forces handle protest over the next year will also have a profound effect on the police-public relationship for years to come.

"Sir Robert Peel, the founder of British policing, said nearly 200 years ago that the mission of the police was to prevent crime and disorder, using force where necessary - in a way that met with public approval. Today, we refer to that approval as public confidence.

"The MPS needs to win the confidence of groups with significantly different perspectives on the protests. People must be confident that we will treat protesters - including schoolchildren on demonstrations with their parents' knowledge - fairly.

Equally, though, we must ensure that London can get on with business as usual and, when force is necessary, we must use it quickly and effectively to assert control over disorder. No-one has confidence in a police force that cannot protect people on the streets.

"Some in the police world say that 'we can't win'. If we take a low-key approach, and violence erupts, we are too 'softly, softly.' If our tactics are robust, we're oppressive.

"But I'm not hiding behind arguments about unfairness. I simply say that the first priority of the Metropolitan Police is to prevent violence on the streets of London. And if there are difficult balancing acts for police, then so be it. It's our job to deal with them.

"Some commentators like to characterise public order policing as ill-thought out, or thuggish. All I can say is that, in my experience, a great deal of thought goes into getting it right, and thuggery is not tolerated.

"Moreover, we police protests in the knowledge that any mistakes or misjudgements will be exposed. The Peel legacy means that we are not currently separated from the public by sterile areas, staring at protesters over the barrels of water cannons. We are in their midst, on the ground. The digital age, with its instant images, has intensified the focus on us.

"Our officers are encouraged to make difficult judgements about who they're dealing with. Are they law abiding youngsters who should be helped to get on their way home? Are they criminals who see an opportunity to rob and steal? Are they peaceful protesters being used effectively as a human shield by masked and hooded agitators?

"It is true that the vast majority of those arrested so far for violent disorder are young people with no previous records

of violence. If convicted, some of them face consequences that will ruin their lives.

"However, be assured that, as our investigations continue, we expect to track down and arrest more of the instigators - who may think their disguises have protected them so far but will shortly find out that they cannot evade justice. Many of these people will have previous involvement in violence.

"Our officers have to be alive to the mood of the crowds. Talking is always best. The Met has always invited reviews of its tactics, especially since the G20 protests. We understand the critical importance of engaging with demonstrators. The vast majority of the 4,500 events in London each year pass peacefully, with co-operation and a good mix of officers in ordinary uniforms and stewards.

"However, as we have seen, the mood can very quickly change and we have to be able to react quickly, with suitably-equipped and trained officers.

"This can be exceptionally difficult. We were caught out when a student march we expected to be peaceful unexpectedly flared into disorder on November 10th, at the headquarters of the Conservative Party on Millbank, in central London.

"I've had the privilege to talk to some of the officers who bravely struggled to contain disorder at Millbank. What happened that day left them - and the public - vulnerable. But to prevent this occurring in the future, we will need to deploy more officers, taking them away from the communities they normally serve.

"If we need to impose containment tactics on a group of people to avoid further or imminent disorder, we try to match the mood of the crowd. Once the risk of violence has receded, we ease the cordons and officers remove NATO helmets and return to normal headwear. Throughout all officers on the containment are directed to look for vulnerable and non-violent people who would like to leave, including those who require medical assistance. We understand the imperative to constantly communicate with the protestors, not only by talking to them but also in recent times by using social networking tools, like Twitter and Facebook. We also make arrangements where possible for water and toilet facilities to be provided.

"Like the rest of public order policing, this is not an exact science. It's a judgement on the ground, as is the decision on whether to make instant arrests for disorder, with the risk of inflaming a crowd, or gather CCTV evidence and arrest later.

"Some commentators urge us to consider water cannons, baton guns, and sterile areas protected by a quasi paramilitary force. The risk with these tactics is that if we are not careful, they could cause us to become distant from the public we serve, with less room for talking and explaining our responses at close quarters.

"It is generally true that police forces in continental Europe take this more 'hands-off' and 'distant' approach. However, the violent scenes in Rome recently remind us that using paramilitary tactics does not guarantee that violent disorder will be prevented, or quelled when it flares.

"So we believe in the British approach, based on engagement and flexibility and the choice of the right tactics to suit the circumstances. How, though, can we improve our ability to get it right?

"Good intelligence is important. We do know some of the hard-core who love a good fight with the police, but we face a challenge now in drawing up a picture of the new protest generation, particularly those in it who are bent on violence. We've had some significant events in recent times - such as G20 - but we haven't had such a widespread level of protest for years.

"We continue to adapt our response to match that used by those who wish to protest and recognise the current importance of social networking sites which are used to plan such events. As important, is to understand what material is accurate and what is misleading.

"However, I can predict, for 2011, that we will continue to work very hard to get things right, constructively engaging with responsible protest organisers, understanding the crowds as best we can, and judging our tactics effectively - talking when we can and using proportionate force when we have to.

"I can also warn those who hide behind masks to stir up violence that we'll use all the technological and forensic techniques we have to identify them, and bring them to justice.

"Exercising the right to protest is a fundamental of democracy. But holding strong views can never legitimise violence.

"A mix of engagement with organisers, sure-footed tactics on the ground and relentless determination to track down those responsible for violence is, ultimately, the way we'll police protest successfully and continue to improve public confidence in the difficult times ahead."