Painting the town blue: the pluralisation of policing

Stuart Lister describes the new landscape of visible security, from the 'extended policing family' to 'neighbourhood policing teams'.

There is now widespread recognition that both the authorisation and provision of policing are increasingly multi-tiered, fragmented and dispersed across networks of security governance (Bayley and Shearing, 2001). This reconfiguration of the policing landscape is tied to broad processes of social change, including the increased marketisation of crime control. The 'pluralisation of policing' is widely evident within many residential areas, where an assortment of security-orientated public, private and hybrid personnel can now be found delivering reassurance-based, visible patrols through a multiplicity of purchaser and provider contractual arrangements (Crawford *et al*, 2005). These conditions not only raise fundamental governance and legitimacy challenges for the police, but also question how it might seek to respond to them in order to foster community safety.

Policing networks as peaks or plateaus?

In an important speech to senior police officers in July 1998, Sir Ian Blair (then Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service) outlined a vision of how the police should proceed and adapt to the pluralised environment in order to consolidate and reaffirm the place of the police within policing. Acknowledging that the police were but one component in a patchwork of patrol providers, he contended the police assume a steering role within a 'horizontal' model of relations between members of the 'extended policing family'. Here, the constable is portrayed as an 'information broker' and 'network coordinator', strengthening the police hand in governing and regulating the activities of others. In an October 2003 speech, however, Sir Ian advocated not the 'horizontal' model of relations, but instead a 'vertical' model in which the vast majority of patrolling services would be directly provided by employees of the police. In the interests of 'social cohesion and public security', Sir Ian argued, the police should seek to reclaim from other organisations as much as possible of the patrol function. Importantly, he identified municipal sources of funding as a key enabler within this endeavour.

This change in approach from a horizontal to a vertical model of policing relations can be largely attributed to several inter-related factors, as the pace of change in the intervening five years shifted upwards through the gears. By 2003 the fear of crime problem and its proposed solution, 'reassurance policing', were attracting increasing local and national political attention (see Innes, this issue); the market for security patrols had greatly expanded, and with it the patrolling presence of municipal wardens and private security guards in urban areas; the philosophy of police reforms now espoused the neo-liberal language of 'citizen-focus' and 'customer-responsiveness'; the police had begun increasingly to dip their bureaucratic toes in

the commercial waters of selling visible patrols; and perhaps most significantly, senior police officers had recognised the greater market leverage offered to them by the introduction of Community Support Officers (under section 38 of the *Police Reform Act 2002*). Indeed, Sir Ian implicitly justified the introduction of this new breed of patrol officer by explaining the competitive edge they would bring the police within the market place (see Blair, 2003).

Swiftly branded *Police* Community Support Officers (PCSOs), this civilian officer can be recruited, trained and deployed more speedily than constables, and crucially at a lower cost, or more prosaically, at a cheaper price. Furthermore, as dedicated patrol officers with limited training and powers, PCSOs can be deployed without the (reactive) pressures that serve to abstract constables from dedicated patrol duties and thus hamper the implementation of contracted police initiatives (Crawford and Lister, 2004). In accordance with Sir Ian's vertical model, police attention has become focused on painting blue the bewildering array of red, green and purple uniforms of non-police patrolling personnel that adorn the streets of towns and cities across the country. Subsequently PCSOs were launched into the patrol market to enable the police to attract external sources of public and private funding. As such, PCSOs have had a crucial role in the further commercialisation of the public police.

A market in visible security patrols

As the market in visible patrol personnel expands, commercial pressures may produce counter-productive relations between different providers of patrol. It is foreseeable that the police will become interested less in developing partnerships with plural policing bodies and more in securing market advantage over them. The contradictory logics within and between the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* and the Best Value regime will inevitably surface in the networks of policing provision (see Newburn, 2002), where coordination and competition make for uneasy bedfellows. Furthermore, as suggested above, recent Government pronouncements have sharpened the commercial mandate of the police by requiring them to be 'customer responsive'. The 2004 White Paper, *Building Communities, Beating Crime*, can be interpreted not only as strengthening the 'customer-focus' within the delivery of front-line police services, but extending it to incorporate the institutional and contractual arrangements that oversee its provision.

