Chapter 5. Localism Defeated, 1827-1838

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The dozen years after the City's reforms of 1827 saw momentous changes in London policing. Sir Robert Peel, then Home secretary and leader of the House of Commons, created the Metropolitan Police in 1829, supplanting traditional parish authorities in the name of centralization throughout London, with the notable exception of the City. Peel understood that the Corporation could mobilize considerable opposition when threatened, so City leaders retained jurisdiction over their own policing.1 The Metropolitan Police went on to make a reputation for themselves as primarily concerned with “riots and demonstrations, working-men’s crowds, and radical politics.”2

In the City, however, the reform movement took a somewhat different direction. The Corporation had opposed inclusion in Peel’s 1829 legislation, but this resistance did not mean opposition to City police reform, which itself culminated in 1838. It sought to centralize City policing at the expense of ward authority, reducing the wards’ power over policing and breaking down ward residents’ sense of regional responsibility and jurisdiction. One aspect of this effort, a common theme throughout the 1830s, was the movement to abolish the ward-appointed office of constable, which had served as the foundation of local policing as well as the source of much local discretionary power. With centralization came an emphasis on more hierarchical structures of policing, resulting in a more efficient police; if officers were more closely supervised, they could enforce the law more effectively, and fewer of them would be needed. This reduction in numbers proved a hard sell to many local residents, who distrusted and disbelieved the connection between improved policing and fewer actual officers. To counter this skepticism, reformers argued that they could reduce the overall expense of policing the City, a concept that must have seemed strange to residents accustomed to thinking of costs in terms of their own wards’ constables and nightly watch. The reforms also mani-
fested a growing interest in daytime policing as a means of checking petty crime and responding to riots.3

Reformers sought to alter the structures of City policing and the nightly watch in fundamental ways, arousing significant opposition from ward inhabitants seeking to retain their own authority and dissension between common councilmen and aldermen over the precise reallocation of control wrested from the wards. The decade of reform, then, poses several questions. What prompted this dramatic shift in control, and why were ward residents ultimately willing to give it up? And by the end of the decade, how much had City policing really changed?

My account follows, in broad outline, Donald Rumbelow’s *I Spy Blue* but differs in several critical areas. Rumbelow’s work emphasizes City rather than ward policing, which allows him to argue the merits of centralization without having to take into account the meanings of local control. His is a story of more unmitigated progress on the part of the City, but it leaves out the complexity of local participation, the cultural shift between different ideals of efficiency, and the legitimate opposition to centralized police authority. Rumbelow, like the Webbs, sees unreformed as equivalent to corrupt and inefficient.

### I. A Night Watch Improved: After 1827

By the end of 1827 the Common Council had exerted control over the beats, pay, and supervision of ward watchmen, concluding optimistically that by a system of Discipline . . . by a judicious selection of the superintending Watchmen, by encouragements for correct and faithful performance of Duty, and a constant and severe notice of all Cases of Negligence or Inattention, the Nightly Watch may be made more available for the general Protection and Security of the Inhabitants of this City, without any material additional Burthens being imposed upon them in respect thereof.4

The court had followed the wards’ lead in appointing superintendents, creating early and late patrols, and revising the hours of watching; in short, the court updated the annual Watch Act to incorporate changes already made in the wards. But the following year, Parliament’s review of City policing, while laudatory, nevertheless struck City leaders as ominous because of its implied possibility of parliamentary interference; as a result the Nightly Watch Committee reconsidered whether the previous year’s reforms had really been instituted.5
The reforms of 1827 had met significant, though not overwhelming, resistance from some wards. Aldersgate and Dowgate had lobbied unsuccessfully for the right to ignore parts of the new Watch Act that they felt were immaterial or harmful. The Common Council of Farringdon Within had great difficulties under the new Act in collecting the watch rate from inhabitants of Blackfriars precinct, many of whom were suing the lord mayor to avoid payment. The Nightly Watch Committee found “that in the Ward of Bishopsgate Without the system of relief and change of stations have been wholly neglected, and that Watch-Boxes are continued there, notwithstanding the express directions of this Court to the contrary.” While it directly named only Bishopsgate Without, other wards must have complained of the new Act, since the committee exhorted all wards to comply despite protests, “as the non-compliance therewith is manifestly calculated to keep up that spirit of dissatisfaction which necessarily arises from the difference of duties, indulgences, and pay of the Watchmen, which it was one of the principal objects of the recent Regulations to remove.” Even so, after the reforms of the previous year the nightly watch had been conducted “in a much more satisfactory and efficient manner than at any previous time.” Yet several problems remained. Marshals and marshalmen continued to display a consistent lack of interest in the ward policing they ostensibly supervised; in the first ten months of 1828, neither City marshal had visited a single watch-house, and the marshalmen had done so only about once every two weeks, hardly a high degree of scrutiny. Nor did ward constables care to attend watch-houses, where they would have to be present in order to receive charges. The evidence indicated, in short, that marshals, marshalmen, and constables continued to resist performing their duties, and that the entire chain of command, and hence accountability, had broken down in the wards, if it had ever existed.

