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Pity the criminal who falls foul of Britain's heroic curtain twitchers

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There are many things I would rather do than join the Neighbourhood Watch – read German philosophy, clean out a wardrobe, talk to the tortoise... I picture busybodies and lace curtain-twitchers who get together for evenings spent fussing about low-level crime, a group that's an instrument of the anxious middle classes, fearful of things that go bump in the night.

But now the organisation has hit back at such lazy stereotyping, insisting its members are at the forefront of the fight against terrorism and human trafficking. The stats back them up: a Neighbourhood Watch presence has been shown to reduce crime by up to 26 per cent.

Let's face it, the police need all the help they can get these days. I once (eventually, reluctantly) answered the persistent ringing of our doorbell, to a young man wearing only a shirt, who had gone to a pub after work and knew nothing of what had happened from that time until he was dumped at the end of our street, stripped of pants, trousers, socks and shoes, at 2am.

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I phoned 999; but the police would only come if somebody's life was threatened. I gave him some clothes and sent him home in an Uber, staggered that even the possibility of some form of sexual assault having been committed didn't engage the police.

Serious crime fighters or not, though, the Neighbourhood Watch is a manifestation of that spirit of self-help that the British have traditionally been good at. Volunteers referee football matches, serve in hospices and patrol the drawing rooms of the National Trust – yes, and join the Neighbourhood Watch. David Cameron's idea of the Big Society didn't get traction: it was a tricky wheeze to promote, particularly at a time of cuts. But it made sense.

There are limits to what the state can do and the principle that we should all look out for each other and each other's property is no bad thing.

Isn't it what we notice with charm and envy in Mediterranean countries where children can play in the village square, seemingly unsupervised until late at night, because all the grown-ups keep a surreptitious eye on them? Most of Britain isn't like that any more.

So let's not deride efforts to cement some of the loose bricks back into society, particularly when it's in everybody's interests to keep homes and possessions safe and especially when there's more aggression on the streets – or possibly the same aggression expressed in a different way. (Richard Gough's *History of Myddle*, a contemporary account of a Shropshire village written in about 1700, shows that random stabbings were a regular occurrence.)

The collapse in hierarchy we have seen in recent years – where yobs see it as their right to behave badly – deserves to be challenged, and not just by the police.

My late mother-in-law, a magistrate in Cambridge, once arrived home to what should have been an empty house, only to hear noises coming from upstairs. She called, in a commanding voice, for the miscreants to come down (they did), then ordered them to turn out their pockets (which they also did). I was awed.

Of course, too much authority in local hands can encourage in some people a little Hitler mentality. We don't want vigilantes. But if the Neighbourhood Watch can attract people like my mother-in-law, it might just make some criminals think twice.