

OPINION:

An almost impossible job: The lessons from Dame Cressida Dick's departure



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Despite months of controversy and criticism, the resignation of Met Commissioner Dame Cressida Dick this week still came as a surprise, given her commitment to the role just hours before announcing her departure; PolicingTV presenter Danny Shaw, the former BBC Home Affairs Correspondent, looks at the politics that prompted her decision, and considers some of the likely candidates to take on UK policing's most difficult job.

And so it is over. Dame Cressida Dick, described by one of her predecessors, Sir Ian (now Lord) Blair, as the “finest police officer of her generation”, has been forced out – just as he was 14 years ago.

Lord Blair was ousted by Boris Johnson, who was then London’s Mayor. Elected to replace Ken Livingstone in May 2008, Johnson told the Metropolitan Police Commissioner he no longer had confidence in him. Lord Blair went to see the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, who was rather shocked. He resigned the next day.

Dame Cressida’s effective dismissal followed a similar pattern. Sadiq Khan, Johnson’s successor, made clear, publicly and in private, he was not satisfied with her plans to address cultural issues in the wake of the Charing Cross report.

The Commissioner felt she had no option but to call time on the job she loved. Again, the Home Secretary, Priti Patel this time, was out of the loop.

In fact, the timing was a surprise to us all. Hours before she announced her departure, Dame Cressida had been on [BBC Radio London saying](#) she was in “very good heart”, had “no intention of leaving” and was leading a “real transformation” in the Met. She had a subtle dig at Khan, who had already put her on notice, claiming that he had declared three weeks ago that he had “never had more confidence in the Met’s ability to deliver”.

The 61-year-old has always steered clear of politics and has a healthy scepticism of those involved in the trade. That remark was out of character and perhaps it was a sign that the relationship between the pair was already fractured beyond repair.

Political manoeuvring

There is a puzzle, nonetheless, as to why Khan moved against the Commissioner after approving a two-year contract extension for her just five months ago. That would have been the obvious point to make a break by allowing Dame Cressida to serve out her five-year term, to April, but launching the process to recruit her successor.

Can it be that Khan decided to act because he was so appalled by the findings of the [IOPC Charing Cross Police Station](#) report? That doesn't quite add up. He – and his officials – would, and certainly should, have been well aware of the content of that inquiry, if not the conclusions: it had been going on since 2018.

Other high-profile controversies since Dame Cressida's contract was renewed in September, including the [sentencing of Wayne Couzens](#) and the inquests into the deaths of four gay men [murdered by Stephen Port](#), would also have been on his radar at that point. In other words, Khan knew that the Commissioner faced more serious problems, but he still gave her a vote of confidence.

A stronger possibility is that Khan decided to act now because public opinion has shifted. There are indications that Londoners, perhaps more inclined to give Dame Cressida the benefit of the doubt last summer and autumn, have lost confidence and trust in her and the force.

There is certainly likely to be a party political dimension, too. By flexing his muscles, Khan can point to the leadership and decisiveness he has shown, in contrast to the Home Secretary.

Patel has at times been a stern critic of the Commissioner but her hands have been tied by the Prime Minister who, [it is reported](#), rejected attempts to remove her last year.

And when it comes to picking Dame Cressida's successor, Johnson's role may be compromised by the fact that he, along with others in Downing Street, are under investigation over alleged breaches of coronavirus regulations. In short, Khan outmanoeuvred the Government, exploiting its current weaknesses.

It is not an edifying sight, but that is the system we have: police leaders are accountable to elected politicians, who have powers to hire and fire them. The irony is that while Patel huffed and puffed for a couple of years about Dame Cressida it was Khan who pulled the trigger.

Who next?

In many ways, the Commissioner's removal, painful though it is for the officers and staff who clearly admired and respected her, may help the Met reset. She had become 'the story'; there were too many headlines about her; too much media focus on her failings.

The new person at the helm will have a clean sheet to get on with the cultural and communications overhaul at Scotland Yard that is sorely needed. So who will that person be?

It must be someone with huge experience in policing whatever the calls for an 'outsider'. An individual who has at least worked in the Met would be an advantage as well. But there is no clear contender.

Met Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, who was in charge of counter-terrorism before going on secondment to lead the police service strategic command course, is well respected and an excellent communicator.

If appointed he would be the first Commissioner from an ethnic minority – he was born to an Indian father – but he is out of favour with Patel, who will play a vital role in the appointment. Elsewhere in the Met, Assistant Commissioner Matt Jukes is highly thought of and has experience outside the force, having led South Wales Police.

Martin Hewitt, a former senior Met officer and head of the National Police Chiefs' Council, has worked closely with the Home Secretary during the pandemic and impressed with his calm authority. Whether he would want the role is unclear.

Simon Byrne, Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, is thought to be more keen, though his own short spell in the Met was controversial; he would not be a popular choice among the rank-and-file.

Other possible candidates include Sir Dave Thompson, the outgoing Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, and Olivia Pinkney, who leads Hampshire constabulary. Two other former Met officers who went for the job when Dame Cressida got it – Sir Mark Rowley and Stephen Kavanagh – will no doubt consider it again; Kavanagh, who is now chief executive of police services at Interpol, came a close second last time.

Dame Lynne Owens, who resigned from the National Crime Agency to have treatment for cancer, would also be a strong contender if she decided to enter the race.

What is clear to me, however, is that whoever gets the job should do it for no more than five years. There should never be talk or speculation again about contract extensions. It is one of the most demanding roles in public life – five years is long enough.

Only two commissioners in the last 30 years have lasted longer – Sir Paul (now Lord) Condon and Sir Bernard (now Lord) Hogan-Howe. In both cases there is a strong argument to say they should have gone earlier. As Dame Cressida’s case has proved, it is almost an impossible job.

About the Author

Danny Shaw is a former BBC Home Affairs Correspondent and lead presenter on [PolicingTV](#), Policing Insight’s sister platform which launched this month. He spent 31 years at the corporation, reporting on crime, policing and justice, and was the Bar Council Legal Reporter of the Year four times. The views in this article – which first appeared on [Danny’s website](#) – are his own.

This article can be found here:

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