II. The Polarization of Watch Reform and the Problem with Constables, 1830–1831

In 1830 the Common Council again embarked on a review of the police with an eye to change. Why the persistent concern with ward constables? City leaders may have feared an increase in the number of citizens serving by substitute. At the annual swearing-in of constables in 1830, it was discovered that over three-fifths of all ward constables had paid someone else to act in their place. The Nightly Watch Committee had argued in 1828 that problems with constables and watchmen derived from

the increasing frequency of Substitutes or Deputies being allowed for
the Constables elected for the several Wards, a practice which we are aware cannot be altogether prevented, but which we think would be materially checked if any means could be devised for relieving the Ward Constables from the duty of attending Executions and Public Processions, by which means the objection on the part of respectable householders to serving the Office in person would be much removed.10

Much of City policing was in this way based on citizens' civic commitment, which evidently had declined, creating the real problem with local policing. Citizens were no longer willing to police their communities personally, but they still wanted such duties performed—a gap filled several years later by the Corporation itself.

But was there really a crisis of civic commitment—that is, had it actually declined? It seems not. The proportion of citizens chosen to serve as constable who hired substitutes remained the same as three decades earlier, and no evidence beyond the committee’s lament suggests that the practice of serving by substitute had recently increased. In 1803 Patrick Colquhoun had ascribed many evils to substitute constables because of their inevitably low income and social status; only these qualities could account for why men accepted such employment. He had then also thought their numbers were increasing, but, strangely, the proportion of constables served by substitute was the same in both periods: about three-fifths.11 Perhaps Colquhoun anticipated a sensibility more strongly felt decades after his work was published: that men of lower social standing were not to be trusted with discretionary criminal justice authority since they were themselves more likely to be criminals. The danger of discretion derived from the social status of citizens likely to possess it. In a survey of metropolitan policing, John Wade made essentially the same assessment of constables in 1829 as Colquhoun had a quarter century earlier:

The office . . . has greatly degenerated, and is now in about the same predicament as that of metropolitan justice prior to the appointment of stipendiary magistrates; those on whom it devolves by operation of law being, for the most part, above its functions; while those who actually discharge them are unworthy of the trust . . . the office has fallen into the hands of the lowest class of retailers and costard-mon-gers, who make up the deficient allowance of their principals by indirect sources of emolument; by winking at offences they ought to prevent; by attorneying for parties; by encouraging prosecutions for the sake of obtaining their expenses; by screening the publican, pawnbroker, brothel-keeper, and receiver of stolen goods.12
The perennial assessments of constables’ effectiveness and the number of citizens hiring deputies turned less on real change than on changes in the perceived danger of those who actually served the office. The fact that the same number of taxpayers employed substitutes in 1830 as in 1803 suggests either that citizens were hiring poorer and less respectable substitutes or that those who traditionally served as substitutes were now deemed less trustworthy by some. But no matter whom citizens hired, the decision was theirs, so that if ward residents wanted “better” policing, however they might define it, they could employ men according to their own criteria of wealth, respectability, and vigilance. Ward councilmen possessed veto power over substitute appointees, and aldermen could always simply refuse to swear in undesirable candidates. The hidden assumption behind much of the criticism was that the people with discretionary power were not fit to exercise it and hence needed supervision, regulation, or, ultimately, to be deprived of that authority altogether. Centralization was the sign of a widening chasm between different conceptions of policing and thresholds of criminality, between City and ward authorities and within both structures as well.

The issue of constables, both substitutes and principals, was central to police reform in the 1830s. It included problems of civic participation in the criminal justice system, the expense of policing (since all substitutes had to be paid, as would all police in future manifestations), the local nature of enforcement priorities, and the relationship of officers’ social standing to accountability and efficiency. Ward leaders saw the office as both positive, representative of locally controlled policing, and negative, an unpleasant job that not enough inhabitants wanted to perform. Yet little evidence indicates a crisis of participation. Citizens had always tried every possible avenue of escape from a job that, admittedly, could not have been an agreeable way to spend the evening, with the chance of injury and the certainty of cold, damp weather and loss of sleep. Of course, if more tax-paying citizens could have been prevailed upon to serve as constable themselves, concerns about their social standing would have been less important, but that seemed unlikely, especially at a time when many of the City’s wealthier (and hence more “respectable”) residents were moving to the suburbs. Anthony Brown noted that many more shop owners and citizens with businesses in the City now lived away from their place of business, and perhaps these were the same respectable people who wanted neither to live among nor to associate with the lower sort.¹³

Attempts were made, nonetheless, to encourage more citizens to serve the office personally by removing some of its more unattractive aspects. The Common Council noted that fewer “respectable householders” would seek to avoid the office of constable if they did not have to serve at execu-
tions and public ceremonials. Neville Brown, the upper marshal, considered the Ward Constables . . . to be of little service because they refused to serve at public executions and other ceremonies and entirely neglected their watch-house duties. Charles Herdsfield, one of the marshalmen, claimed that the constables “want a great deal of looking after” and often sent others to do their duties.

The committee concluded that the best solution was to alter fundamentally, if not abolish, the office of ward constable, and some members wanted to eliminate the wards’ role in selecting and regulating the night watch. But legal difficulties arose with how far the Corporation could reduce or dismantle the structures of ward policing without applying to Parliament. The City solicitor, W. L. Newman, was initially optimistic, stating “that he was of opinion a Constabulary Force must be kept for the performance of various duties under the Common Law and under specific Acts of Parliament, but that he apprehended their numbers might be reduced.” A subcommittee resolved to unify the City’s day police and nightly watch into “one Force . . . under one Control,” a commissioner who would have “sole appointment of all the Officers of Police & be answerable for the due performance of the whole duty.” Since this body of officers would then perform all necessary policing functions, ward constables would have little to do and “their numbers should be reduced to an extent hereafter to be defined so that so many only be elected as are required for the performance of the duties imposed upon them by the Common Law or by Specific Acts of Parliament.” Ward constables, in other words, would no longer be necessary and could be phased out of existence. All current policing establishments in the City—the aldermen’s day police and the wards’ nightly watch—would be eliminated, “and that for prevention of crime, the Security of personal property and the preservation of public tranquility by day and night there should be provided a Body of Constables not exceeding Five hundred in number who should be placed under the Control of the Commissioner.” To reduce expense even further, all but seven of the wards’ thirty-two watch-houses would be closed.

