Though only part of the mainstream British political discourse since the early 1990s, serious organised crime has frequently dominated public attention, mythologised by the entertainment industry and sensationalised by the mass media. The concept of serious organised crime is a vague one – with definitions generally attempting to cast the net wide enough to catch those it’s aimed at, without also including those whose activities are not seen as a significant threat to society (Levi 2002:882). Unlike some other contested phrases (e.g. terrorism), there has been some international consensus – in for example, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. In the UK, the accepted definition was formulated by the (now dissolved) National Crime Intelligence Service: “those involved, normally working with others, in continuing serious criminal activities for substantial profit, whether based in the UK or elsewhere” (Home Office 2004).

While useful in that it highlights the often transnational nature of such activity, the definition begs the question, what is serious organised criminal activity? One might be tempted to take Justice Stewart’s approach, and claim that we “know it when we see it”, but this is analytically unsatisfactory. While issues of definition will not be pursued here, it is important to view any discussion in light of the broad and contested nature of the subject.

Serious organised crime is commonly understood as including drug trafficking, people trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, illegal waste dumping, smuggling, credit card fraud, media piracy and smuggling (Levi 2002: 880).

The money associated with this crime is staggering. It is estimated that 2% of the UK’s GDP, or approximately £18bn, consists of ‘dirty assets’. Globally, the socio-economic costs are estimated to be in the region of £20-£40bn per year (Home Office 2004). The Home Office estimates that in the UK alone, the social costs from Class-A drug use is in excess of £30m per year. Unsurprisingly, these figures have prompted a strong response from the government. The Blair government’s determination to be ‘tough on crime’ has given birth to an unprecedented volume of legislation. On average, in the 60 years prior to 1985, parliament produced one criminal justice act per decade. Between 1985-1995, the rate was one every 18 months. Under Blair, it’s been in excess of two a year. The foremost development in the past decade (and perhaps in the history of British policing) has been the establishment of the Serious Organised Crime Agency.

### SOCA: Serious Organised Crime Agency

*The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 received Royal Assent in April 2005, and the Agency was launched almost a year later, on 3 April 2006. SOCA’s innovations include facilitating informants for Queen’s evidence, financial reporting orders and disclosure notices, as well as enabling officers with the combined powers of intelligence gathering, police, and customs officials. The establishment of SOCA was described as “a paradigm shift” in British policing, prompting commentators to wonder if we should “be afraid” (Harfield 2006; Corker 2006, Bowling and Ross 2006).*

### Effectiveness

A recent Channel 4 News special report exposed SOCA as an agencyparalysed by excessive bureaucracy, under-experienced staff and ‘top-centered’ management. The report went on to highlight poor morale and low job satisfaction, as well as a number of staff leaving after less than a year in their posts. This image of inexperienced, demoralised staff is contrary to what was expected prior to SOCA’s launch. One former National Crime Squad detective noted that SOCA “needs to be elite”. If SOCA is indeed failing to retain highly qualified, expert staff, then this is likely to hinder effective operational effectiveness. Perhaps these problems can be put down to the teething problems of a new agency.

One area in which the agency has been somewhat successful is the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). Established as part of SOCA, it enjoyed its first successful prosecution in June 2006. However, CEOP is largely autonomous within SOCA and other operative matters appear less successful. The case of drug crime prevention is illustrative. According to the SOCA officer interviewed by Channel 4 News, of “around 300 cases” referred from HMRC (HM Revenue & Customs) to SOCA since the latter’s inception, only “a handful … in the region of about 10 cases” have been taken up by SOCA. Whether this has lead to a gap in crime prevention, or whether it is simply a new strategy being pursued to solve an old problem remains to be seen. Nevertheless the question arises as to how SOCA’s effectiveness is monitored.
Accountability

SOCA’s accountability came to the fore in the debate around its establishing Act, with fears of Home Office control. Certainly, the most direct means of accountability is to the Secretary of State (Bowling and Ross 2006). HMIC must inspect the agency “from time to time”, or at the request of the Home Secretary. Individual complaints can be investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), though that agency has yet to show itself capable of standing up to powerful police chiefs. While initial worries were of centralised control of a national police, a year into the operation of SOCA the concern is more about the lack of any accountability. The government’s present position is that SOCA’s annual reports are sufficient oversight, and the agency’s first such report is eagerly anticipated.

SOCA’s unaccountable and secretive nature is evidenced by the lack of publicly available information about its work. Exempt from freedom of information requirements, its executive refuses press interviews and exerts strong control over media interaction. Its website lists only three ‘updates’ since its launch in April 2006, one of which pertains to interaction. Its website lists only three ‘updates’ since its launch in April 2006, one of which pertains to information requirements, its executive refuses press interviews and exerts strong control over media interaction. Its website lists only three ‘updates’ since its launch in April 2006, one of which pertains to

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