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Re-imagining policing post-austerity

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THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS continues to send shock waves through the banking, business and public sectors. The associated financial constraints on the public sector in the UK, as in many other countries, need no introduction. Criminal justice agencies have not been immune to significant budget cuts and the Coalition government's 2010 spending review called for police budgets to be reduced by 20 per cent. As a result, the police service is being asked to deliver the same level of service with considerably less resources. This has led to widespread public and political debate regarding what the police can realistically deliver, the implications for the numbers of police (and other) officers 'on the beat' and ultimately for order maintenance and crime control. However, as the state contracts the clear hope of the Coalition is that, through the mechanisms of the so-called 'Big Society' project, the private sector, volunteers and community groups will step in to fill any void. The emphasis is on 'bottom-up' governance of policing problems rather than 'top-down' central government control, a philosophy exemplified by the introduction of directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners, with the first elections scheduled for November 2012.

It is no exaggeration to say that these are particularly challenging times for the police service. Given this context we felt this is the perfect time to reconsider what policing is about and to re-imagine policing post-austerity. We received British Academy funding for a seminar held at the Academy on 27 September 2011 with the title: 'Policing in a time of contraction and constraint: Re-imagining the role and function of contemporary policing'. The seminar was not primarily concerned with considering whether the police can deliver the same level of service with less. Instead, given the scale of the challenges ahead, it considered: is it time to re-imagine the role and function of the police service, the mechanisms through which policing is delivered, and how police priorities are determined?

The seminar was attended by some of the top policing scholars in the country, as well as representatives from the police, the Home Office, the National Policing Improvement Agency and other interested parties.¹ In this article some initial reflections are presented on the main themes of the

seminar. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of other seminar participants.

Re-imagining the nature of the policing task

In the first instance the seminar considered the nature of the contemporary policing task. The policing task is multifaceted and the police service is expected to deal with a multitude of crime and other problems. From tackling anti-social behaviour, crime prevention and detection, public order, reassurance, traffic, serious crime, through to responding to terrorist threats, the police service is at the heart of society's response to wide-ranging social problems. Furthermore, the rioting and looting of August 2011 remind us that the police are called on to mobilise resources quickly to deal with unexpected incidents and problems. In recent history Chief Constables have had considerable success in asking government for greater police numbers to meet these challenges. It remains to be seen if they are able to use the scenes of widespread disorder in the summer to argue that they need at least to retain current levels of investment in front-line officers. The populist politics that call for 'more bobbies on the beat' had dictated that a reduction in police numbers was a no-go area for government (perhaps until now). From 1977 to 2009 the Police Service Strength in England and Wales grew by over 30 per cent. This was at a time when the population of England and Wales grew by 10 per cent. This expansion is remarkable as it came at a time of increased competition for security services. As other providers have increased, it would be logical to expect the state police to have decreased in size; yet the opposite occurred. Furthermore, the expansion continued despite all measures of crime falling from the mid-1990s onwards. In effect there was less core business, yet the number of officers continued to rise.

Whilst demand for policing may have fallen in general terms, it may well be argued that crime problems have become increasingly more complex, requiring the development and application of specialist teams. For example, contemporary terrorist threats have required that the police develop new and, potentially, specialist skills. As well as becoming more specialist, the police service has

¹ Papers were presented by Ben Bowling (King's College London), Simon Holdaway (University of Sheffield), Robert Reiner (London School of Economics), Mike Hough (Birkbeck, University of London), Nick Tilley (University College London), as well as ourselves, Andrew Millie (Edge Hill University) and Karen Bullock (University of Surrey). Discussion was led by

Betsy Stanko (Metropolitan Police), John Graham (the Police Foundation), and P.A.J. Waddington (University of Wolverhampton). Some of the papers presented at the seminar will be collected in a special issue of the British Society of Criminology's journal, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Further presentation at the Home Office is also planned.