This proposal addressed the central problem of inattentive ward constables who served by substitute and whose substitutes barely attended executions, sessions, or the watch-house and paid little or no attention to removing public nuisances, assisting at fires outside their wards, or standing guard at public ceremonies. In short, ward constables cost the inhabitants who paid their salaries (by way of substitutes’ fees), and performed none of the duties required of them “for the general protection and security” of those they ostensibly served. The only solution was to wipe the slate clean by creating a force for the whole City and responsible to one authority, who in turn would be appointed by a committee of the lord mayor,
aldermen, and a councilman representing each ward. This solution required the abolition of direct local control.

The proposal was notable not for any new policing responsibilities but for the elaborate hierarchy put into place to ensure the proper execution of duties that had been performed for centuries. Three superintendents, 12 inspectors, 48 conductors, and, finally, 432 regular constables would serve under the commissioner. One in every eight officers employed to police the City would in actuality be policing other officers. Naturally, none of these men would be responsible to a particular ward; rather, they would serve the City as a whole. Moreover, the plan would save money for the wards (whose watch rates would decrease) and the inhabitants annually chosen to pay their way out of the office of constable.19

But the legality of the plan remained unclear, and the City solicitor now felt that the abolition of ward constables, or even a reduction in their numbers, lay outside the law. Not only did the law require constables to perform certain duties—apprehending felons and preserving public order in a variety of ways—but constables also embodied certain rights of the City of London, by which Newman referred to individuals living within the City rather than the Corporation itself:

Such abolition of the present system would be prejudicial to the antient Laws and Franchises of this City under which the Citizens and Inhabitants of each Ward hold the power of electing such Constables at their Courts of Wardmote. Having also some doubt whether any other than those duly elected at the said Wardmotes would be legally protected in the execution of the duties of that office and whether the customary number in each Ward could be reduced consistent with the existing Laws of this City, so as that such constabulary force might become less efficient in point of number for the purposes of the Ward in particular and for the preservation of the Peace in the City generally.

Citizens had the right to police their own wards, and Newman foresaw that if anyone else performed that function, even if sanctioned by the Corporation itself, those officers might be legally liable to lawsuits for wrongful imprisonment, assault, and other actions for which ward constables received extra protection. This problem made abolition not impossible but more difficult, as the Corporation would have to receive parliamentary sanction before proceeding.20

Newman Knowlys, the City recorder, was even more critical of the proposal, testifying that he “objected to it on principle, and would oppose it decidedly, if he had a seat in Parliament.”21 The law, he said, gave power for
preservation of the peace to the lord mayor and aldermen as magistrates, but the plan would take this power away from them. He may have been referring to the plan’s proposal to delegate certain responsibilities for regulating the police to a commissioner and superintendents. The Freeman’s Oath, Knowlys argued, directed freemen of the City of London to be “obeysant and obedient ... to the Mayor and Magistrates,” and citizens so sworn could not then deprive magistrates of “the power of appointment and suspension.” Between the City’s solicitor, who tried cases, and the City’s recorder, who functioned as a magistrate and heard cases, we have a curious combination of arguments: the plan took away the rights of alderman to regulate the police, and it took away the citizens’ rights, in wards, to regulate the police as well. Knowlys also restated the argument for locally generated reform that was part of each ward’s discretionary power:

As to the expediency of altering the present system he by no means thought it necessary—many of the city officers do their duty well, although there are some deficient ... if in the election of Constables care were taken to elect competent persons, and the Nightly Watch (which is at present not sufficiently attended to) made more efficient, all would be effected that is required. ... Magistrates can swear in Constables for any particular duty.

Knowlys recognized that the power to reform the police lay in the wards and magistrates themselves, and that while applying to Parliament might aid a particular kind of reform, it was not inherently necessary.

Legal opinion, then, went against the tone and substance of the proposals and indicated divisions over the kind of reform desired, and such divisions provoked a public response: on May 7 the committee chair called a meeting “in consequence of the great anxiety expressed out of doors as to what the Corporation were likely to do in respect of the Police and Nightly Watch.” A subcommittee had presented a proposal on March 24, but “a great difference of opinion having arisen therein,” the proposal was then handed off to a different subcommittee, which concluded that the plan was “highly objectionable and inexpedient.” It would require the aid of Parliament, setting unwanted precedents for further legislative intrusion, and it would also reduce the number of police below acceptable levels. The plan had sought to get around that problem by emphasizing the greater efficiencies of centralization, but to the second subcommittee the reduction seemed not only like decreased protection but also like an unwarranted concentration of power. Its rhetoric pointed toward the infringement on
the lord mayor’s powers, but one suspects that the real concern was the decreased access to police regulation implied by such a hierarchy.26

