

“ I think my Association (ACPO) has got to stop putting its head in the sand about the size of forces.... for too long we have been saying no amalgamations at any price... there's got to be some way in which we face the reality - small is not beautiful.”

# The shape of the future

Stephen Savage considers the changing geography of police governance.

The political geography of British policing is in flux. The established structure of the British police service, based upon 43, often fiercely independent, police forces (with another eight for Scotland) is under challenge. The quotation above comes from a chief constable of a middle-sized force in England who, in response to a query about the future of British policing<sup>1</sup>, predicted a significant change to the existing geography of policing in England and Wales. The spectre of continuing centralisation and, perhaps of more importance, regionalisation, seems to loom large.

As debate about the future of British policing continues<sup>2</sup>, it is interesting to speculate about the future geography of police governance in Britain and the impact of possible structural reconfiguration of the police service nation-wide. How pervasive are the forces of centralisation and/or regionalisation? What threats do they present? How might the emergent supra-local structure of policing, national and regional, articulate with present arrangements for police accountability? What will become of that sacred cow of British policing, the principle of 'constabulary independence'? I will consider these questions against

the backdrop of both centralisation and regionalisation.

## The onward march of centralisation?

The view that British policing has been undergoing a process of centralisation, with a consequent diminution of its 'local' tradition, now has the status of a truism in police studies discourse<sup>3</sup>.

On top of longer term centralising developments, such as the growing influence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the growing influence of the Association of Chief Police Officers (but see below), has come the *Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 (PMCA)*, with its national objectives for policing and the new types of police authority, heralding for some the final nail in the coffin of local policing - the establishment of an effective 'state police'. Alongside the PMCA, a range of national police agencies has been created, the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS), the National Crime Squad and the National Directorate of Police Training.

All of this might seem to point to what Simon Jenkins has called the 'nationalisation' of a once local public service<sup>4</sup>. What is more, almost without exception, the process of centralisation has been presented in a negative light - in the zero-sum game, the growth of central influence and power has been at the expense of local controls and influence over policing. This is despite the fact that, prior to these developments, there was little evidence of commentators celebrating the effectiveness of local police accountability under the previous system. But is it possible that the 'centralisation thesis' has been overstated? There are some important counter-arguments.

Firstly, it has become apparent that the twin 'evils' of PMCA, the national police objectives and the newly constituted police authorities, might not be the subversive, counter-democratic, forces they were feared to be. As Trevor Jones and Tim Newburn have argued<sup>5</sup>, the potential for increased central influence contained within the national police objectives has not, to date, been apparent in the objectives themselves. These have, so far, been uncontentious and fur-

thermore were drawn up only after close consultations with bodies outside of central government itself - the local authority associations, ACPO and so on. Jones and Newburn have also argued, on the basis of their research, that the new police authorities are, in some cases, more assertive than their more 'democratic' predecessors.

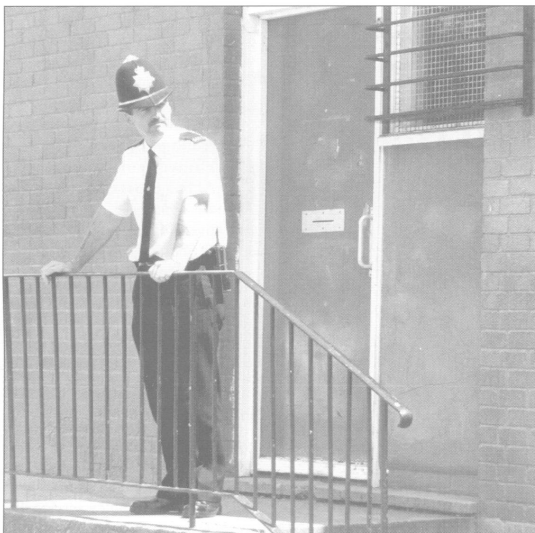
## ACPO research

Research undertaken by myself, Sarah Charman and Stephen Cope on the role of ACPO reinforces that view. Many ACPO officers we interviewed stated that some of the members of the new police authorities, particularly the 'independent' members, were more challenging and interventionist than those they had experienced in the past. Local policing plans, as each year passes, may more and more reflect local influence and priorities. While a centralising machinery certainly is in place, countervailing mechanisms may also be at work.

Secondly, some of the more recent 'centralising' developments have institutionalised new accountability mechanisms which may help disperse, rather than concentrate, influence over decision-making. The new national 'thematic' agencies such as NCIS are to be accountable to 'service authorities', bodies representing the major 'stakeholders' in national policing policy, with a statutory responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the agency in question. One feature of the service authorities is the constitutional status granted to representatives of local police authorities - nine of the seventeen members are selected by the Association of Police Authorities. Only one member of the service authority is a Home Office representative.

