

Plus ça change: the search for police reform

Barrie Irving charts the recent development in research and theory about policing methods.

Reform, reorganise, amalgamate, restructure, reengineer – things change and adapting organisations to perform better is what managers, including police managers, are paid to do.

Peter Manning's classic comparison of transatlantic policing styles (1997) first identified the importance of stage management in police performance. So it was that incoming police chiefs used to establish themselves in their new fiefdoms by a bout of reorganisation: re-shape a division here, re-name a department there, perhaps adopt a fashionable strategy and give it one's imprimatur (Weatheritt, 1986). The old guard would grimace and reinvent tired jokes and soon the flurry of activity would fade and calm would return.

Zhao (1996) reviewed the effect of the US Federal Community Oriented Policing Programme (COP) on 200

Compstat owes its effectiveness to its combination of scientific management and three ring circus. The identification of crime and disorder problems and subsequent efforts to solve them remain much the same but Bratton has shown that by putting police performance under the spotlight and inviting an audience to participate, the nature of the work changes significantly in the eyes of the actors.

Here in Britain, the home-grown New Public Management emphasis on performance indicators, league tables and naming and shaming operational policing units deemed to be 'failing', has a similar if more opaque dramaturgical effect (Broadbent *et al* 2002). From 1995 to 2002 the fashionable criminological argument was whether the increasingly obvious reversal in the previous volume crime trend had anything to do with improved central management of policing especially when careful

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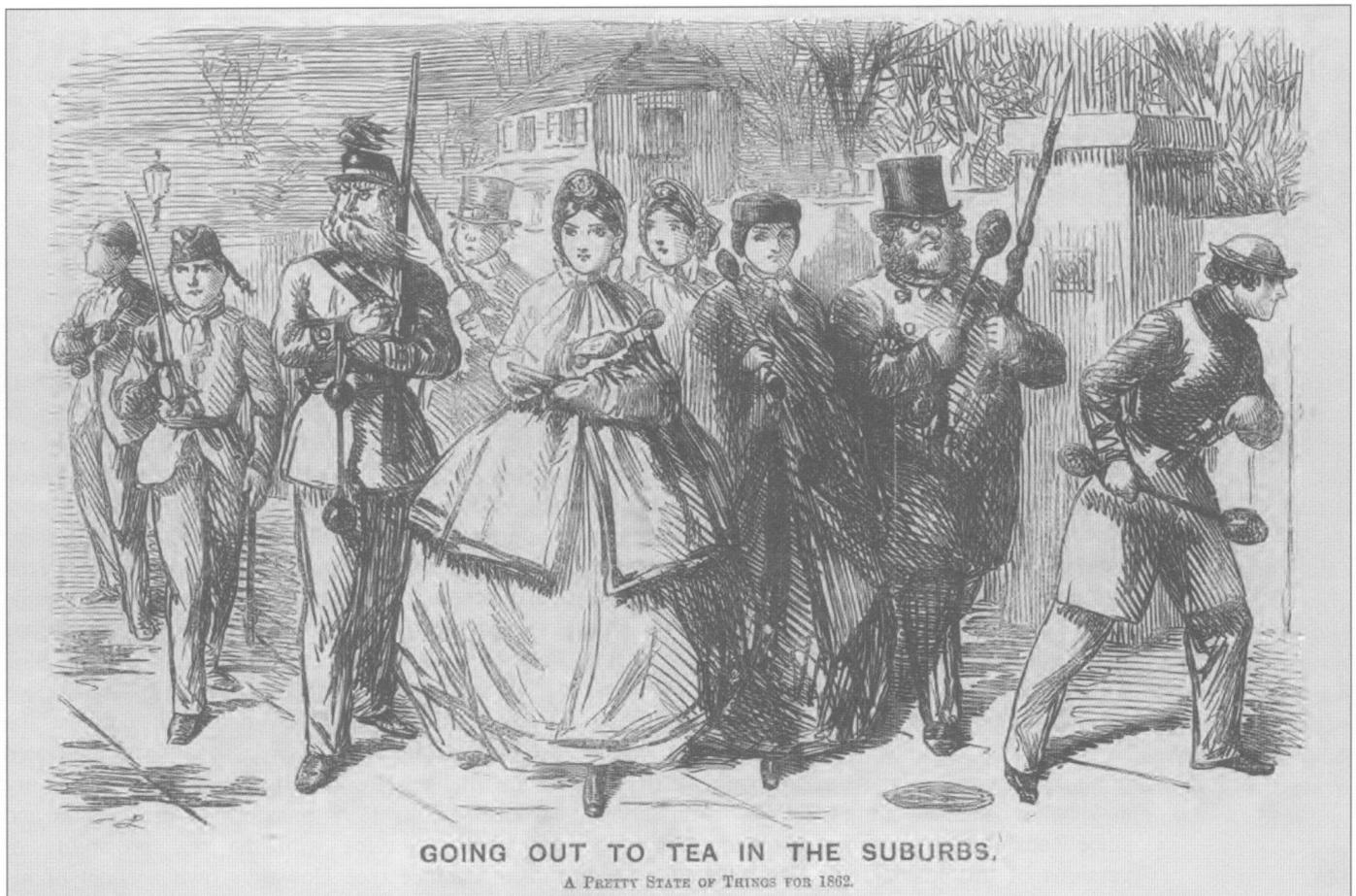
municipal forces after a much criticised Federal expenditure of over \$10 billion (Mulhausen, 2003). The summary conclusion – surprisingly little change. The impact of the findings seems to have been a conclusion supporting the so-called 'continuity' theory of policing. Continuity proponents predict that unless and until the essential nature of law-breaking and disorderly behaviour changes, police work will remain roughly the same whatever politicians, criminologists and police strive to achieve.

