

Influencing policy

Jan Berry reflects on her chairmanship of the Police Federation and criticises the government's approach to policy reform.

In May this year, I stood down as Chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales, a post I had held for the previous 6 years. The Police Federation is the largest police officer staff association in the UK. As well as the bread-and-butter job of ensuring the very best pay, terms, and conditions to reward, attract, recruit, and perhaps even more importantly retain a high calibre of officers within the service, the Police Federation is a respected and informed stakeholder playing an active part to both set and influence the government's agenda and policy.

To that end, we have been trying to ensure that legislative time and effort are not wasted on a series of untested and unassessed proposals and pilot projects. It was in 1999 when we first called for a Royal Commission to independently review all policing practices, processes, and structures. Now, I realise that Royal Commissions are not popular with any government of the day, but that does not negate the urgent need for a holistic overview of policing in England and Wales.

Sadly, despite our best efforts, our call fell on deaf ears, and the Flanagan Review published earlier this year falls far short of the holistic review required (see the Loveday article in this issue).

Over the last 6 years, there has been a dogged attitude by this government to appear to consult while pushing ahead with their own agenda. This has been to the detriment of policing and to the detriment of the criminal justice system as a whole.

When we look back to when David Blunkett was Home Secretary, it is clear that is when the era of embarking on a system of wide

reaching reform of policing began. Despite our best efforts to engage, the government started to pull down the shutters. Blunkett had a vision of centralising policing, and I firmly believe this caused major unbalances in the structure of policing in this country. It was also during the Blunkett years when the piecemeal method of change became the preferred option for government to tackle anything related to policing.

Blunkett's abrupt method to tackle police reform was a dramatic change from what the police service was used to. What that change showed was that the government had the arrogance, rather than the confidence, to believe they could turn parts of the criminal justice system and the police service on its head without any holistic overview of how one change within the criminal justice system might affect another. The new approach demonstrated to all partners in the criminal justice system that this decade was not going to be business as usual, but instead quite the opposite. The police service in particular entered into a period of uncertainty, which unfortunately still remains 8 years down the line.

The police service compared with any other public service has undergone many reforms in recent years. To a certain extent, this is natural, and the rule of law should be the glue of our society. We have to respond to every social ill; for example, we never needed a drug squad until the drug problem arose, etc. We now have a process where we have increasing numbers of non-sworn officers and a falling number of police officers. I believe the Home Secretary and indeed some senior police officers misunderstood the

concept of having a visible police presence on our streets. The government have lost touch with the endless duties we have as police officers to the communities we serve. It is our duty to earn the trust and respect of the public. We should have uniformed, sworn officers who have the training and powers to deal with situations as or if they arise. Nothing can replace the authoritative presence of a police officer who can offer advice and guidance when needed. Unfortunately, a lack of clarity about who should be fulfilling what role and a number of inconsistencies in the functions of Police Community Support Officers throughout the 43 forces means there are too many variations in the difference of duties of sworn and unsworn officers. Thankfully, this amalgamation process was eventually scrapped because of the huge uncertainty police officers felt about where they were expected to work and live.

Another key issue which needs highlighting is the historic change we have experienced through the Home Office function being split in two. Where initially we were able to join partners in the criminal justice system calling for change, we are now forced to lobby two separate government departments that are both, in turn, fighting for increased finance and resources. Regrettably, while the Minister for Justice appears to be on an equal footing with the Prime Minister, we have been left with a Home Secretary who is doing nothing to show she understands policing, the pressures and demands placed upon us, or the unique status of the Office of Constable. It is also important to highlight that policing matters touch on a wide range of government departments that are all equally demanding within each performance framework.

Our influence in using our experience for informing is wide and varied, and the government would have benefited more if they listened to our advice on some major issues, especially drug policies. The Police Federation warned the government that there would be huge repercussions if cannabis was reclassified. Likewise, if they listened

to us about the implications of introducing 24-hour drinking licences, then it would not have had to be revisited. Frontline officers are the people to listen to before making such dramatic social changes; they know what the impact is likely to be and can help advise on such policies. After all, it is our members who actually come face to face on a daily basis with these issues, and despite who is in charge of policy making, it is police officers who understand the pressures and insecurities of the public.

This government spends more time auditing and counting things, but we need more balance. Police officers should not be chasing targets; they should be chasing criminals. Too strong an emphasis is put on quantity rather than quality, and this has resulted in the demise of good common-sense policing.

But it is not all doom and gloom. The Police Federation can still make government ministers sit up and listen. You only have to look at the march of nearly 25,000 off-duty police officers through central London in January, protesting about the Home Secretary's decision not to implement

in full the Police Arbitration Tribunal's recommendation of a 2.5 per cent pay award, to see that we are still a force to be reckoned with. This was a clear display of the frustration these officers felt towards the Home Secretary.

Recently, the government have continued to pursue their agenda of modernising the workforce. The Police Federation acknowledges that change is both inevitable and necessary, and that we must respond to new trends and demands on the police service. But change must be measured and to the benefit of the public. To that end, we have actively participated in workforce

modernisation meetings with the government and other partners, to ensure that the views of frontline police officers are taken into account.

The Police Federation was also instrumental in feeding views into the Flanagan Report—the review of policing by Sir Ronnie

Flanagan. Both formally and informally, we were able to give our views on bureaucracy, police officer functions, officer numbers, etc. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable for government ministers or civil

servants to sit up and listen to the Police Federation. It is more fashionable for them to place us in a box as an archaic and self-serving union.

However, over the years, the Police Federation has also been instrumental in determining public policy. We play an active part in consultation responses to related government bills and documents, as well as keeping a watchful eye on reports from a variety of influential think tanks.

Police officers are a good audience to speak to about what works and what does not, and let us not forget that policing is a service, so it is vital that somebody asks the public exactly what they want. The government has a responsibility to clarify the police role and functions, which would make it much easier to establish much needed integrated structure, governance, and accountability arrangements.

The best way of moving forward is to address one key question urgently: what do the public want the police to do, who should do it, and how should it be done?

So, as I look back at my time with the Police Federation of England and Wales, what do I think will be the lasting legacy of the Federation? Well, to coin the title phrase of the history of the Federation by Tony Judge, the government can be in no doubt that whether it is pay and conditions, workforce modernisation or criminal justice sector policy and processes; the Federation truly is a force of persuasion. ■

Jan Berry is former Chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales.

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