

Gay rights in the police service: is the enemy still within?

Dean Blackburn argues that the Gay Police Association has made progress in promoting tolerance within the police force, but says there is still some way to go.

In the 1990s most rank and file police officers viewed being gay as akin to paedophilia or other criminal conduct, and believed that being lesbian or gay, and also a police officer, presented a 'conflict of interest'. Reporting on its fifteenth anniversary, the Gay Police Association (GPA), commented on progress to date: its membership of only 300 in 1999 had grown to just below 2000 members at the end of 2004, although the number of internal hate incidents recorded by police services had also jumped significantly between 1999 and 2004. Ironically this could be seen as a measure of success, as it appeared to demonstrate that more members of the police service were willing to report homophobic incidents than before. The GPA argues that more people are experiencing homophobia because more people are 'coming out'. As was recently suggested by one senior police officer: "It used to be mandatory to be homophobic in the police service... at least now it is only optional" (Cahill cited in Martis, 2005).

Changing attitudes?

For the GPA, the tipping point within the Metropolitan Police proved to be its response to the Admiral Duncan pub bombing in 1999. In this bombing, three people were killed and many members of the gay community using the pub were seriously injured. Within thirty minutes of the Soho bombing, the Met's Racial and Violent Crimes Task Force made contact with the GPA asking for their help. Within two hours the GPA had deployed 'critical incidents co-ordinators' to work with senior police investigators at the scene of the crime. As argued by one GPA member:

"This was the first time that a large group of lesbian and gay police officers had been operationally deployed to support a police force anywhere in the world and represented a defining moment of police relations with the gay community within the UK" (Martis, 2005).

The GPA's efforts to improve the status of gay officers within the police service have been aided by the pro-active stance adopted by some Chief Constables. For example, John Giffard, Chief Constable of Staffordshire Constabulary, has publicly stated that: "It is important that people are open about their sexuality and are not discriminated against. That is for the good of the police service and the public" (Giffard cited in Woolcock, 2006).

More recently Stonewall, the gay rights campaign group, identified Staffordshire police service as the most 'gay friendly' employer in Britain. Stonewall found that one in ten officers within this service were gay, a figure achieved following a recent recruitment drive for gay and lesbian cadets. It also praised Staffordshire for its progress in encouraging gay victims of crime to come forward to report attacks or homophobic abuse

(Townley, 2006).

Peter Fahy, ACPO Lead Officer on Race and Diversity, has also argued that the GPA has been an enormous help to the progress the police service has made in diversity issues (Martis, 2005). In 2004 it was estimated that there could be as many as 20,000 gay personnel within the police service. This moreover might well be an underestimate, as exact figures were not known. Until recently, sexual orientation was not monitored by the police service (Police Review, 2004).

Taking pride?

Evidence suggests that homophobia which dominated the police service in the past is now being successfully confronted. Yet it is also apparent that there is still some way to go before the deep prejudices held by many police officers towards gay officers is finally overcome. Indeed the GPA notes that while some police forces have done much to improve internal relations, the overall picture is still extremely patchy and that "some forces continue to be policy rich but practice poor".

Insight into police organisational culture demonstrates that there is in fact still a mountain to climb before the interests of diverse groups are fully protected within the service. Recent cases involving a provincial police force have only served to highlight how significant the issue remains. The wide publicity surrounding an incident within Merseyside Police was to graphically demonstrate the nature and extent of the continuing internal cultural problem.

Here it was reported that up to 500 officers at Merseyside police were investigated because of emails passed between them. The emails included anti-gay abuse and images that were described as "virulently racist". While the chairman of the Merseyside Police Authority stated he was both "appalled and disappointed," it was later learned that a police inquiry had ruled those involved should only have a few days pay docked as punishment. As a result, it was possible to interpret this response as constituting almost a public endorsement by senior police managers of the police culture (gay.com, 2006).

