Firearms and policing: driven to it?

Peter Squires predicts an increasingly armed future for the police in Britain.

Approximately ten years ago there occurred a debate about an apparently significant change in police methods, tactics and weapons. Many commentators interpreted this as a general 'tooling up' of police responses. The adoption of new weapons and tactics by the police was said to reflect, in part, the crime patterns, public order problems, and industrial militancy characterising the 1980s.[1]

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Of more fundamental concern, however, was the limited democratic scrutiny applying to police decisions to deploy new weapons, and a sense that Britain's much heralded tradition of unarmed 'policing by consent' was being sacrificed. Many came to regard the drift towards armed policing in Britain as inevitable. We have arrived at the end of the 20th century with specialist firearms teams in possession of weapons and equipment once presumed quite alien to British policing (machine guns, semi-automatic assault rifles and pistols, sniper rifles, stun grenades and CS gas launchers).

Routine deployment of firearms

During the 1990s the debate over police weapons re-ignited. There remains considerable resistance to a more routine arming of the British police and developments in the mid-1990s may have forestalled such a possibility in the short term. Nevertheless a wider review suggests a number of processes working in the opposite direction.

First, the mid-1990s, saw a groundswell of opinion from amongst police rank and file, particularly in London, in favour of a more routine deployment of firearms. Pressure began to mount following the murder of a number of London police officers. This alleged need to arm the police was often linked politically to the loss of the 'ultimate deterrent', the death penalty. Applying its own pressure, the Police Federation sponsored a number of surveys of its members' opinions, each suggesting an increase in support for the routine arming of officers. This sequence of events culminated in a postal survey of all 73,000 Federation members in 1995. The results showed only 21% of officers in favour of routine arming on duty (but 35% in London), and effectively squashed the ambitions of Federation hardliners, but they did show as many as 82.5% wanting an increase in the number of officers who were firearms trained and a more liberal firearms deployment policy.

At the same time, police leaders, in particular Paul Condon, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, developed their own response. Determined not to be dictated to by rank and file officers and getting little public support from politicians or the Home Office, Condon opted for pragmatism. The police response, he argued publicly, would be 'event driven'. Many criticised this philosophy for being dangerously elastic: what was the destination to which we were being driven? Condon's practical compromise was to increase the deployment of armed response vehicles (ARVs) in the Metropolitan area, allow the ARV crews to openly carry their handguns whilst on 'routine' patrol and relax the authorisation procedures permitting ARV officers to draw and use their weapons. In due course, ACPO advocated similar policy changes and a number of police forces followed the Met's lead.

Hitherto, ACPO policy had been to secure an overall reduction in the number of officers authorised to carry firearms but, at the same time, a more rigorous training and authorisation process for firearms officers (AFOs). Two grades of training and authorisation were established. The first level related to the ARV crews but further programmes were developed for units of officers having to handle the inherently more hazardous siege and hostage situations where specialist tactics and weapons might be called for. This twin track strategy provided for less AFOs overall, but an increasingly routine deployment of them. Media reactions to these developments were unequivocal. The Daily Express described the decision to openly arm ARV patrol officers as, "the greatest British defeat since Dunkirk" and likened the British police armed response units to the SWAT teams introduced in the USA.

Normalisation of armed response

Reference to the USA can be helpful here, in particular it draws our attention to a further series of relevant factors. American commentators have noted an increasingly militaristic language being applied to crime control.[2] One facet of this approach to crime control, they suggest, is the increasing normalisation of 'specialist' response. While SWAT teams also began life essentially as response units, they have

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increasingly come to be deployed in more proactive operations against 'organised' or 'gang-related' criminal enterprises. Likewise, they have also been at the forefront of a process by which many UK police departments have come to regard increasingly lethal firepower as essential. Yet the process is entirely cyclical and self-defeating.[3] The main reason that US weapons manufacturers have for selling new firearms to police departments (often virtual loss-leaders) is in order to gain a crucial edge in the much bigger and more lucrative civilian market. Approval by the FBI or LAPD can mean hugely increased sales. In turn, as the criminal fraternity begins to acquire more powerful weapons, so the case for augmenting police firepower surfaces once again - 'gun driven' rather than 'event driven'.

Questions for European Policing

While the civilian market does not apply in the UK, the British police are far from immune to all such developments and have lately had to deal with yet others. The lowering of European border controls has led to concerns about the creation of a so-called domestic 'security deficit' with Britain and its unarmed police being seen as a 'soft target' for criminal activities. Similarly, questions have arisen concerning parity in equipment and enforcement capacity across the police forces of Europe.[4] Alongside these developments runs a final rather worrying influence in the form of an increasingly aggressive marketing of new firepower to the UK police. For instance, if the developments in weapons and tactics featured in the *International Police Review* are anything to go by then the continued augmentation of both lethal and non-lethal police weaponry seems inevitable.

The event-driven 'war on order' scenarios commonly depicted in the *International Police Review* may fall some way beyond the UK's current domestic policing agenda. Yet the violent and dangerous world it represents demands an armed and capable police. The magazine shows 'police capacity' developing, not according to some democratic mandate or needs assessment, but as rather more ideologically, technologically or 'event' driven. As one contributor to the magazine argues, special operations units, their weapons and tactics, "must be shielded to the highest degree possible from both departmental and public curiosity."[5] As a policy, however, this secret 'event driven' world contains no inherent limits; it lacks a public or democratic safety catch. ■

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Notes:

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