The continuity hypothesis is also supported by a line of research which emphasises the attractiveness and satisfaction potential of real (i.e. traditional) police work (Foster, 2003). And yet – there is a powerful alternative camp in US criminology who point not only to countervailing findings from the COP programme but to other developments notably in Chicago (the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy-CAPS) (Skogan, 2004) and Bill Bratton's real and apparent achievements with the now partially discredited zero tolerance/Broken Windows strategy (Earls in Hurley, 2004) and subsequently the development of 'Compstat' (Shane, 2004).

The change strategies currently credited with a significant and sustained positive effect on policing have in common a massive, sustained (CAPS) or dramatic and emotionally compelling (Compstat) assault on how police officers perceive their work. Sampson and colleagues (1997) have described how community officers in Chicago have invested in building social efficacy in deprived communities and in doing so the core content of their work has changed with impressive results.

analysis of variations in performance between basic command units for the Home Office revealed that around 70 per cent of the observed differences could be statistically attributed to local social, geographical and demographic factors outside police management control (Brunsdon, 2003). However, around 2002 another and more politically ominous trend in public behaviour became apparent. In spite of falling crime and significant reductions in the probability of victimisation, the British public stubbornly believed the opposite to be the case. Insecurity and lack of trust and confidence in policing were failing to respond as expected.

Building on a genuinely innovative analysis of this phenomenon and its causes by Martin Innes of Surrey University, first Surrey Police then The National Reassurance Policing Programme systematically rebuilt local policing strategy on Innes's theory of signal events and signal controls (Innes *et al* 2004). The implementation process in the experimental introduction of the new strategy was planned to take account of the 'continuity' hypothesis and the evidence from Chicago and New York (Irving 2005). Results from both close process evaluation and more general outcome measurement have been not only encouraging but also coherent (Tuffin *et al* 2006). Where resistance to change was identified during implementation and remedial efforts were unsuccessful, outcome results tended to be weaker (Bottoms, 2006). It has been possible to account for failure and success sufficiently to help managers in a practical way with the process of reform. The reassurance strategy is a solid test of the ability of the service to change: it does require a radical re-engineering of the job of policing with no corresponding



'Going out to tea in the Suburbs. A pretty state of things for 1862'. Women go visiting with an armed escort because of the garotting (mugging) scare of 1862. Source: Punch's Almanack, 1863. Mary Evans Picture Library.

change in the nature of crime and disorder. The conclusion has been that genuine reformation of police work is possible even if public behaviour remains the same as long as sufficient time and appropriately focused effort are invested in the task.