The second subcommittee also affirmed Knowlys’s position on the possibility of meaningful reform within the boundaries of the 1737 Nightly Watch Act, that is, within the decision-making capacity of the Court of Common Council and the wards. It argued the merits of local authority and even local wisdom, and that

the appointment and management of the several Watchmen and Patrols ought to remain with the Aldermen, Deputy, and Common Council, in their respective wards, as the patrolling necessarily depends, in a great degree, upon the habits of the inhabitants, the nature of their businesses, and the peculiar localities of each ward; and of the Nightly Watch, in number, station, and mode of watching, the members of the several wards are, from their local knowledge, more competent to judge than any individuals or body of Commissioners, sitting at Guildhall, could be.27

Thus was revealed, in the contrast between the two reports, the clash between two sets of values regarding policing and two ideas about what constituted “efficiency.” One side thought of centralization as a model of legal authority based on transcendent criminal justice priorities held everywhere equally and hence equally applicable; the other conceptualized a model based on the efficiency of local decision making about those priorities and the recognition that different regions, and different individuals, might have different but equally valid policing priorities.

While opposing centralized authority, the second subcommittee did not argue for stasis but rather proposed to capitalize on and legitimate elements of ward policing that had evolved independently over previous decades. A common complaint had been the lack of daytime policing, and wards were already hiring assistant beadles, extra street-keepers, patroles, and watch superintendents to police the streets outside the night watchmen’s hours; the report recommended combining these officers with the day police under aldermanic direction for a force “amply sufficient for the protection of the City during the day.” Such a force would attend to public punishments, ceremonies, and executions, officially relieving ward constables of a duty so unpleasant that they had in fact stopped doing it years before. The nightly watch itself would remain as before.28

In many ways this plan, like the first, sought to break down ward particularity and loyalty, requiring for the first time a common uniform: “All the officers employed in the day duty should wear one uniform dress, and
the Nightly Watch, instead of the coats at present used by them, should be provided with some particular, but plain dress, which by an arrangement with the Deputies of the several wards, might be made uniform, and of one colour.” Ward leaders, moreover, should encourage officers to leave their wards if fire in adjacent areas required their assistance; this innovation had been proposed before, but now extra pay was promised. In an extension of the Corporation’s supervisory duties over ward policing, this new combination of police would be governed by a new committee composed of both common councilmen and aldermen, the latter necessarily included because all the day officers would be sworn as constables and because the plan incorporated the already existing City Police into its proposals.29

How, then, did the two kinds of reform differ? Both would have been ostensibly under the same kinds of control by committees representing aldermen and members of each ward’s Common Council. However, the first called for the entire force to be sworn as constables, which meant that much greater authority over them would remain with the Court of Aldermen, with a greater real possibility of such constables being called out of their separate wards to address rioters. Perhaps most importantly, under the first plan a commissioner responsible to a representative committee made all appointments, but under the second ward leaders and residents continued to exercise the power of appointment directly. Philosophically they differed as well: the first plan sought dramatic reform by scrapping old systems of policing, whereas the second sought to incorporate those elements of incremental and local reform already undertaken by ward leaders and to preserve a greater although not absolute degree of local autonomy.

The Common Council heard both proposals and, in a notable moment of indecision, referred them back to committee the same day, again desiring a principle of uniformity, under the control of a Central Committee to be appointed by this Court, to make such arrangements as shall ensure the efficient co-operation of the Watch and Police of the various Wards when necessary;—to strengthen the Day Police;—to reduce as far as possible the number of Ward Constables; and to relieve the Inhabitants of this City of as large a portion as may be of the various Sums paid by them for the support of the Nightly Watch and Day Police.30

The issue thus went back to the Nightly Watch Committee, where relations between different factions had grown more contentious in recent weeks and now worsened. The month before, the committee had been moved to consider police reform “upon the basis of a system of uniformity to be
placed under the control of a General Committee of Management without reference to the present division of Wards,” but the motion had failed. In fact, the committee’s report, which had contained both proposals, almost did not make it to the court at all. On the very day that it was presented, Alderman Venables, the committee chair, tried to block a vote on whether to present both reports, but members called for a formal vote that passed, twelve to eleven.

Though the vote was close, the committee ultimately supported the second, more gradualist and less centralized conception of watch reform, arguing that “the entire force engaged in the Nightly Watch, as well as the other Ward Officers and Street Keepers, be placed under the control and management of the local authorities.” The Common Council then ordered the Nightly Watch Committee to sit regularly, once every month, to take suggestions from ward leaders on an ongoing basis. Having been initiated in order to centralize City policing authority, the committee concluded instead with an affirmation of ward control. Rhetorically, at least, this seemed to be the case, supported by the recommended abolition of the Night Patrole, the police regulated by the Court of Aldermen. Two of the twelve men on the Night Patrole would serve as superintendents of the nightly watch, and the rest would be added to the Day Patrole, which effectively meant that the Court of Aldermen would hold responsibility for all policing during the daytime, “entirely leaving it to the Aldermen Deputies and Common Council men of the several Wards to make the due and effectual provision for the Nightly Watch of this City.” The aldermen agreed.

By night, evidently, local authority continued to prevail.

The reality was somewhat different. The Nightly Watch Committee, now meeting each month, came to serve the same functions as ward meetings had before. It was at these meetings that complaints about particular robberies were heard, and the committee began to require reports by watch officers about burglaries, deaths, or irregular practices in their respective wards. The superintendents gave monthly reports on crime throughout the City, and the committee even appears to have investigated crimes as well. In November 1831, Cheap ward experienced two burglaries, one of over £2,000 worth of lace, and the committee sent a letter to the ward deputy “drawing his attention to the two Burglaries recently committed in his ward and of the wish of the Committee that an investigation should take place respecting the same and requesting him to furnish this Committee with all the information he can respecting the same.”

