

Now Labour accused of attempt to 'politicise police' after ministers ask terror chief to make the case for 42-day detentions

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Drafted in: Met Assistant Commissioner Bob Quick is the country's most senior anti-terror officer

Ministers were accused of trying to politicise the police last night after asking the country's most senior anti-terror officer to make the case for 42-day detention without charge.

Opposition MPs said it was "entirely inappropriate" for police to be expected to bail out a desperate Government facing defeat over the controversial plan.

The row centres on a letter sent to all MPs by Police Minister Tony McNulty yesterday.

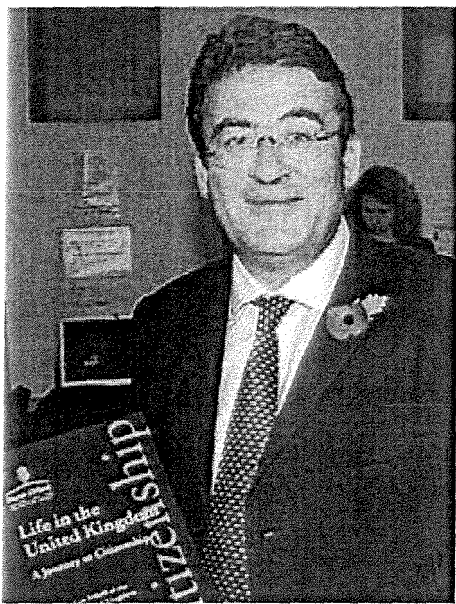
Mr McNulty said Bob Quick, the Met's assistant commissioner in charge of terrorism, would hold a briefing for MPs to explain the "operational practicalities which have led them (the police) to support the Government's proposals for the reserve of power".

Crucially, the letter makes clear Mr Quick is "agreeing" to a Home Office request, rather than putting himself forward to help.

The policy is facing defeat - plunging Gordon Brown into even deeper trouble.

It has become a question of the Prime Minister's personal authority over the party.

MPs say the timing of the request to Mr Quick shows increasing desperation at the heart of Government, which yesterday also faced demands from ex-home secretary Charles Clarke to dump the 42-day plan.



Police minister Tony McNulty sent a letter to all MPs which the Opposition claim was 'entirely inappropriate'

Colleagues of Mr Quick said it was unfortunate the highly-respected officer had been placed in such a difficult position by the Government. He only began the job, arguably the most demanding in policing, earlier this year.

Ministers faced similar criticism in 2005, when they asked police to lobby for 90-days without charge.

Shadow Home Secretary, David Davis, said: "I spoke to DAC Quick (yesterday) morning and established that there was a range of views across chief constables, and no single police view.

"It is entirely inappropriate that a serving officer should be asked to make the Government's case - particularly when it doesn't reflect the common view of chief constables."

Liberal Democrat spokesman Chris Huhne said: "It is unacceptable that the police are being used as New Labour cheerleaders over extension of pre-charge detention.

"The Government's decision to ask Bob Quick to make the case for 42 days smacks of desperation.

"Ministers have lost the argument over pre-charge detention and they should not be politicising the police force in an attempt to dig themselves out of a hole."

Former Home Secretary Mr Clarke also urged Mr Brown to shelve the latest plans.

"We should abandon proposals to increase the period of pre-charge detention to 42 days," he wrote in the Left-wing Progress Magazine.

"This Parliament settled the matter in March 2006 at 28 days and, though I will support the Government's proposals, I believe that it would be best not to consider them again during this Parliament."

The intervention from such a prominent figure in the fight against terrorism is likely to provoke anger in Downing Street, with Mr Brown already facing the prospect of a Commons defeat.

Mr Davis said: "Mr Clarke was the Home Secretary who bought proposals for 90 days' detention without trial to Parliament.

"He will know every argument put by the security services and the police, and, perhaps more importantly know the weaknesses in those arguments.

"If he is willing to accept the judgment of the House of Commons, so should the current Home Secretary and Prime Minister."

Mr Brown's position over the 42-day detention issue is dire.

Last month, a leaked list from Labour whips showed they expect at least 50 backbenchers to vote against the terror reforms. A further 44 are said to be undecided.

The lobbying exercise will also put Met Commissioner Sir Ian Blair back into the spotlight on the issue.

In November 2005, Sir Ian was accused by MPs of "overstepping the mark" with his support for proposals to hold terrorist suspects for 90 days.

Ministers had written to the Association of Chief Police Officers requesting senior officers be available to provide advice for MPs.

Many provided briefings ahead of the crucial vote, which the Government lost.

Earlier this week, it emerged Sir Ian had admitted misleading MPs by overstating the gravity of the terror threat to Britain.