A recent Home Office guidance document (under the heading 'Marketing the funding concept') identifies a range of public and private organisations that might provide match-funding for the provision of PCSOs, including "local authorities, parish councils, universities, colleges and schools, local markets,

local transport providers, chambers of commerce, local businesses, and others interested in safer neighbourhoods" (Home Office, 2006: 2). Of these potential 'partners', police forces are particularly targeting local authorities, many of which already fund a variety of warden schemes (e.g.' street', 'estate', 'neighbourhood', 'park', 'ambassador' etc). Accordingly, local councillors are increasingly being confronted by a choice: whether to maintain their warden schemes or reduce if not abandon them in order to free-up resources to fund PCSOs. This is a loaded choice, which often results in core funding being diverted from municipal wardens towards PCSOs. In this, potential 'partners' are usually offered the bait of central government matched-funding, which cushions the initial blow of any financial outlay on PCSOs. Moreover, it would be surprising if the incessant public demand for more 'bobbies on the beat' failed to bring some pressure to bear on elected council members, but also if local authorities didn't perceive this expenditure on the police to resonate more palpably with their community safety responsibilities, as stimulated by the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*.

These funding decisions arise despite the fact that wardens usually retain a wider role than PCSOs and deliver a tangibly different service, one that is less focused on law enforcement and arguably more attuned to building networks of trust and social capital within local neighbourhoods. Although the increasing presence of PCSOs in local communities potentially liberates wardens from their enforcement-focused security patrols, instead allowing them to concentrate on, for example, the community cohesion aspects of their role, in reality the either/or nature of many core funding decisions means that the presence of the latter is merely supplanted, not supplemented, by the former. Such scenarios, which chime with Sir Ian's vision of a vertical model of patrol providers, add weight to concerns about the increasing securitisation of social life, but also represent a further notch in the formalisation of social control. Furthermore, they invest yet more public cash and private sentiment in the dubious promise of a police solution to the public's quest for order and security.

Neighbourhood Policing

The huge political investment in 'Neighbourhood Policing' should not be viewed in isolation from these pluralisation and marketisation developments. This contemporary rearticulation of the community policing tradition coheres with the emerging government mantra of 'new localism', but it also offers the police a powerful marketing strategy, or 'brand identifier', in the battle for resources that is currently being waged within the market for patrols. As such, 'Neighbourhood Policing' has a crucial symbolic and practical role within police aspirations to colonise the patrol function. Furthermore, since Neighbourhood Policing can be understood as the institutional arrangements by which the police aim to organise their 'patrol product' and deliver 'reassurance policing', there is potentially an infinite resource seam to be mined in the form of public insecurities and anxieties about crime, disorder and incivilities.

The 'Neighbourhood Policing' project is intimately entwined with the Government's commitment to increase the number of PCSOs to 24,000 by 2008 (from the current establishment of approximately 6,300). Whilst the Government's Neighbourhood Policing Fund is initially funding much of this expansion, its longer term future may, to a greater or lesser extent, be contingent on the police attracting external sources of funding. In some areas, the provision of Neighbourhood Policing Teams

(NPTs) is already heavily reliant on such funding. In Leeds, for example, NPTs will soon contain three PCSOs per ward, each officer funded (over and above the local police precept) by the city council at an annual total cost of over one million pounds. Likewise, the funding of the 'Safer Neighbourhoods' initiative in London (the Metropolitan Police Service's corporate brand name for the provision of ward-based NPTs), is supplemented heavily by the coffers of the capital's borough councils. These external funding arrangements, which are premised on the requirements of 'customer-satisfaction', raise not only managerial problems of ownership and control, but normative concerns over impartiality of provision, equity of access, and the effectiveness or otherwise of internal and external accountability mechanisms (Crawford and Lister, 2004). Furthermore, the financial costs incurred by councils in funding NPTs may leave them short of funding for more pro-social and inclusive community safety interventions; whilst the inter-organisational complexity of these arrangements and the blurred transparency of the contractual relations governing their provision may leave elected members floundering for public recognition of their role in assisting Sir Ian Blair's vision, and perhaps enabling the police to reclaim sovereignty over the commodified terrain of patrol.

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