Every ward watch-house was henceforth to keep a book in which watch officers would sign in and record nightly occurrences, and these books were to be surveyed by the committee every month. In several ways, then,
while wards still regulated much local watch activity, the Common Council had succeeded in exerting more authority over ward policing, no doubt aided by the simple administrative device of a standing committee. A committee charged with nothing but regulation, one not responding to any particular crisis but hearing the state of the watch every month, could not help but provide a powerful platform for ongoing reformist energies. So although watch reform appeared settled by 1830, the problems of local difference and local discretion, particularly in the case of ward constables, had merely been shelved temporarily. The issues would be looked at anew when the focus on deterring crime fused with a desire to respond more effectively to riots during the public disturbances and reform agitation of 1830–32.

### III. The “New” City Police, 1832

In January 1831 the Court of Aldermen discontinued the Night Patrole and doubled the Day Patrole, which, with the marshals, marshalmen and the six “police officers,” meant a force that “we consider fully adequate for the protection of this City during the day.” But protection from what? Though the Court of Aldermen, and its Police Committee that regularly attended to the City Police, continued to see such day police in terms of crime prevention, by 1832 this function had begun to change. The riots attending consideration of parliamentary reform in 1830–31, in rural districts as well as London, led the national government to concentrate two thousand of the new Metropolitan police in Westminster as an alternative to the seven thousand soldiers deployed around the capitol. Windows of government ministers were broken, country estates were fortified, and for a time the events looked like revolution to some. Though in the event such escalation did not happen, the prospect must have heightened the concern of the propertied everywhere—even those who supported the reform cause. In January of that year the Common Council again recommended consolidating all City police, Day Patroles, and night watchmen under one authority; while the Common Council clearly still saw criminality as its main concern, there are signs that the riots of the early 1830s had made an impact in the City. William Cope, one of the City marshals, suggested that night watchmen, if organized differently, “might be called in to assist the Day Police occasionally in cases of disturbance.”

The aldermen also began an inquiry in February 1832 and without delay voted to abolish the Day Patrole, marshals, and marshalmen and to stop hiring extra constables, thus creating a wholly new policing structure “under the sole authority and control of this Honourable Court.” The
Corporation alone spent over £6,000 per year on its various police officers, they complained, “for which an adequate Force is by no means provided,” and their meaning was clear:

Having taken into our serious consideration the present state of that part of the Police which is more immediately under the direction and control of the Magistracy . . . it appears to us to be highly necessary that the same should be remodelled and put upon a more extended and efficient footing than at present so as to be at all times in readiness as an available and useful force under the directions of the Magistracy in cases of tumult or confusion arising as also for the execution of the duties required in the public Streets and in attending upon all Ceremonials and public occasions within this City.

They proposed and approved of a force of one hundred officers, all sworn constables and all under their regulation, to provide the City with “a very competent and efficient Police Establishment . . . conducted at an expense not exceeding that at present.” They had no desire to tamper with the nightly watch but hoped the Common Council would “make so far available that the Men may at any time be called out during the day in case of Riot taking place, by which means the City would have five hundred Men at least at all times ready for actual service.”

The aldermen did not stop there, for, having abolished much of the traditional structure of policing, they sought to reduce the number of ward constables as well. Perhaps they felt that the new City Police would fulfill the main duties of such officers, or that ward constables were wholly unreliable. Certainly William Cope thought so, testifying that ward constables “do not look after the Thieves do not consider it their duty—that he has no confidence in the Ward Constables as an efficient force in case of Tumults.” Substitutes, because they were relatively poor, may have been thought overly sympathetic to working-class political demonstrations, or unwilling to see riot suppression as part of a ward constable’s responsibility. At the very least, eliminating the office would save money for residents, which might make the new force more widely acceptable.

Cope’s suggestion that watchmen assist the Day Patrole led the Nightly Watch Committee to recommend a consolidation of the two forces, similar to the aldermen’s proposal. Consolidation, though, implied that the Court of Aldermen, the Common Council, or the separate wards would have to give up some element of control, and consensus again broke down on this issue.

The Day and Night Police Committee, formed to produce such legislation and composed of both aldermen and councilmen, manifested tensions
almost immediately. Colonel Rowan and Sir Richard Mayne, commissioners of the new Metropolitan Police, testified before it that “the person who shall have the control of the whole force & is answerable for their good conduct should have the choice of the Men.” Following their lead, the committee recommended amalgamating the day police and nightly watch into a force of four hundred officers. These officers would not be tied to particular wards; hence, efficiency would be improved and fewer officers would be needed to cover the entire City. This proposal meant a vast reduction in numbers, for at present over nine hundred constables, beadles, under beadles, and watchmen of several rank, their beats set ward by ward, made up the nightly watch. Efficiency thus meant, at least in part, reducing duplication of service at ward boundaries in which several wards paid officers to perform the same duty. William Jones, a councilman on the committee, later testified before a parliamentary Select Committee regarding one reason for such a reduction: “Here is a street with two men going up and down it, that street dividing two wards, and each being patrolled separately; many streets in the City of London are very narrow, one portion belonging to one ward and one to another; two men are actually doing the same thing, in consequence of this.” The proposed police would certainly have cost residents less; the committee estimated savings to residents of £15,000 each year out of the annual watch rates.

