



A VIEW FROM THE TOP

Kirsty Cunningham talks to Paul Whitehouse

What do you consider to be your most important role as a chief constable?

Leadership. I am the person to whom the entire force looks for the direction in which it is going; if I am not going in that direction myself, then I am giving a mixed message.

Do you think there is a tension between balancing the dual roles of a Chief Constable as bureaucrat and bobby?

I do not think that there is a tension except that there is never enough time to do all the things that one would like. There is a need as a chief executive to be an effective leader and manager. Those two are not necessarily the same, however they are both essential. Also it is important to have an understanding of the job and to show that one has not forgotten the pressures it presents to staff. All decisions must rest on an understanding of those pressures.

What do you consider to be the most pressing problem for Chief Constables today?

A combination of the changes that are being brought about, not just by the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act but also by the emphasis on performance from the Home Office, the Audit Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The emphasis on performance itself is not a bad thing but the way in which the performance is being measured is questionable, not least because different people are measuring it in different ways and those ways aren't necessarily compatible.

Also the presentation of those figures may well give the public cause for concern. Fear of crime is much worse than anything else because it can be self-justifying and self-perpetuating. Anything that might tend to show that the place is lawless when people hadn't previously presupposed it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now it doesn't follow that that will happen, but coping with the changes of the Bill and the greater emphasis on short term results is what worries most Chief Constables.

Policing today is facing momentous changes, arguably the most profound reorganisation since Sir Robert Peel's original establishment of Metropolitan police in 1829. What implications

do you think the present changes have for the future of British policing?

I think there is a danger of short termism. At times we have been driven by short term requirements and where we have it has tended to lead to further problems in the longer term. As Weigh (Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset) commented after the St Pauls riots, we need to be very careful to achieve consent and balance. This can very easily be upset, and this may not become apparent until very late. But that doesn't mean you should not continually try to improve.

Would you agree that to achieve such consent and balance, policing must be based on the community policing philosophy of John Alderson?

Unless we police with the consent of the community and unless we are seen as friends of the community we shall need far more people. We have the smallest ratio of police officers to population of any European country, other than perhaps Denmark. This would tend to indicate that we have got it right. I don't want to change that, I want to be seen as part of the people rather than as an arm of the state.

Do you think the Government are moving towards a position where they want to privatise the police force?

I do not know. I wish I knew what they wanted to do. Certainly the work currently being undertaken by the Core and Ancillary Tasks working group in the Home Office would tend to indicate that they are trying to identify those tasks which could be hived off to the private sector. The logical next step of course is to remove that amount of money from the police, thus reducing the overall ability of the police to cope. Two things must be understood: Firstly much of the work that might be considered ancillary is done in opportunity time and secondly, doing these tasks enables us to keep in contact with people, not on confrontational terms, which is helpful in obtaining information and maintaining good community links.

In your opinion are the police primarily a service or a force?

We are essentially a service that has to use force from time to time. If we are seen as primarily a force we shall be a different sort of organisation.

What is your reaction to the proposed arming of the police?

The actual number of crimes in which



Sussex Police

weapons are involved is still a tiny proportion of the total and pales into insignificance in comparison with North America. I think you have to be very careful about arming the police because there will be many colleagues, I suspect, who would not want to carry a firearm and equally probably some who would like to, but you can't have a partly armed force.

It is very difficult to go from being an armed force to being an unarmed force; it is very easy to go the other way. At the moment we do not have a substantial number of officers being shot so where is the evidence which suggests that it is necessary?

What changes would you like to see included in a Criminal Justice Bill?

There are still some things which I would like to see altered. For example I believe the right to silence should be abolished. However I would like to introduce an absolute right to see a solicitor. The clock should only start running when the solicitor has arrived. We should have a public defender, like the prosecutor. This would change the values system. I would also change the rules on disclosure to make them slightly more eligible to ensure for example that there is a slightly more sensible balance between the needs of the defence and the needs of the community at large. However apart from those changes, let's have no more legislation, let's have no more packages and let's just consolidate where we are. I believe that we can do very well with what we've got.

Paul Whitehouse is Chief Constable of Sussex Police.