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## **Englishwoman fights zero tolerance cops**

*By Tony Allen-Mills Washington*

WHEN Caroline Nicholl began her career as one of Britain's most successful women police officers, the job was easy. "Go out the back gate at the Marylebone station [in London] and make arrests," was the routine, she said.

Two decades and a transatlantic transfer later, policing has become more complicated for this former chief superintendent from Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, who has turned into an outspoken dissenter in the politically charged debate on American law enforcement.

After almost three years of frustration and increasing alarm as a senior programme manager with Washington DC police, Nicholl has joined a chorus of concern at hardline attitudes to crime and punishment - some of which, to her chagrin, have an echo in Britain.

"What's happening in America, with the high reliance on incarceration and the war on crime and drugs, is an indication of a desperate society," she said. "It was shocking to see how punitive this society is."

After being hand-picked to help to clean up one of America's most notorious city police forces, Nicholl, 45, has spent three years grappling with problems she could never have imagined when she pioneered community programmes to cut petty crime in Milton Keynes.

Washington is America's homicide capital with a murder rate 30 times higher than London. It is also known for its gangland killings, drive-by shootings, bent cops, interfering politicians, inept and corrupt bureaucrats - and a mayor jailed after he was filmed smoking crack cocaine.

In 1998 Charles Ramsey, the city's new police chief from Chicago, was told to stop the rot. Nicholl had met him during her fellowship year in America, and he was impressed by her ideas on bringing offenders and victims together to discuss crime problems before they reached the courts.

When Nicholl returned to Britain she missed the challenge of American criminal justice. As one of the country's youngest chief superintendents, she stood a good chance of becoming a chief constable. But Ramsey offered her a job.

"About 10 of us were hired to turn the DC ship around," she said. "To say it was a

mess would be an understatement."

Her main responsibility was domestic violence - a chronic problem in some of Washington's poor neighbourhoods. She recalls the shock of seeing a drawing by a six-year-old of daddy strangling mummy.

Her early enthusiasm soon turned to dismay in the face of bureaucratic inertia and political interference. It also quickly became clear her liberal British sensibilities were out of step with a get-tough cop culture that was filling America's jails.

She was not the the only one, however, to express concern at the aggressive attitudes inspired by celebrated crime-busters such as Bill Bratton, the former New York City police department chief whose reorganisation of the NYPD was widely credited with turning battle-scarred boroughs such as Harlem and the Bronx into havens of comparative peace.

Bratton's prime weapon was a computerised statistical crime survey known as Compstat, which identified high-risk crime areas and enabled a rapid police response. Nicholl believes the system turned many officers into "bean-counters" who sometimes massaged the figures. "If you tell the cops they are there to fight a war, then they are going to behave like soldiers," she said.

Nicholl admits it would take a brave - or foolish - American police chief to challenge the current political orthodoxy that enforcement and punishment are the most effective means of controlling crime; New York, for example, has certainly become a safer place - murders more than halved between 1990 and 1996 - although some criminologists have noted equal falls in other cities where different policing methods were used.

But Nicholl insists alternatives are possible. In Milton Keynes, she impressed retailers with a community programme that brought shoplifters face to face with the businessmen they had robbed. In Washington, she set up a school for prostitutes' clients, bringing so-called "johns" together with ex-hookers and health workers.

Nicholl was already thinking of leaving when she was offered a job at a prestigious Washington think-tank. She left the DC police last weekend.

"We obviously need prisons and jails, but we're overusing them," Nicholl said. "Some of the police chiefs here are making these assumptions that if we had more police, more laws, more powers, we would be more effective. But to me it's wrong. We can persuade the public there are other ways of skinning the cat."

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