Not everyone agreed with this kind of efficiency, which took the power over policing out of individual wards, but a reassertion of ward authority now failed, signifying an important shift since 1830. The committee resolved “that the Control and Management of the Day and Night police ought to be placed under one Authority.” Some councilmen argued that such fundamental alterations of the police deserved “a more deliberate and careful consideration and investigation,” but the Court of Common Council ignored the implications of railroading and submitted a consolidated police bill to Parliament. On July 26 the court learned that the bill had been altered after it had finished with it. One or more aldermen had inserted a clause placing the Night Police under the aldermen’s control; because sworn as constables, the Night Police would be “subject to the jurisdiction of the Magistrates and Justices in such and in the like manner as other Constables are by Law subject.” This change destroyed whatever consensus might have existed. The Common Council protested its loss of control and ordered the remembrancer (the Corporation officer charged with handling City business in Parliament) to have the words expunged or the bill withdrawn. Councilmen asked the mayor to convene a special meeting to discuss the aldermen’s apparently high-handed actions, but the mayor declined. The offending words must have been struck anyway, for
the Court of Aldermen met on July 26 in high dudgeon, proclaiming indignantly and frantically that the bill without such phrasing will render the said Magistrates unable to execute their respective duties in preserving the Peace of this City and more especially in case of any riot or disturbance and will not only tend to the introduction of a Military Force in all such cases but to place the City very shortly in the hands of the Secretary of State for the Home Department and ultimately lead to the introduction of a paid Magistracy instead of the City being governed by Magistrates chosen by the Citizens and as it has hitherto ever been.

The aldermen argued, in essence, that unless they directly supervised the night police, they might not be able to preserve public order, part of their function as City magistrates. This in turn could conceivably require them to request military aid from the Home secretary, and hence force them to surrender the City’s privilege of self-government. In order to protect the City’s freedoms, the aldermen had to take away those of the Common Council. With that, the bill was pulled before it ever got to the House of Commons, as one participant put it, “entirely from the opposition that was given to the magistrates having more power in the management of the police than the Common Council thought they ought to have.”

The mere threat of such a bill provoked considerable opposition from individual wards as well as the Common Council as a whole, but while the council argued on behalf of its own privileges relative to those of aldermen, ward petitions argued for the wards’ own privileges. Vintry ward begged the Common Council to oppose any reform “whereby the control will be removed from the Local authorities.” Inhabitants of Cripplegate Without protested that the Nightly Watch of their Ward has been rendered very efficient, and being under the immediate Control and Superintendence of the Local Authorities, its efficiency is likely to be preserved by the facility with which any inattention or neglect of duty in any part of the Ward can be made known to the proper Authorities, by any, even the humblest Inhabitant of the Ward; and from the certainty that due and immediate attention will be paid to any wellfounded complaints.

In another petition the next month, 160 residents of the same ward restated that the watch was “highly satisfactory to the Inhabitants at large, and there does not appear to be any good reason for an alteration,” objecting to the powers placed under the Bill in the hands of a commissioner as ultimately
“subversive of the rights and privileges of the Citizens of London.” Aldersgate residents “viewed with dissatisfaction the attempt which has been made to deprive them of the privileges which they have so long possessed of appointing the persons who are to protect their lives and property” and considered that “any proposed alterations with respect to the Ward Officers ought to emanate from themselves and that any Legislative measure which might be brought forward upon this subject ought to be supported by the complaints of the Citizens at large of the inefficiency of the present system.” They had held a special meeting to oppose the bill by petitioning the Court of Common Council and paying to publish the petition in the *Times* and the *Morning Advertiser.* Seventy-five Dowgate petitioners argued that while the Bill was ostensibly designed to answer the nightly watch’s growing expense, “they cannot avoid looking with suspicion on any measure proposing to remove the local authority . . . to that of a Commission.” Broad Street residents petitioned the Common Council to “refuse its sanction to any new system of Nightly Watch, tending to deprive them of the local services of their Representatives in a matter of so great importance as the protection by night of the houses and property of the inhabitants of this Ward.”

Ward petitions against the Bill, then, articulated support for local authority over policing in several ways that were embedded in traditional structures of ward social policy. Inhabitants used rhetoric about ancient rights and liberties to defend the virtue of local control and to argue that truly efficient change could only derive from their own efforts—a concept of efficiency rather different from that of many City leaders. Deputy Richard Hicks of Castle Baynard ward explained several years later that he had opposed the Bill at the urging of his constituents, and his testimony reveals practical concerns of those residents whom police reform would affect the most:

They have a control individually over the nightly watch, which they consider they would lose if there were an uniform force under the control of the aldermen or magistrates; if any cause of complaint arises, from neglect or impropriety of conduct, or any other matter which may be the cause of complaint against the watchmen, by a complaint being made the following morning to the deputy of the ward, such matter is usually inquired into and determined upon its merits; it was an argument used by the inhabitants in my own presence, that if a board were established or they had to attend upon the court of aldermen, they might have to wait sometimes an hour or two before they were called in in their turn, or it might be several days before the case might be finally heard, which would cause considerable inconvenience to them; and therefore finding the present system work exceedingly
well in the ward, it was their desire that no change should take place.\textsuperscript{66}

The residents of Castle Baynard had reason to be pleased, for Hicks had recently restructured the watch by “superannuating those old men whose lives have been faithfully spent in the service of the Ward, and who are no longer able to fulfill those duties; by discharging such as were unfit; by appointing active, able-bodied, and powerful men, of good character only, who have little or no daily occupation; and subjecting the whole to certain regulations.”\textsuperscript{67} In championing and enacting local watch reform, Hicks was doing what any ward leader could do.

