

Community, the police and public confidence: an interview with Ian Blair

Enver Solomon and Ben Bowling interview Metropolitan Police Chief Sir Ian Blair.

Enver Solomon: Reflecting on your call for a public debate about the future of policing in your Dimpleby lecture, there are currently lots of reforms under way – neighbourhood policing, the creation of the Serious Organised Crime Agency and plans for the merger of police forces. Given these developments, do you not think that some of those answers that you were looking for have effectively been decided in advance, by your political masters?

Ian Blair: No, because actually, bluntly, I don't think that's where the debate is. There's a bit of debate, a very significant piece of debate about the use of force, which is again, because the Dimpleby lecture was given in the immediate aftermath of the death of Jean Charles de Menezes, which we can deal with in a minute. The area of public concern frankly isn't around the Serious and Organised Crime Agency, or whether there should be a British FBI, or frankly whether forces should be restructured. For most people that's a matter as relevant to them, as whether it's a Regional Health Authority, a Strategic Health Authority, or whatever it is. It doesn't matter, they're interested in a doctor and the local hospital, in a broad sense, and I think the area which does require

...people are opening their doors, leaving their doors open now, or leaving them unlocked, certainly, in a way they haven't done for 25 years, so there's some interesting things going on.

debate is, is this development of neighbourhood engagement a legitimate piece of policing, or has it strayed somewhere else? But those who say it's strayed out of policing matters have got to answer the question that it seems to be doing something that nobody else is doing, and which people are requiring, so give me another answer. Then, I think the second part of the debate is what I described in the Dimpleby lecture, as answerability at a level that makes sense, in terms of a much larger geographic area, but before it becomes too large. So in London terms it's a London borough, and elsewhere it's where a big police bit and a big local authority bit connect.

If you live in Cambridge, as an example, there isn't much connection for the whole of Cambridge before you get to Cambridgeshire Police Authority, or if you live in Thames Valley there's not much connection in Reading, until you get right to something that's run out of police headquarters in Oxford. Well, I think that bit's also missing.

ES Focusing down on the whole issue of neighbourhood engagement, then, to what extent should the police actively be always willing to respond to the needs of the local community? We've got the *Police and Justice Bill* going through Parliament, and the proposed call to action, which is intended to trigger intervention by local authorities – do you see that as an effective way of engaging the community, when it feels that its needs and concerns are being overlooked or ignored?

IB I'm on record as saying I thought that was an unnecessary step, and I mean it's not an unhelpful one, but I just don't think it's necessary here in London, because we've actually developed that mechanism and it's sitting there. It's called the Sergeant, and they've got his or her telephone number. Interestingly, talking to borough commanders, they've found and reported that local MPs have found a considerable reduction in the number of letters and calls they are getting, because actually the matters are being dealt with by, effectively, the Sheriff of whatever ward that is. So I hope in London that will not be used very often.

ES So you think there are effective measures already there?

IB I'll go back to this conversation I was having yesterday, that one of the people on one of our six-strong neighbourhood teams had previously been what was called the Permanent Beat Officer, and he laughed and said the first word was the one thing he wasn't, because he was constantly being taken away, because he was being sent uptown to the football, or whatever else it was, but with a team of six there's always somebody there. You know, the telephone numbers are available, and suddenly you've got a mechanism sitting in the community that the community can access, and interestingly they said, at first there was scepticism, and then there was an overwhelming over-expectation, and now it's settling



down to what is reasonable for six people to be able to achieve. They are also pushing out mechanisms that are very dynamic. They were talking about something that we've imported from Chicago, which we describe as the Street Roll Call, so there are the six officers, being briefed by their Sergeant, and the community is told when that briefing is going to take place, and it's going to take place in public. Now, that's a long way from an ordinary meeting, and the public are then entitled to intervene and say, well, that's not true, or you haven't thought about this, so it's a very, very interesting process.

ES And this of course sits alongside a whole range of initiatives around the Government's 'Together We Can' programme, and for example, looking at how the community might be involved in determining what kind of unpaid work offenders should do on probation. Do you see any tensions between these different initiatives, and how should they be managed in the best way?

IB Well, the point I was making in the Dimbleby lecture was, here is a major change in social policy, taking place in front of people's eyes, and it's the Police Service doing it. Nobody's asked the Police Service to do this, the Police Service on its own has decided this is the way it wants to go, and that's the bit of the debate that seems to me to be missing. I

feel that I've got a Police Authority that thinks this is broadly pretty wonderful, and the local ward councillors and MP think it's pretty wonderful, but nobody's actually said, you really must do this, or what the limits of this should be. I'm not sure even central Government has quite seen that, and I took one of the new ministers with me yesterday, and you could see this was quite a revelation, as to where they'd got to.