The problem of ineffective management response to internal discriminatory behaviour was identified as a continuing challenge for police forces by the GPA in 2006. Commenting on the fact that the GPA's twenty-four hour action line had experienced a 75 per cent increase in callers reporting homophobic bullying and harassment by colleagues, the GPA was to note that it had: "also discovered an alarming increase in the proportion of police managers who either refuse or resist the need to take action against homophobia in the workplace. Many are not even aware that they have a legal duty to do this under employment law" (Codling, 2006).

The lack of decisive action by police managers is matched by the absence of any recording of internal homophobic incidents

within police forces. Whilst provision is made for members of the public to report homophobic crime, this does not extend to police officers and staff experiencing similar victimisation from work colleagues. Thus while homophobic incidents external to the police may be increasingly reported, homophobic incidents inside the police service are neither recorded or monitored anywhere in the UK. Other than that provided by the GPA, no accurate data is captured on this subject. Additionally, where homophobic 'hot spots' have been identified by the GPA, police managers have usually proved to be unaware that a problem existed (Codling, 2006).

Consequences of Macpherson

A recent and influential report on the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has served to reinforce a perception that all is not well in relation to diversity issues within the police service. Research conducted for the report showed that while police forces had sought to outlaw racist language, a similar urgency was not apparent in tackling other forms of discriminatory language (Home Office, 2005:40). It also found that there was a greater tolerance of sexist and homophobic language across each of the research sites. Because of the Macpherson Report, police managers were significantly more stringent towards the use of racist language by their officers but this did not extend to the use of sexist or homophobic language by the same officers (Home Office, 2005:40).

Interestingly, the research was to find that the majority of overtly and discriminatory behaviour observed to occur did not take place with interactions with the public, but usually amongst officers "away from public view, inside police stations, or inside police cars" (Home Office, 2005:41). Use of this language was, unfortunately, rarely challenged.

The research also highlighted the overwhelming significance of a police culture that was predominantly male and heterosexist. Women and gay and lesbian officers in all sites reported feeling excluded and commonly said that they, "were undermined and under-valued" and often ignored and excluded within their teams.

This problem was recently highlighted by the suicide of a female police officer expelled from a fire-arms unit in Merseyside Police, following alleged victimisation and bullying of this officer by her male colleagues. The case was to demonstrate how a number of junior-ranking male officers wielded a disproportionate amount of power and where "supervisory officers allowed a culture to develop which if challenged could put an officers' career in jeopardy" (Bunyan, 2006).

The 2005 Home Office research also reported the lack or low visibility of gay male police officers. Far fewer openly gay male officers than lesbian staff were to be identified. At a number of sites no LGBT representatives had been recruited. Police officers believed that publicly identifying themselves in these posts would only make them vulnerable to abuse. One officer interviewed commented that, "there was always a fear that if you came out there was going to be some form of retribution, like homophobic remarks" (Home Office, 2005:42).

Given the recent emphasis on the importance of diversity by senior police managers, the report came to a worrying conclusion. It noted there was a perception amongst police officers that the organisational attitude toward gay officers had not changed significantly since the early 1990s. The Macpherson Report (1999) had clearly affected racist

language and behaviour amongst police officers, with the threat of disciplinary action proven to be a key factor towards encouraging this change. Disciplinary action however, did not extend to sexism and homophobia. It may have explained why many minority officers believed changes in the cultural climate were merely cosmetic and that, "more fundamental expressions of discrimination continued largely unchecked" (Home Office, 2005:48).

The 2005 Home Office Report indicates that the police culture continues to represent a significant barrier to those wishing to see a more open, diverse and responsive police service. It also suggests that there is now a need to fully explore the nature and extent of homophobia within the police service. This point has been made persuasively by Moran who has argued that the findings on sexism and homophobia within the 2005 research clearly argues that a broader review is urgently required (Moran, 2006).

The early optimism expressed by some members of the GPA in relation to changing attitudes to gay officers may still have some foundation. It is however, only too apparent that there has been a lack of consistency across police forces in England & Wales. Homophobia within the police service, as the most recent evidence suggests, remains a major problem and it remains a long way from being afforded the level of managerial attention this issue demands.

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