In 1834 the Court of Aldermen tried again, submitting an application to Parliament “for regulating the Election and Duties of the several Ward Constables.”\textsuperscript{68} On March 22 the aldermen’s Police Committee directed the remembrancer to prepare “a Bill for abolishing the Office of Ward Constable altogether—giving the Court of Aldermen power to place proper persons to perform the night duty as Constable in such places as they may think proper.”\textsuperscript{69} The Common Council protested to Parliament that while the bill’s preamble sought to “more effectually enforc[e] the due execution of the Office of Constable,” the aldermen intended something deceptive and quite different,

> in reality to abolish the Office of Ward Constable and to substitute a system of Police appointed by the said Court of Aldermen in lieu of the Ward Constables who are annually chosen by their fellow Citizens in Wardmote assembled and indirectly to deprive your Petitioners of the exercise of the powers vested in them for the regulation of the Ward Constables and Nightly Watch.

Not only would the bill authorize aldermen to appoint all substitute constables throughout the City, it would also allow them to collect the requisite fines residents paid to get out of serving the office. And it allowed aldermen to appoint as many constables as they liked independently of ward officers, “a power which may be exercised to the great injury of the Inhabitants of the City of London.”\textsuperscript{70} This bill, like that of 1832, fell owing to divisions over the nature of control.\textsuperscript{71}

One would expect that the riots and demonstrations of the early 1830s affected police reform, and we have seen how several City officers noted the need for more police at public disturbances. In May 1833 demonstrations had taken place in Cold Bath Fields, and though the Court of Aldermen ordered all ward constables to attend, a large number had not. Fully 103 ward officers never appeared, which may have given some aldermen and councilmen further reason to restructure the City’s nightly watch to make it more
serviceable by day as well. But this problem was nothing new; complaints of ward constables’ nonattendance at public ceremonies and disturbances had been made for several decades, and in any case little evidence points to a real sense of crisis at this time. Nor did aldermen seem particularly disturbed by the trades union meetings in Copenhagen Fields of April 1834, though the lord mayor “ordered the Marshals to have the City Police force being One hundred Men ready in case of need.” No problems developed, but the fact that the lord mayor made use of the City Police in this fashion suggests that preserving civic order may have played a part in its evolution. This, however, only explains police reform up to a point, for the Common Council consistently opposed police reform measures that emphasized policing riots.

IV. City Policing in the Late 1830s

By the 1830s, then, a series of reform proposals had been floated and most had sunk. The one successful reform was the one enacted by the aldermen in creating the City Police in 1832. This measure had passed only because it had left alone the power of wards and the Common Council. Even so, the City Police of 1832 was not markedly different than the assorted police forces formerly maintained by the aldermen, so the change appears less revolutionary and more a formalization of the buildup of City policing in past decades. There was continuity between new and old; not only did the marshal become the superintendent of the new force, but all the officers employed previously were offered posts in the new City Police. What did policing mean by the 1830s? Though some new duties had arisen since the late eighteenth century, the main change was one of control, even before the reforms of 1838. By 1831 the Court of Aldermen’s Police Committee was meeting three times each month, and through its jurisdiction over constables, marshals, marshalmen, and the City Police in effect already regulated much daytime policing. Much of what the committee actually did, however, concerned matters previously handled by wards or by the marshals and marshalmen. After 1828 the inspector of the Day Patrole delivered monthly reports of officers’ conduct and residents’ complaints, and on that basis the committee regularly discharged officers for drunkenness, as when George Tennant “was found drunk in Vintry Ward Watch House,” or John Herdsfield was suspended for intoxication at Bartholomew Fair. In 1832 it dismissed John Edwards “for using offensive language towards his Serjeant,” and William Gardner “for being in bed with a woman.” It enforced residency of officers within the City boundaries; looked over watch-house books to ensure that marshalmen had visited; ordered the
streets cleared of vagrants according to very old statutes; and regulated (or attempted to regulate) public houses, fairs, and the persistent problem of bad meat being sold in Smithfield Market. In certain specific instances, the committee and the police did perform new tasks, most notably in handling the high volume of complaints about traffic in City streets. A Castle Baynard ward constable described the press of omnibuses, carts, and coaches in St. Paul’s churchyard, and the marshals confirmed that some coaches stayed there an hour or more waiting for passengers and blocking traffic. The committee accordingly ordered a City police officer to regulate such traffic.

The nightly watch also remained in practice close to its eighteenth-century roots. Like the aldermen’s Police Committee, the Common Council’s Nightly Watch Committee had assumed increasing authority over the wards’ separate watches by the 1830s. As in the Police Committee, this control was facilitated by monthly reports on watchmen, constables, and burglaries compiled by the superintendent of the nightly watch. The Nightly Watch Committee inspected the wards’ watchmen as a whole, working to break down both individual ward control and an intensely local conception of ward policing, so that by January 1838 the superintendent of the watch noted that “it was not now the practice for Watchmen in cases of Robbery or otherwise to decline going from one Ward to another to apprehend Offenders,” something that would have been inconceivable just a decade before. It, too, dismissed inefficient watchmen on complaint, but also reinstated them when individual ward councilmen argued on their behalf.