There is of course the danger that the service authorities will be 'toothless tigers' and that backstage agendas will dictate events. However, the framework they create is one which establishes a more formal involvement of representatives of local authorities in consultation over policing policy on a national level than was the case before. In time this may lead to a net increase in the extent of influence exerted by locally-based organisations over

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nationally-based policing activities. There has been little scope for that in the past.

Thirdly, one further countervailing force to the centralisation process lies within ACPO itself. Commentators have typically viewed the growing influence of ACPO as one further dimension in the process of centralisation<sup>6</sup>. However, as we have argued elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, it is also possible to see the strengthening of ACPO as one means of resisting central control and 'nationalisation'. In a sense, the more effective ACPO becomes in influencing its membership, the more it can persuade its constituent forces to toe a 'party line' on policing policy and follow common policies, the weaker the case for replacing the current structure of 43 separate forces with a national police force. As one of our respondents put it:

*"I see (ACPO) as being the only sensible counter to a national police service and I see it as a necessary bulwark against over-centralisation."*

In effect, this is to say that the concentration of power within ACPO acts as a counter-weight to the concentration of power within central government. So be it. However, we should not feel totally comfortable with this. To whom is ACPO accountable? We know that as a body ACPO has no formal status within an accountability relationship, yet its national influence over policing

policy is substantial. Perhaps the establishment of a service authority, or something similar, for ACPO itself, again containing representatives of the local police authorities, would be one way of further dispersing power and influence down the line to the local level. The 'tripartite' structure, chief constable, Home Office, local authority, has never been as adequately reflected at national level as it has at force level; a service authority for ACPO would in part address that problem.

Taking these points together it should be apparent that the 'centralisation thesis' can be overstated, or at least oversimplified. Countervailing tendencies are apparent within the geography of police governance; the uni-directional model of ever increasing centralisation of governance is in need of qualification. One further reason for this is emergence of another supra-local level of police governance: regionalisation.

### Towards regional governance?

Whereas much attention has been given to the centralisation of policing and police governance, little has been given to what may become a much more significant development in the geography of police governance, the regionalisation of policing in Britain. This should not be equated with or seen as necessarily consist-

ent with, centralisation. Stronger regional governance can mean weaker centralised governance. There are powerful indications that the drift towards regional policing is an emerging feature of the landscape of policing.

Our research on ACPO included a 'futures' dimension. We asked a sample of ACPO's membership (41 in total) what they saw as the most likely shape of British policing as it moved into the new millennium. Over half of those interviewed anticipated that regionalisation would be one likely or possible feature of the policing map in the not too distant future. One member put it boldly:

*"In the year 2010 I wouldn't be surprised if we have got 10 regions, a boss in charge of each region and a boss in charge of each force."*

In most cases, the emergence of regionalisation was associated with force amalgamations, something, of course, already potent within PMCA. Talk of force amalgamations, of course, is not new. There have been suspicions, for example, that plans had been drawn up by HMIC in the late 1980s for a reduction in the number of forces from 43 to 20 or so forces. However, the 'regional agenda' is about more than the coupling of forces this way. As the quotation above indicates, it is also about an additional tier of governance over and above that operating at police authority level - a supra-local tier. Ironically, this may be made more likely because of the strengthening of governance at the 'micro-' level of policing. The rise of 'geographic policing' or 'basic command units' (BCUs) has, in concentrating more power at the local level, created scope for new forms of governance at the regional level. These relatively self-contained policing units, equivalent in size to the old police sub-divisions, have become the accepted basis for the local delivery of policing services virtually across the country. Given that the BCUs involve managerial responsibilities which have been devolved from force headquarters,

the necessity for a fully equipped central service for each and every force along present models is diminished: localisation of police management opens the door to the reduction in the number of force headquarters and, in turn to the regionalisation of policing.

The regional agenda, following this logic, is therefore driven in part by the resource-case. Under the Conservative Government, interest in possible regionalisation was linked to the pursuit of economies of scale and rationalisation or resources. However, an additional thrust has now been provided by the political push for regionalisation under Labour in the form of regional assemblies and devolution. The idea of a 'Welsh police force' or a 'South-East police force' is not a fanciful one. This might not involve the disappearance of the existing police authority boundaries - after all, the Government plans to reform the Crown Prosecution Service along exactly these lines. It would involve, however, new forms of governance and require new mechanisms for accountability and, not least, new forms of power sharing.

