

POLICE MATTERS

Change, Competition, Challenge

It still comes as something of a surprise to recall that in 1966 116 Police Forces in England and Wales were made jointly responsible for the upkeep of the Queen's Peace. As a result of amalgamation (1966-68) and local government reorganisation (1974) England and Wales now has just 43 Police Forces a number of which cross county boundaries (like West Mercia). Force strengths range from the Metropolitan Police, with an authorised establishment of over 27,000, to Bedfordshire (1000), Gwent (978) and Warwickshire (967).

Other than the Metropolitan Police (where the Home Secretary is the Police Authority) the governance of police is based upon the 1964 Police Act which established the 'tripartite arrangement' under which responsibility for provincial police forces is shared by the Chief Constable, Home Secretary and Police Authority. The Chief Constable 'directs and controls' his police force while both the Home Secretary and Police Authority (composed of two thirds councillors and one third magistrates) have a statutory responsibility for the provision of an 'adequate and efficient' police force. It has always proved difficult to accept the view that this arrangement was one established between equal partners. Increasing Home Office in-

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continued

the status of the uniformed beat officer.

A great deal is being done to make the police service ever more responsive to the needs of the community, but it is the work of the uniformed patrol officer that is central to the whole process; more than just an enhancement of status is required. A coherent career structure for the role of the uniformed constable, whereby this crucial function within society could come to be seen as a vocation in itself, is needed if the public's and politicians' pleas for closer cooperation between police and community is to be more than lip-service.

Interest in improved efficiency has led to greater intervention by the Home Secretary in matters affecting the policing of the provinces. Further, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), representing all senior officers from Chief Constable to Assistant Chief Constable, has been happy to develop a 'bilateral dialogue' with the Home Office on a variety of policing matters. As a result Police Authorities can often feel excluded or unable to pursue what they believe are their statutory responsibilities.

It is often suggested that under the 1964 Act the Home Secretary enjoys 'power without responsibility' in relation to provincial police forces. He is able to guide and influence policing policies without being made formally accountable to parliament for what he wishes them to do. The issue was highlighted quite dramatically during the 1984-85 miners' strike when it appeared Britain had, via the National Reporting Centre, a **national police force**, albeit a *de facto* one. Subsequently, the Home Secretary has overridden the decision of Northumbria Police Authority not to provide baton rounds or CS gas to its police force. Paradoxically there has been, as a result of these developments, a growing interest in the possible creation of a, *de jure*, national police force which would at least make the Home Secretary formally accountable for the decisions he already makes.

New Challenges

For police forces however the most immediate issues which confront them centre on new management initiatives and structures. As with other public services, Police Forces have been encouraged to demonstrate value for money and greater financial accountability. Other than the move to local cost centres, the most dramatic result to date of this programme has been the growth of **civilianisation** of staff within Police Forces. Police have been pressured to identify an increasing number of functions which, by the employment of civilians, would release police officers for operational duties. Home Office circulars 105 and 106 of 1988 clearly indicate that no substantial increase in police officer

establishment can be expected if civilianisation has not been undertaken. Scenes of crime officers and computer personnel have already been civilianised. No end seems in sight as Police Management departments analyse functions and conclude that they do not require the skills of a police officer or indeed police supervision. Indeed, a police commentator has publicly questioned recently whether, on the basis of value for money, the investigation of complaints against the police can continue to be sole responsibility of police officers. It will be perhaps ironic if the long debate over who guards the guardians is ended not on the basis of impartiality but of cost.

A further issue confronting police forces is that of **privatisation**. A notable breach in the concept of public service provision came recently at Harwich where the British Transport Police were removed and under the long forgotten 1847 Docks and Harbours Act, were replaced by 'Special Constables' who were employees of the shipping company and cost £15,000 less per 'officer' than their British Transport Police equivalents.

Recently The Adam Smith Institute has called, in Scotland, for the abolition of existing police forces and the creation of a national police force with a secondary tier of 'municipal police' for towns and cities which would be open to civilianisation and possible privatisation. While major crime and public disorder would remain the responsibility of the national police, municipal police would take responsibility for all other matters (traffic regulation, lost and found, burglary inquiries at al.). These functions, already subject to civilianisation, might be the subject of competitive bids by public and private agencies.

Nor can the implications of **European integration** be ignored. If, as is likely, border controls evaporate after 1992, will the existing structure of 43 autonomous police forces continue to be sustainable? With the increased movement of goods and people across Europe the need for a national, rather than local, police body might prove to be overwhelming.

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