Yet, just as this process of painstakingly refashioning local policing seemed to be overcoming inertia and gathering pace in a way reminiscent of CAPS, the programme was shut down and its work subsumed under the more general title of Neighbourhood Policing. At the same time, a plethora of policing initiatives loomed: the Serious and Organised Crime Agency was created with an entirely new type of constitution and terms and conditions of employment for its personnel.

The National Police Improvement Agency came into being in April and is taking over responsibility for centralised HR functions and programmes as well as police information technology development. The Workforce Modernisation programme is examining ways of redesigning and regrading police roles to introduce 'Fordist' principles into police work organisation. Finally a significant number of smaller forces were set to lose their identity in a series of amalgamations only to be resuscitated at the eleventh hour because of a lack of cash to bury them.

These tectonic upheavals will be accompanied by a continuo of legislation and Home Office guidance on a wide range of politically sensitive social and behavioural issues in the general purview of policing. All this will have to be managed while the police service copes with a new and culturally awkward terrorist threat that threatens to destabilise the advances on cultural diversity and human rights made

by the police service over the last thirty years. Centralised performance management orchestrated by the media will continue unabated as a matter of political principle.

Is this policy juggernaut 'evidence-based'? In trying to gauge what will be influential and what merely rhetorical or cosmetic in the current reform agenda, a simple but firmly evidence-based expedient is to abandon sociological forms of analysis and try to empathise with constables' (from probationer to Chief) reactions. For if Zhao is right in his conclusions what drives police organisational inertia is the potent mixture of unchanging job content and extraordinary (by modern standards) levels of discretion concentrated at the base of the organisational hierarchy.

What would you do if you were a constable? What sort of police manager will see this environment as an opportunity; who will construe it as a threat; will it encourage transparency, experimentation, honest assessment, admitting mistakes and putting things right or the reverse?

In a prophetic talk to a Home Office sponsored conference on the criminal justice system in the early 1990s, Professor Colin Carnall warned delegates that the paper antics of strategists and planners could have a devastating impact on the work load and morale of middle managers and that even effective change programmes tended to go through a white knuckle ride through collapsing confidence, confusion and reduced effectiveness before signs of benefit and stability appeared (Carnall, 2003).

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It is an axiom of strategic management theory that radical organisational change threatens existing power relations. Where the overall expected benefits of change are exceeded by the threats, then powerful individuals will act to delay or neutralise innovations. If the change agent is a close colleague the Luddite tendency will be more difficult to pursue. If the driver of change is acting at a distance, resistance is easier. In a deeply conservative organisational environment like the police with a long, complex chain of command creating a myriad of informal power groups, only if change is driven by powerful local champions will it succeed (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). This is the sub-text of much of the evaluative research on the COP programme.

Ian Loader, Oxford Professor of Criminology, was recently quoted on the No. 10 website charging New Labour with "legislative hyperactivity". This mental health metaphor is apposite: hyperactivity confuses those who have to deal with it and ultimately compels disengagement. If received wisdom about managing organisational change is valid then the current police reform programme needs the opposite dynamic. Of course new agencies, new committees, new campaigns will attract enthusiastic police leaders to the new and exciting roles thus created. However that process only increases the emotional distance between leaders and led and exacerbates the difficulty of winning genuine local support for radical cultural change at the grass roots (Loveday, 2006).

Leaving aside the separate critical question of whether a radical reform programme is currently necessary – and I believe there are compelling fiscal reasons to conclude that it is – this reform oriented 'hyperactivity' is too confusing and unfocused to be 'fit for purpose'. The amalgamation plan on its own, which had nothing to do with the reform of police work, was sufficient to bring to a halt many of the initiatives that have genuine reform potential and, wisely, has been shelved. The National Police Improvement Agency now needs to be given space and time to develop a coherent organic reform strategy on behalf of the service that can be professionally owned and managed. This is not a proper task for politicians or generalist civil servants. For its part, ACPO bears the heavy responsibility of providing corporate backing to NPIA and adopting it as an integral part of the police service rather than forcing it back into the arms of ministers and the civil service.

It is ironic that the hardest lesson for the public services to take from Chicago and CAPS is that social efficacy is best promoted by helping communities and their organisations help themselves, *then giving away the credit for so doing* (incidentally the trademark of the good therapist). Centralised performance management regimes run by politicians make such self-effacement institutionally improbable.

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