



POLICING & DEMOCRACY

Policy development and democratic accountability

Much of the recent debate over proposed reforms to the police has focused upon the 'democratic accountability' of the police service. The current tripartite structure divides responsibility for the framing of policing policy between the Home Secretary, chief constables and local police authorities. Although there is a considerable academic literature on police accountability (see Reiner, 1992, for a review), much of it eschews any discussion of democracy and seems to use the term as if its meaning and its virtues were beyond question. As a partial corrective to this lacuna, PSI undertook a major study in four provincial police forces and at the national level, which analysed how the formal structure for the democratic governance of the police related to actual changes in policing policy during the 1980s and early 1990s (Jones *et al.*, 1994).

The democratic framework

The notion of democracy is associated with a range of values which may to some degree conflict, and thus need to be carefully balanced. Any model of democracy involves an explicit or implicit judgement about the relative ranking of different values. We suggest the following set of 'democratic' criteria for analysing the development of policing policy - *equity, delivery of service, responsiveness, distribution of power, information, redress and participation*. Participation in decision-making is often central to ideas of democracy. However, in the case of policing, we argue that other democratic values are more important, because they have a greater impact on the quality of life of the majority.

Changes in policing policy

The research focused on three areas of police policy: crime prevention; crimes against women and children; and civilianisation.

- There was evidence of significant changes in policing responses to crimes against women and children. New initiatives included specialist units, victim examination suites, increased training, written procedures, participation in inter-agency structures, and the recruitment of female police surgeons. All forces studied had made efforts to ensure that victims of rape and child abuse were to be given sensitive consideration and continuing

support.

- Civilianisation was an important part of a wider attempt to improve value for money in the police service. There was a substantial increase in the employment of civilians during the latter half of the 1980s, and by 1993, civilians made up over 28 per cent of total police staffing. Civilians are increasingly found in more senior positions within the police organisation. However, civilianisation always meant real growth. For senior police officers, the first priority was to maintain or increase police officer numbers.

- Crime prevention received an increasing amount of attention during the 1980s, but changes in *policing* policy in the field were limited. Despite some increases in crime prevention activity, there was evidence of a wider failure by the police to make substantive changes towards introducing effective crime prevention policies. In general, crime prevention remained somewhat marginal within the police organisation, 'social' crime prevention projects had tenuous links with concrete objectives, and detailed crime pattern analysis was rare. Rigorous evaluation of schemes was conspicuous by its absence.

Influences over policy change

Central influences

The study confirmed that the most important influences over policing policy come from central bodies, in particular the Home Office. In all three areas of policy covered by the study, the Home Office was the vital influence, although in some cases ACPO was involved from a very early stage and could be described as a 'joint author' of policy. In most cases, the impetus for change came from senior officials rather than elected ministers. Home Office circulars were crucial in all areas of policy.

A range of national bodies were influential in some areas of policy. In particular, women's groups had an important influence in stimulating policy change in the police response to rape and (less successfully) to domestic violence. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office were influential in encouraging forces to civilianise and introduce value for money measures. The local authority associations also had an important input into the development of national policy in this area.

There was little evidence of Parliament having a major influence over change

in any of the policy areas studied.

Local police authorities

Local police authorities had little influence over developments in the policy areas studied. This partly reflects their lack of statutory powers, but a number of other factors compounded this. Police authorities adopted too narrow a view of their own role, and suffered from a lack of relevant information and expertise. The large size and cumbersome structure of some police authorities inhibited an effective discussion of policy.

The study suggests that there is scope for some aspects of policing policy to be determined by local representative bodies, but that neither police authorities nor consultative committees (in their current forms) are the appropriate model. They are at the wrong scale, they are not adequately serviced by professional advisers, and they do not adequately represent groups that come into conflict with the police.

The balance sheet

British policing currently meets or partially meets a number of democratic criteria. Two of the policy changes upon which the study concentrated can be justified on grounds of equity. All three policy changes have been aimed at an improved delivery of service, and levels of information about the inputs and outputs of policing have been improved in recent years. Finally, despite the pervasive influence of the Home Office, power is perhaps more dispersed in the system than some commentators have suggested. However, the formal democratic institutions that are supposed to frame policing - police authorities, consultative committees, Parliament - do not appear to have played an important role in the development of policy. This suggests that democracy is not only or primarily about governmental institutions, but more generally about the openness of a society and its capacity to respond flexibly to new demands and pressures.

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References

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Reiner, R. (1992) *The Politics of the Police*, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.