### Constabulary independence

The ramifications of the process of regionalisation would stretch far and wide. One area of particular interest would be the status of the sacred principle of constabulary independence. Attempts to extend the influence of local bodies outside of policing over policing policy have in the past been rebutted on the grounds that they would 'conflict with the chief officers' independence'. Even ACPO's activities and attempts to bring its members into line have been resisted on this basis. Few dare to even appear to tread in this area, not even the Home Office.

Perhaps it is time to look at constabulary independence less as a sacred principle guiding policing and more as a form of senior officer discourse, to see the discourse of 'independence' as a means of defending space. That discourse has had substantial power as a buttress against

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interference with the autonomy of chief officers to make decisions concerning their forces. In other words, independence is invoked to maintain the managerial closure and control of the chief, against incursions from outside bodies. The growth of regionalisation will inevitably challenge that discourse. Regionally-based policies and decisions would force chief constables to accept interference from 'above' in a way not seen before. In turn, this might open the Pandora's Box of 'operational independence' and force those charged with developing policing policy to ask some awkward questions, not least where the line between 'policy' and 'operations' can be drawn.

The changing geography of police governance is, therefore, not just about structural change in the way policing will be managed and delivered in the future. It is about who will 'own' policing and about how power over policing can be shared. Coupled with the equally challenging development of partnerships and local authority responsibility for community safety, processes such as regionalisation will establish new frameworks for the way in which we think about policing. ■

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**Footnotes:**

1. From an interview undertaken as part of a research project on the changing role of the Association of Chief Police Officers. The research was based on over 100 interviews with ACPO members, key role holders, and a range of representatives of bodies associated with policing, such as the Home Office, HMIC, the Audit Commission, and the Police Federation.
2. Morgan, R and Newburn T (1997) *The Future of Policing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
3. Reiner, R (1991) *Chief Constables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p.271ff
4. Jenkins, S (1995) *Accountable to None: The Tory Nationalisation of Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton)
5. Jones, T and Newburn, T *Policing After the Act* (London: Policy Studies Institute)
6. Rutherford, A (1993) *Criminal Justice and the Pursuit of Decency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
7. Savage, S., Charman, S, and Cope, S (1996) 'Police Governance: the Association of Chief Police Officers and Constitutional Change' *Public Policy and Administration* Vol 11. No. 2 p92-106

# Inspecting constabularies

David O'Dowd looks at the challenges facing the Inspectorate today.



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary

essential function remains the same - to provide accountability to the Government and therefore to the public, that the money granted to the police forces of England and Wales, now some £7 billion a year, is used to provide an appropriate and efficient policing service.

Although the organisation has grown since 1856, it is still relatively small, consisting of 5 HMIs and 4 Assistant Inspectors of Constabulary, each with a team of police and support staff. Two of the Assistant Inspectors have a non-police background who, in line with the Citizen's Charter principles, broaden the professional base of the Inspectorate and provide an independent perspective. In total around 95 staff divided between five locations, annually inspect an increasingly complex service that employs over 180,000 staff.

**Current role**

In 1994, the Police and Magistrates Courts Act (now incorporated into the Police Act 1996) significantly reformed the governance and management of the Police Service impacting on all three partners of the tripartite structure. Police authorities were given greater statutory powers and responsibilities and their structure reformed to allow them to exercise those powers more effectively. One of these new responsibilities was to produce a costed annual policing plan containing both locally and nationally set objectives and performance targets. The Act also transferred the control of police force budgets from local authorities to the new free-standing police authorities, so providing chief constables with greater freedom to manage their own finances.

The reforms were not restricted to members of the tripartite structure alone. The role of HMIC was extended through a statutory duty to report on not just the efficiency but also the effectiveness of forces, and for the first time the Metropolitan Police came under the aegis of the Inspectorate whereas previously they were inspected by invitation only. Following these changes the role of the HMIC is summarised as:

*To promote efficiency and effectiveness of policing in England and Wales through the inspection process, to facilitate the*

Established in 1856 under the County and Borough Police Act, the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary has been examining the efficiency and subsequently the efficiency and effectiveness of the Police Service for nearly one hundred and fifty years. The original three HM Inspectors (HMIs) were introduced to assess the state of efficiency of all the new police forces, with the exception of the Metropolitan police. Those forces certified as efficient would then receive an Exchequer grant amounting to one quarter of the cost of pay and clothing. Although the role has expanded over the years, in many respects the

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*spread of good practice and to provide advice and support to the tripartite partners on policing issues whilst maintaining independence of judgement and the highest of professional standards.*

The inspection process is the cornerstone of the Inspectorate activity and the reforms prompted changes to the Inspectorate's annual inspection programme in order to best be able to report on forces' performance under the new regime. From 1994, the inspection process was separated into three distinct formats:

- a) **Primary inspection:** an in-depth examination of the force over the whole breadth of its activities undergone once every three years.
- b) **Performance review inspection,** which is shorter and more focused on actual performance of the force which is undertaken in the interim years.
- c) **Thematic inspection,** which examines a single function across a number of forces and comments solely on the effectiveness of that function.