Ben Bowling: That's very helpful and very interesting. On the question of public engagement, your first line of response is to talk about the neighbourhood policing teams as the individual officer engaging with the community.

IB Of the individual team.

BB Of a team, but the field of community engagement is now quite complex. You've got your police authority, you've got your Community Police Consultative Groups, you've got independent advisory groups, and a whole range of other kinds of mechanisms for engagement, so what do you see as the most effective form of community engagement?

IB I think there's a whole series here, and again you are moving up and down a series of levels and a scale, and you're moving from communities of interest, to communities of residential population, etc. Just going back to the neighbourhood teams, they are below the radar of police authorities; they're below the radar of Community Police Consultative Groups largely, because they are looking at borough-wide, at least, and then citywide. These people are talking about an estate, a set of 6,000 homes, or whatever it is, so especially in London, a very tight-knit geographic area. The thing that we've said to the teams is that broadly, you are free from doing anything about the priorities of the Metropolitan Police Authority, because what I'm interested in is what these local people want, although there's a clause, which effectively says, mind you, if one of the problems that the Met has identified is happening in your ward, then I'm afraid you've got us as a fairly senior resident as well. So if you've got a robbery problem that's on your ward, then I expect you to deal with that robbery problem, but if you haven't got a robbery problem, but the Met has got a robbery problem, we'd have to deal with it.

BB You seem to be suggesting that the police, rather than being part of the community, become leaders of the community?

IB Well that in a sense, but only if the community wants that to be the case. I think leaders is quite a strong term, but a mechanism for the community to express its wishes, perhaps is a better system. You

Continued on page 46

know, at the moment we're in a, kind of honeymoon period in all of this, because people are finally seeing uniforms where they haven't seen uniforms for years. I went to Haringey in North London recently, and found two of the team had adopted a tower block, nineteen storeys of it, and how long is it since the police patrolled the corridors of a tower block? It's as if, when the slums they replaced were flattened and they put that up, the police stopped patrolling, so it's quite an interesting concept, and people are opening their doors, leaving their doors open now, or leaving them unlocked, certainly, in a way they haven't done for 25 years, so there's some interesting things going on.

BB Can you say a bit more about what happens

...the plain fact is they (BME communities) do trust us.

when local communities, whether it's a Ward Councillor, or a local group of communities, are demanding things, and you say, tell us what you want us to do, and they demand things that you find, or they would find, or the team would find, or the Metropolitan Police would find unpalatable? What are the limits, I suppose, of responding to public needs?

IB Well, so far we haven't reached that point, but we have thought about it. I would just expect that anything that seemed to be discriminatory against a group of people, and not because of their actions, but because of their lifestyle, or their race, religion, or anything else, would be not where we would go, and anything that in any way made one group of people more important than another group of people, I think is very difficult. I mean this is challenging stuff, so in a slightly different area of London it is interesting, when you go to a public meeting, to find that most of them are lawyers, so I mean there are some challenges there.

ES Part of this is also about public confidence in the Police Force you lead, and I don't want to go into anything around the operational issues concerning the Jean Charles de Menezes incident, but do you think that incident, and the coverage, and all about it, has actually had a negative effect on all this work that you're talking about, in relation to community engagement, and particularly with the black and minority ethnic communities in London?

IB First of all, the statistics that we keep quoting show continuing and quite solid rises in public confidence. We are seeing rises in whether people are seeing more police, whether they think the level of policing is about right, whether they believe crime is falling and anti-social behaviour is falling. I think the most interesting one is the, I think quite

exquisite question of, do you feel safe walking in this neighbourhood at night? And we're seeing a steady rise there, in that direction, and secondly people, I think are wise enough to look at the events of last July, and while the death of Jean Charles de Menezes still has to be accounted for, they also weigh that in relation to how the Met responded on July 7th. I think people see those two things as, there were some extraordinary actions on the day of July 7th, and people haven't forgotten that. What are we seeing in terms of BME communities? Well, we're seeing one fantastic statistic, which is that of the people who have made initial enquiries to become a police officer in London last year, 51 per cent of them were from minority communities, and six years after Macpherson that is a huge achievement. Converting that initial enquiry into a body standing in a blue uniform at Hendon will still be a challenge, but we are seeing nearly one in five of police officers now being recruited from ethnic minority communities. We're seeing one in three of the Community Support Officers are from minority communities, so in a way people are voting with their feet inwards, which is actually rather a good plan, so I feel very good about it. Do I think that the death of Mr de Menezes was a damaging incident to the reputation of the Metropolitan Police Service? Of course I do. I mean what else could it be, we shot an innocent man, and we then did not handle the consequences of it well. I've said that on a number of occasions, it's not new, and there are various reasons. One was that however dreadful that event was, the actual thing that we were concerned about was where were the bombers, and were they going to strike again, and the concentration was on that, but that's a matter we'll have to account for in due course.