In general, then, what was truly different about policing in the 1830s was the overwhelming sense of hierarchy, centralized authority, and stress on accountability at all levels of governance. Individual wards, the Common Council, and the Court of Aldermen had all sought to implement essentially the same kinds of changes in their own jurisdictions, while at the same time retaining control of such decisions when threatened, in many cases, by each other. So although there was much opposition to reform proposals in these years, there was at the same time a constant reevaluation of criminological priorities throughout the City. In that context, the regular meetings and reformism of the aldermen’s Police Committee and the Common Council’s Nightly Watch Committee meant that aldermen and councilmen now held increased discretion over local policing—the kind of control exercised for the previous half-century, and earlier, by ward leaders and inhabitants.

V. The Triumph of Centralization, 1838

In light of the previous decade’s reform efforts, the eventual consolidation of City policing in 1838 came as no surprise but rather as the long-anticipated,
and by some feared, abolition of local policing authority. As with earlier proposals, the watch and police reform of 1838–39 came out of several concerns—financing, civic responsibility, jurisdiction, control, and criminality. By no means was this last installment of reform more dramatic or more sudden than in past years; the issues in 1838 were quite similar to the issues of 1830, 1832, and 1834—even Matthew Wood’s reform attempts in 1815. But attitudes toward centralization in the City had shifted sufficiently by the late 1830s to make palatable what had been voted down time and again in the past.

The issue began in the Common Council, which moved in October 1837 to consolidate City policing. For several months efforts were made to kill the initiative, both in the council and in the Nightly Watch Committee, but in January 1838 the Common Council finally secured a majority to proceed, petitioned Parliament, and began drawing up a bill. At that moment it became clear that the government had its own ideas of consolidation on a larger scale. Late in February 1838 the Court of Aldermen received an explosive letter from Lord John Russell, then the Home Secretary:

Observing that a Bill has been brought into the House of Commons for improving the City Police, I think it right to inform you, and I request you to communicate the information to the City Authorities that the Government is of opinion, the Police ought to be placed under the Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police. Her Majesty’s Ministers therefore intend to propose a measure for accomplishing this object.

This declaration was not well received by anyone in the City. The Court of Aldermen protested, sent a deputation to meet with Russell, and argued tellingly that “if the proposed object be to adopt one uniform system of Police and such object should appear desirable this Court is of opinion that means may be adopted fully to effect that object without destroying or impairing the valuable Franchises of the Citizens of London.” This statement suggests the possibility that the aldermen were prepared to use the threat of infringement from without in order to force the Common Council to give up some of its own authority, for they then requested that the Common Council withdraw its nightly watch bill from parliamentary consideration, or alter it “in such manner as to place the Nightly Watch under the same control as the Day Police now is.” By November, operating under this threat, the Common Council passed a Watch Act for the following year that it called a “Bill for appointing and regulating the Day Police and Nightly Watch.” The old system of ward-specific and ward-regulated policing, encroached upon for decades by this point, was suddenly abolished. Five hundred men, all sworn as constables, would be under the control of a superintendent appointed by the council. Though most of the expense of the new system would be borne...
by taxes levied by each ward, the officers themselves would no longer be appointed by ward leaders or inhabitants; they would be divided into six districts rather than being responsible in any way to a particular part of the City. In an emblematic gesture of continuity between new and old, when Aldersgate ward pensioned off its watchmen and watch inspector, ward leaders allowed the forcibly retired officers to keep their uniforms, “with the exception of the Great Coats which had been lent to the New Police.”

Why did this fundamental change in how residents of the City structured their police take place in 1838? The end of ward constables, and of direct ward influence over hiring, discharging, and regulating night watchmen, was surely a dramatic event. It is important to qualify this idea and to understand precisely how this change was a major transformation and how in many ways it was not. It was the same kind of reform that had very nearly passed earlier in the decade, and furthermore, it built upon hundreds of minute alterations by ward inhabitants, common councilmen, and aldermen over at least the past half-century. Increasingly close supervision of ward constables and watchmen by the Nightly Watch Committee and similar regulation of City police (in any incarnation) by the aldermen's Police Committee had informally gone a long way toward the control exhibited in the 1838 reform. Perhaps most importantly, the reform of 1838 kept the Common Council, representative of each ward’s interests, at the center of police regulation. Wards and the Common Council had opposed earlier reforms in part because many gave too much power to the Court of Aldermen, which represented wealth more than constituents. What did citizens have to say? Surprisingly, very little. If the 1830s indeed saw a decline in citizens’ participation in regulating the police, one could then explain reform as the Corporation stepping in to do what individuals no longer wanted to do themselves. In part this was true; middle-class property owners apparently disliked policing public ceremonies and executions, and many such citizens resided in the City by day only and hence had less time to attend to the watch. Ward records, however, show no decline in interest at ward meetings, where police regulation continued, and even increased in volume, right up to 1838. It may have been residents’ positive experiences dealing with the aldermen’s and Common Council’s regulatory committees since the mid-1820s that made relinquishing direct control more acceptable, or the negative threat of relinquishing even more control to the state should the City not undertake this degree of internal centralization. In addition, of course, the new police were sold as a less expensive option than the old. With all policing under one authority, in theory rising costs could be better controlled. It may well be for all of these reasons that in 1838 citizens of the City of London agreed to sever the direct connection between their own policing priorities and how their police were actually regulated.