All praise to chickens!

Here we go again with the National Police and Loué poultry farms! The recent Loué ad campaign has once more taken perverse pleasure in playing on the French word "poulet" (chicken) and its use as a slang term for the police. So now we have a police officer perched on a tractor with a rotating light on it, in company with a proud poultry specimen on its own perch atop a Loué municipal signpost, a sophomoric idea hatched by Yves de la Fouchardière, managing director of the Loué poultry farmers cooperative.

This is not the Loué cooperative's first stab at this. As recently as 2010, the company dared to taunt the good constabulary with its ad featuring, on the one side, a laid-back police officer and a tongue-in-cheek tagline celebrating free-range Loué "poulet", and on the other, a bunch of cops packed into a Black Maria with a caption pointing to other "poulets" - a humorous way to show up the advantages of free-range chickens over battery hens.

All the same, each time Yves de la Fouchardière's teasing liberty-taking has aroused the ire of some representatives of law and order, who see this as impugning the dignity of their profession. Two years ago, the Unité SGP Police officers' union fired off an irate letter to the Loué managing director to denounce what it described as an outrageous attack against the forces of law and order.

In loudly voicing their indignation, the police officers in fact ended up dealing themselves quite a blow in return, as this did more to promote Loué chickens than the image of the forces of law and order, who came out of it looking rather like mugs. Moreover, if the aim was to muzzle the derogatory campaign, it went wide of the mark, as both traditional and social media pounced on the story with glee.

The police union's reaction was that much more out of sync because in French culture police officers have always been archly associated with birds. One just has to flip through a dictionary of slang terms to rediscover lots of mischievous expressions: "poulet" of course, but also "perdreau" (partridge), "poulaga", even "la maison Poulardin" for "cop shop". So in a sense, Loué is only jumping on the popular bandwagon of making fun of the police.

The very origin of the "poulet" slang is also linked to the birds reared by the Loué cooperative, and it was none other than the website of the Ministry of the Interior that brought to light the origins of the word association between "police officer" and "poulet". The site mentions a 7 September 1870 decree by the prefect of police, whereby town constables would henceforth be known by another name -guardians of the peace. Their uniform would be changed and their cocked hats replaced with peaked caps. In 1871, Jules Ferry gave the Cité barracks to the police prefecture for its headquarters. The barracks had been built on the site of the old Paris poultry market, and so the police officers came to be known colloquially as "poulets".

If anyone in this Loué "fowl" story deserves to go down, it is the wet blanket police union members who were a little too quick to take offence. Although Loué's ad campaign is not terribly clever in itself, it is in no way an insult to the police profession. Moreover, there are actually police officers and gendarmes who did not make the mistake of buying into this sense of outrage.
The advertisement has become a veritable collector’s item in some police stations and barracks, according to Yves de la Fouchardière, who says that the company had a 9,000-copy reprint run to meet all the requests for the ad poster that came in by phone or in the mail. What was more surprising was that many of these requests came from none other than gendarmerie posts and police stations. The company had many, many requests from the forces of law and order, for example, for farewell parties. All this to say that the whole story was hardly worth the raised hackles and spurs!