ES You quote that statistic about inquiries on joining up, from BME groups, but at the same time you must accept that there are cases that people read about in the press, like O'Neill Crooks, the black man who was wrongly accused of being a drug dealer on a West End night out, and that's resulted in a review being conducted by Scotland Yard. But when members of BME communities, and indeed others, read stories like that, do you not think, well, why should they trust us?

IB Of course that's an issue, but the plain fact is they do trust us. This is an organisation that receives something in the region of 8 or 9 million calls for assistance every year. We deal with Londoners and non-Londoners in enormous volumes, and we will make mistakes, and we will have people who do not work to our values. You know, this is that kind of organisation, but I tend to use the example of Norgay Tenzing, about how he climbed Everest, and when he was asked what the answer was, he said, I didn't look up very much, I just looked down into the valley to see how far we have come. I mean this is an organisation that 15 or 20 years ago was absolutely unable to understand how to deal with minority communities, and the kinds of stories that you've just raised were

everyday affairs, but they are now actually quite rare. I mean we have them, and we will deal with them, and so to me, of course I recognise that those stories are damaging, but frankly, if you look over the last two or three years, you'd be pushed to find ten.

BB So picking up on that, that in 1999, the then Commissioner, I suppose was more or less forced to admit the findings of the Lawrence Inquiry, that institutional racism was a problem for the Metropolitan Police, the attitudes, culture, and so on, leading to an inappropriate service for the black minority communities in London? Do you think that still applies?

IB Yes I do, I do think it does, and I think it will take a long time to change. The phrase that I particularly remember from the actual inquiry itself was the one about the minority communities being over-policed and under-protected. There are still touchstone issues, and Stop and Search is one of them, but again it's just a matter of progress. You can't walk around the Metropolitan Police, you can't go into a canteen, or a police station, without recognising this is a multi-cultural organisation. We are the largest single employer of minority staff in London.

BB But then there's the issue of one of the things that came out in the Lawrence Inquiry, of this idea of an unthinking assumption of a relationship between black people and crime, and the allegation was that that accounts for some of what we're seeing in terms of Stop and Search. Do you think that still applies?

...as my brilliant predecessor Robert Mark put it so well, the police service is the anvil on which society beats out inequalities and prejudice.

IB I think there are a number of things here. First of all there are legacies in any organisation, but secondly, as my brilliant predecessor Robert Mark put it so well, the police service is the anvil on which society beats out inequalities and prejudice, and yet to some degree criminality is a structural problem. If we look at some of the issues that disproportionately affect minority communities, they include dysfunctional families, they include educational exclusion, and then the police pick up criminality, because I'm afraid there is a connection between those things, so to some extent we are bound to have that. We are very concerned, for instance, about street robbery in London, and the continuing issue of the over-representation of the minority community groups in the suspect descriptions. I mean it's just there, and it's not the police officers saying, oh, of course it was a black man, it's actually the person who's been robbed saying that, and that leads to issues. But do I feel that we're moving in the right direction? Yeah, I feel we're massively moving in the right direction.

Enver Solomon is Deputy Director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

Ben Bowling is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the School of Law, King's College London.

Continued from page 19

Conclusion

The experience of youth conferencing shows that greater community participation in criminal justice can be achieved – particularly for victims – using a restorative justice model. Whilst victims are often marginalised or excluded in the conventional criminal justice system and their participation is limited to providing evidence to secure a conviction, this does not need to be the case.

Our research shows that victims appreciate the opportunity of taking part in a process which deals with the person who victimised them. Not only does conferencing facilitate this, it also results in high levels of satisfaction for victims, something clearly lacking in the traditional criminal justice framework. Victims can and do play a constructive role in criminal justice when given the opportunity. Restorative justice provides a framework which can help achieve considerably better levels of participation in justice and it has the potential to be constructive for all parties.

Roisin Devlin is a researcher and David O'Mahony is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice, School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast.

References

- Campbell, C., Devlin, R., O'Mahony, D., Doak, J., Jackson, J., Corrigan, T. and McEvoy, K. (2006) *Evaluation of the Youth Conference Service*. NIO: Statistics and Research Report No.12.
- Criminal Justice Review Group (2000) *Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland*. NIO: Statistics and Research Branch.
- Dignan, J. (2000) *Restorative Justice Options for Northern Ireland: A Comparative Review*, Criminal Justice Review Group Research Report 10. NIO: Statistics and Research Branch.
- McEvoy, K. and Mika, H. (2002) Restorative Justice and the Critique of Informalism in Northern Ireland. *British journal of Criminology* 42(3), 534-562.
- O'Mahony, D. and Deazley, R. (2000) *Juvenile Crime and Justice*, Criminal Justice Review Group Research Report 17. NIO: Statistics and Research Branch.