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JANUARY 21 - 25, 2009
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To Expel an Inspector How the LAPD cleansed itself

Bobbi Murray

published: December 10, 1998



Photo by Slobodan Dimitrov

Even at the best of times, Katherine Mader encountered only grudging cooperation in her

pioneering role as the LAPD's first inspector general. More often, she was regarded by the police department in terms one captain offered soon after she accepted the post: "A host organism trying to expel a foreign intruder."

Rather than wait to be expelled, Mader resigned last month, leaving department critics to fume that the LAPD and the civilian Police Commission were standing by as the reforms endorsed by the Christopher Commission in 1991 — including creation of an Inspector General's Office — were nullified. Speaking before the Elected Charter Commission Monday night in her first public appearance since her resignation, Mader pressed for changes to the city charter that would strengthen the role of the LAPD's civilian watchdog.

"There are a lot of pressures that are applied every day to an inspector general that lives in the Police Department," Mader said.

Mader's position was challenged by her erstwhile bosses. The five members of the Police Commission stood literally shoulder-to-shoulder as they cautioned the charter panel against creating a local "independent prosecutor." It was the third time in two months that commissioners had closed ranks to insist that the inspector general serve under the direct supervision of the commission's executive director, a structure that sharply diminishes the I.G.'s authority.

The charter-reform panel ignored that advice, voting instead that the inspector general report directly to the Police Commission.

But the debate over Mader and her role will be reprised again next Monday, when the City Council's Public Safety Committee holds a special hearing on the questions of autonomy, independence and police reform.

Mader's sudden resignation took many by surprise, but pressure against her has been mounting since last year, after Police Chief Willie Williams was forced from office, to be replaced by the popular Bernard Parks.

There are recurring suggestions that Mader was encouraged to investigate the department with much more vigor when Williams was chief, and was increasingly restricted after Parks came in.

"It's only in the last year that there have been problems," observed Ramona Ripston, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. "In the first year, during Williams' tenure, no one focused on her. She seemed to be getting information. We never heard from her."

Police Protective League Director Dennis Zine, a fierce Parks critic, is more direct. "They used [Mader's] position to get Williams out — and then she became a problem."



Not that Mader wasn't a "problem" for Williams, running afoul of him six months after her appointment in 1996 when she issued a report showing the LAPD undercounted complaints and had a sloppy tracking system.

Raymond C. Fisher, then president of the police commission, was careful not to take sides in the conflict, but used the issue to restate this week the importance of the inspector-general position. "While we were there, there was clearly a concern about getting the Christopher Commission reforms concluded," Fisher said in a phone interview.

Mader pressed ahead with investigations into police-discipline problems and issued three reports in 1997, two before Parks' inauguration in August, and one in November.

Fisher departed the commission that month to take a top post at the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. Mader has not issued a report since; one, a critical assessment of police use-of-force procedures, was prepared for issuance this fall but has not been cleared for release.

Civil rights advocates say that the current dearth of reporting reflects the commission's ebbing interest in pursuing reforms since Parks came in, the same lack of interest that brought pressure to bear on Mader.

"The leadership changed and we have not been getting updates on the status of the Christopher Commission reforms," said the ACLU's Ripston.

Police Commissioner Dean Hensell responded that Mader and her position were "not marginalized" and that she has gotten many more assignments that don't necessarily result in reports. "To the extent there's been any changes, the inspector general has gotten busier," he said, adding that Mader's productivity was an issue for the commission.

The commission's tough critique of Mader's work is the latest volley in a siege that began with real intensity this time last year, three months after Parks took office and following Fisher's departure.

Mader went to the commission in November to propose investigating a domestic-violence case involving a police officer. Before Mader could begin fact-finding, Commissioner Edith Perez called a press conference to announce her own investigation; she was later overruled by the rest of the commission. Later that month, another scuffle occurred when Perez reportedly encouraged the Police Protective League to undermine Mader's work — an incident the league's Zine says was misinterpreted.

"There was an unhappiness with Mader that got discussed — it wasn't a conspiracy," he said, adding that Mader was an ally in defending officers on disciplinary matters. "I spoke with one commissioner who expressed unhappiness with Mader; it was clear to me that she wasn't looked upon favorably by some of the commission."

Mader's standing slipped again this past July with the appointment of Joe Gunn as the Police Commission's executive director — and Mader's boss, according to the commission's interpretation of the city charter. Gunn was a commander and 20-year LAPD veteran when he retired in 1979 to pursue a screenwriting career. He was appointed deputy mayor in 1996 and served as Riordan's point man on Parks' selection as police chief.

By then, Mader was finding all her official contacts strained. In her testimony before the Charter Reform Commission, Mader described a Police Department where personnel are under orders to let the chief know if they have been contacted by the Inspector General's Office; calls from the chief to the commissioners were often followed by questions from the commission's executive director.

Her office was supposed to have unrestricted access to department files, but was able to get information only on a piecemeal basis. And there was the time that officers from Internal Affairs came to her office with tweezers and a demand for a complaint letter — and planned to search for fingerprints to determine who had sent it.

The final escalation against Mader came in September, when the City Council approved an extraordinary pay hike for Gunn, reasoning that his salary should exceed Mader's because he was her boss. When Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg balked at that hierarchy of command, Gunn was emphatic. He supervised Mader "on a daily basis," Gunn told Goldberg. "On her special projects, special investigations, she has to gain my approval."

Gunn and the commissioners point to ambiguous wording in the city charter to confirm their authority; others are more equivocal. "Somewhere along the line, this reporting relationship took form and no one said anything," said Frederick N. Merkin of the City Attorney's Office, who wrote the charter language that was approved by Los Angeles voters in April 1995. "I have no recollection that it was an issue at any time until this most recent time."

Former Police Commissioner Fisher speaks of the inspector-general position as one that was taking shape after the position was legally created.

"We did succeed in upgrading the salary and status of the inspector general when the commission had a better idea of how to use an inspector general," Fisher said.