

OUTRAGED

Policing the gay community

In May 1990 Outrage, the Lesbian and Gay direct action group, was founded in the wake of the murder of Michael Booth a gay man found dead in an open area popular with gay men in West London. The killing focused attention on the apparent failure of the police to take anti-gay violence seriously whilst at the same time they devoted considerable resources to policing arguably victimless sexual activities taking place in public lavatories ('cottages') and open 'cruising' areas.

Later the same year, under considerable pressure from the media and the gay community, the Metropolitan Police set up a consultative forum to promote liaison between London's community and the police. On a cursory inspection the initiative appeared to be a success - the Met's forum was followed by similar regional schemes, many forces appointed specific gay community liaison officers, a lesbian and gay police officers group emerged, anti-gay violence monitoring schemes were established and instructions were issued by the Met requiring restraint in 'cottaging' operations.

Yet despite the apparent advances, these policing initiatives have been greeted with suspicion, cynicism and downright hostility by certain sections of the gay community. In August 1993 Outrage withdrew from the umbrella Metropolitan Police/London gay community liaison group, LLGPI, on the basis that two years of liaison had produced very little of substance for London's gay community and because the group was in danger of being used by the police as a public relations exercise only.

The situation is well illustrated by police 'cottaging' operations. In April 1993 the Met produced a set of instructions regarding such operations which were clearly influenced by representations made by the LLGPI and which set out a 'step by step' approach to be adopted by police divisions in dealing with complaints about cottages. The directions required, *inter alia*, that all complaints from members of the public regarding cottages should be recorded so that verification that the police were not acting on their own initiative could be provided, that the initial police response to genuine complaints should be to discuss alterations

to the lavatory (for example, improved lighting or the provision of an attendant) with the relevant local authority; that failing this patrols by identifiable uniformed officers should be tried and, ultimately, if the preceding steps were unsuccessful, a senior officer could authorise an undercover surveillance operation, providing such operations were publicised in advance in the gay press.

The directions also made it clear that no arrests should take place if an offence of importuning (trying to pick another man up) was directed at a plain clothes police officer and that consideration should always be given to cautioning an arrested person rather than prosecuting them.

The directions arguably provide a model of good policing practice although the very need for any sort of policing of public lavatories can be questioned on at least two grounds. First, as a matter of priorities - when members of the public complain about a burglary or car theft or vandalism ('real' crimes with clear victims) the police action and investigation is invariably confined to recording the complaint and issuing a crime report number for an insurance claim, the reason being lack of police staff and resources. Secondly, it is questionable whether adult males in a public lavatory require police protection from unwanted displays of interest. Of course, there would be no argument that children require protection from unwanted sexual advances, but in approximately 800 cottaging cases that I have handled I have not encountered an allegation of sexual behaviour being directed towards a person under the age of 16.

However, any residual welcome for the directions has been considerably muted by the fact that they are honoured more in the breach than by their implementation.

Certainly, police statements arising out of cottaging operations now routinely commence with an assurance that the operation has been mounted as a result of public complaints but no evidence is ever produced of the nature, number or indeed very existence of the complaints.

At the end of 1993 I challenged a senior officer within the Met to describe lavatories that had been physically altered to deter cottaging. He was able to refer me to only two locations at one of which the 'alteration' consisted of the installation of

a two way mirror - something which was clearly done to aid a policing operation rather than to discourage misbehaviour.

Checks on plain clothes police operations mounted since the issuing of the directives have also revealed that at only one location did uniformed officers visit the lavatory prior to the commencement of the usual plain clothes operation. On at least two occasions at this location uniformed officers kicked in the doors of closed cubicles and arrested the occupants rather than warning them about their behaviour. Prosecutions of defendants in cottaging cases are still vigorously pursued. Cautions are rarely offered. Plain clothes police officers still present themselves as the victims of importuning.

The checks have also revealed that the gay press has only been notified on one occasion by the police of an intended surveillance operation.

The stipulation that plain clothes operations be authorised in advance is also too easily circumvented. For example, at the public lavatory at Carnaby St. in London's West End such operations are invariably carried out by the Juvenile Protection Unit, whose specialist work does not require such sanction. And yet, their operations at Carnaby St. appear almost invariably to be 'ordinary' cottaging surveillance with no element of child protection involved at all.

Similarly, following the fatal fire at the Dream City porn cinema in Islington in February 1994 a police operation was mounted to keep observation on a similar establishment in the same area. The apparent concern over fire safety was used to justify the operation and yet its only outcome was the prosecution of four of the cinema's customers for sexual misbehaviour.

The cumulative effect of these and other examples I could cite is to undermine substantially the already limited amount of trust shown towards the police and to bring into question the effectiveness of the gay community liaising with the police over policing policy.

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