The introduction of the Performance Review Inspection has increased the emphasis on the use of performance data as part of the inspection process. Performance management has steadily developed within the Police Service over the past ten years and from the outset HMIC have been heavily involved in the development of performance measures.

In the mid eighties, a range of police data including the deployment of staff, activities, outputs and outcomes was first collected

from forces on an annual basis. Following this in 1993, in collaboration with the Audit Commission and the Home office, the Police Service Suite of Performance Indicators was launched which aimed to provide highlighted performance indicators on each of the core service areas. Later, the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 introduced key national objectives with their associated performance indicators determined by the Home Secretary. The Inspectorate was tasked with publishing the national data and interpreting the results, the vehicle for this being the HMIC Annual Report.

So over the years, although effort is made to ensure that only data required for supporting inspections is collected, the database (the HMIC Matrix of indicators) has developed into a vast and complex source of Police Service data. It has outgrown its current software, but work is progressing to replace it with a system that will allow more sophisticated and flexible analysis of the data. One of the problems integral to databases of this size is to ensure accuracy and comparability. This is recognised as vitally important. Constant liaison with the Service is essential in order to maintain and ultimately to try and improve the quality of the data collected, thereby allowing meaningful comparisons to be made.

The use of performance data is important in any inspection of forces, but it is equally important that an holistic view is taken with the assessment of other aspects such as leadership, integrity, accountability and the public interface. The Inspectorate is

uniquely placed to offer a definitive view on policing issues. Whilst retaining a high degree of independence, the deployment of senior staff ensures that a high level of knowledge, skill and experience is brought to bear with an unparalleled understanding of policing issues. It is

particularly important that the service develops leaders of the calibre to meet the challenges of taking a professional service into the next century. Consultation with chief constables has confirmed the value of an independent and professional assessment of force performance through a regular inspection programme.

Spreading good practice throughout the Service continues to be a high priority for the Inspectorate and, as such, greater emphasis has been placed on undertaking thematic inspections as an effective method of identifying and disseminating this to the police forces.

With such regular contact with all forces and the first-hand knowledge and experience of policing issues, the Inspectorate provides a source of professional advice to all members of the tripartite system and other agencies. The Chief HMI acts as the senior professional police adviser to ministers and as such plays an important part, influencing policy making in a positive and constructive way for the Service.

## Recent developments

The growing recognition of the inter-relationship of the separate elements within the criminal justice system and their ability to impact dramatically on each other, has highlighted the need for inter-agency collaboration. Consequently, in seeking to promote police effectiveness and efficiency HMIC has increasingly involved experts from other organisations in their thematic inspections such as the Probation Service, Crown

Prosecution Service, Inspectorate of Prisons, Commission for Racial Equality and Social Services Inspectorate. In addition, the Inspectorate works in close liaison with other agencies such as the Audit Commission, the Police Complaints Authority and the Association of Police Authorities.

With the increasing pressure on budgets, the need to ensure value for money is obtained in every aspect of policing is paramount. This has been one of the Inspectorate's prime aims over the past few years. The three year thematic inspection programme was targeted on those areas where it was considered the greatest scope for obtaining improved value for money existed. This included police sickness, IT project management and an overview of good practice and further potential for value for money. Increasingly the Inspectorate is making progress in costing its activity and encouraging forces to cost theirs in far greater detail.

## Future developments

The pace of change within policing will continue. Changes in the approach to policing predicate changes in approach to methods of inspection. Police authorities, like local authorities, will be required to work within the parameters of the Government's Best Value initiative. Best Value will entail further collaborative work with the Audit Commission and draw HMIC into a prospective role of certification when historically the task has been ex post facto review.

The shifting focus from crime detection to crime reduction through statutory partnerships will require nuances to inspection technique. The introduction by statute of multi-disciplinary Youth Offending Teams again will lead to future collaboration between professional inspectorates and other agencies.

These are dynamic times for the agencies of social control and social support. It is right that HMIC, at the leading edge of professional inspectorates, is in tune with that dynamism.

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