

The Police Reform Agenda

Barry Loveday looks at the restructuring of command authority within the police.

As with other 'services' within the criminal justice system, the police service is expected to be the subject of significant reform in 2002. This has been in the making for quite some time and is likely to change the make up and structure within police forces quite fundamentally over the next few years. Trawled for some time now within the Home Office the 'agenda' entails *inter alia* taking full advantage of the basic command unit structure introduced some ten years ago to radically rethink the role and function of police headquarters within the 41 police forces in England and Wales. Some movement on this has already occurred as direct funding from the Home Office to basic command units (BCUs) has now already begun. This will only serve to further encourage devolved budgeting which was trumpeted with the introduction of the BCU concept. Chief officers have however proved rather reluctant to devolve funding for quite understandable reasons. Now however the case against devolved budgeting appears to be unsustainable and new funding mechanisms are now planned to bypass police headquarters entirely. In doing so, of course they also raise questions about the long term role and future of the HQ structure itself.

Turkeys vote for Christmas

The current debate over the exact relationship which should pertain between headquarters and basic command units may prove to be the prelude to further police force amalgamations as the 'overhead' costs of HQ staffing is further exposed by devolved budgeting. Police force amalgamation has been a long term departmental aim within the Home Office. Back in 1990 it was planning primary legislation involving significant amalgamations of forces which would be justified by the introduction of BCUs, the 'building blocks of policing' any number of which could be overseen by a much reduced number of police headquarters staff. Rather unfortunately, neither ACPO or its president were consulted about this at the time and were to learn about Home Office legislative plans for the future of policing in rather unusual circumstances and also quite by accident. At least now all police associations have been forewarned, particularly chief officers. Over the last two years members of the Strategic Command Course at Bramshill, the course all those who aspire to chief officer rank must successfully complete, have been subject to numerous lectures from Home Office officials identifying the inevitability of further amalgamation and the benefits it can expect to bring.

Such indeed has been the success of this 'softening up' strategy conducted by the Home Office that senior police officers can be expected to accept the reform agenda rather than oppose it. This could have major implications for ACPO and its membership as very many chief officers can expect to become 'surplus to requirements' once amalgamation is pushed through.

A local policing model?

It is however undeniable that the current need for the often large central police bureaucracies is difficult to justify. In some of the larger metropolitan forces they have proved to be a major element in protecting some police specialist squads whose time was thought to be up many years ago. Headquarters' control of the budget meant that these units continued to be protected, even when the utility of so doing was clearly questioned 'on the ground'. It is also the case that HQs by their very nature will attract any number of specialist officers who thereafter can prove difficult to remove. If visible policing continues to be a major priority for the public it is a recognised fact that police HQs are not in the business of providing this. Rather they act as yet another form of manpower abstraction, a continuing haemorrhage within most police forces.

BCUs may therefore prove able to optimise the use of manpower and will, particularly where police boundaries are co-terminous with that of the local authority, be better able to deliver a police service which begins to match popular expectations. Visible policing and the provision of public reassurance through effective and directed uniform police patrol could begin to challenge the public's 'fear of crime' which successive local crime audits have served to highlight and which now needs to be addressed comprehensively. Local BCU commanders will also be able to play a more direct and meaningful part in developing inter-agency arrangements between local partners. As has been discovered since the introduction of the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*, much depends on the police for its successful implementation. For example it is becoming clear that much hinges on effective police leadership in sustaining local partnerships particularly in relation to laggard local authority departments who continue to under-rate the significance of this important initiative.

It may be an exaggeration to suggest that BCUs mark a return to 'borough policing'. It is however the case that the government will expect BCU commanders to effectively manage resources and as the White Paper *Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead* [2001] makes abundantly clear this will involve the coordination of a variety of new initiatives including



neighbourhood wardens, town wardens and the opportunity for police managers to buy in private security patrols where they believe this will be beneficial. The emphasis will therefore be on 'effective management', a relatively new concept for the police service but one that is likely to be made more emphatic by the decision of HMIC to direct future inspections to BCUs rather than police forces.

The resurrection of Sheehy

The most fundamental element of the reform agenda is likely to pertain however to internal management reform rather than force boundaries. Here the issue to be confronted is how the 'office of constable' can be adjusted to allow for the more effective management of police officers. In what is likely to prove to be the biggest challenge to both the Home Office and police service the ability of senior police managers to hire and fire officers will be a crucial ingredient to the 'agenda'. Protected by an arcane disciplinary procedure along with the benefits of evidential standards required of the criminal law, it has proved very difficult for senior officers to rid themselves of those who either were not up to the job or who demonstrated levels of integrity which left much to be desired.

It is also very clear, and possibly music to the ears of Eric Caines, a leading member of the Sheehy Inquiry, that there are now many senior officers who are eager and willing to exercise a real management role in developing contractual arrangements for serving officers. A contractual basis of employment would give them, as commanders, an opportunity for the first time to effect basic changes in the level and standard of service delivery -- for which they will be made immediately responsible. Making such change has, inevitably, been made much more difficult as

a result of Home Office commitment to 'constabulary independence' and police 'operational autonomy'. The absurdity of this 'convention' was made manifest during the 1980s when the police service was required to carry through a clear political agenda set by central government. Home Office deification of 'police independence' has to date, however, made reform of that service far more problematic than, in reality, it needed ever to have been. ■

Barry Loveday is a Reader in Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth. He was also an Associate Tutor on the Strategic Command Course at Bramshill (2001).