increasingly moved into diverse spheres of public service. Under successive New Labour administrations, the last decade has witnessed an expansion in Neighbourhood Policing with the purpose to provide greater visible reassurance to communities. Consequently we have witnessed the explosion of 'quasi' police officers who have different levels of powers and responsibilities – Police Community Support Officers being a case in point. But policing has diffused into other non-traditional roles and responsibilities – symptomatic of the wider criminalisation of social policy, or more specifically the 'policification'² of social policy. For instance, the police have been increasingly involved in offender supervision/probation work; school discipline and truancy patrols; youth work; contracted security work; disaster management and family liaison; plus other neighbourhood and partnership responsibilities. In the context of enforced contraction, what the police service takes responsibility for needs to be reappraised. Put simply, the police cannot do everything, but nor do they need to be doing everything. One answer may be a return to what constitutes core policing tasks. There is disagreement over what core policing entails, and it is clear that society calls on the police to deal with wide-ranging problems. However the



core remit of the police is generally agreed to involve, to varying degrees, the maintenance of public order and the control of crime. How widely or narrowly order maintenance and crime control are defined will dictate the roles and responsibilities adopted by the police service. If a narrow definition is adopted then others will, of course, need to take up the slack. And while voluntary organisations and the wider public sector have similarly to cope with austerity, it may be too much to expect them to fill the gap. The Coalition government is promoting its 'Big Society' project, but without support it is difficult to imagine who will have the capacity to take on such a mantle. These are points we return to later in this article.

Re-imagining mechanisms through which policing is delivered

If there is a case for reimagining the roles and functions of the police service, then the question becomes who should decide what they are? Through what mechanisms should priorities for policing be determined? The Coalition is introducing elected Police and Crime Commissioners who will determine local priorities for policing. The hope is that these will improve local accountability, transparency and render the service more responsive to local concerns. The role that democracy could play in determining the functions of the police service was considered in the seminar, but also the limitations. For many, public input in public services is problematic, as those with greatest political capital are inevitably more engaged, and minority and marginalised populations often most excluded. Furthermore, young people (disproportionately the targets of police attention) are, by definition, excluded from democratic election processes. There is also danger in introducing a political process that populist agendas will dominate election campaigns. As highlighted recently by Rick Muir and Ian Loader,³ having directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners creates 'risks of politicizing policing and of subjecting minority groups to populist crackdowns on crime'. The political and media debates that followed the summer 2011 rioting and looting clearly demonstrate that there is little agreement regarding how best to respond to crime and disorder, especially in respect to that committed by young people. Yet the populist call is inevitably for more punitive measures.

While there are risks in adopting such a democratic model for policing, there are also possible gains in respect to improved legitimacy. However, this too cannot be assumed. In his paper Mike Hough suggested that successful policing – at least in respect to securing the legitimacy of the police task – probably has more to do with procedural justice and ensuring that all citizens are treated fairly and respectfully. Whatever the arguments for or against elected Commissioners, the first are due to be elected by the end of 2012. In considering the role Commissioners play in securing the legitimacy of policing, important issues will be: the extent to which 'populist' policies come to dominate;

² Cf. H. Kemshall and M. Maguire, 'Public protection, partnership and risk penalty: The multi-agency risk management of sexual and violent offenders', *Punishment and Society*, 3:2 (2001), 237-264.

³ R. Muir and I. Loader, *Progressive Police and Crime Commissioners: An Opportunity for the Centre-Left* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011). Available at: www.ippr.org/articles/56/7957/progressive-police-and-crime-commissioners-an-opportunity-for-the-centre-left

the extent to which minority and marginalised groups (including young people) participate in democratic processes so that they can be considered *truly* reflective of a 'Big Society'; and the extent to which the resultant policing is characterised by fairness and respect for all.

Re-imagining the way policing priorities are determined

The introduction of elected Commissioners will inevitably have an impact on the way policing priorities are determined. However, those newly elected will have a tough job marrying election promises with diminished policing budgets. If the police service retreats from delivering certain roles and functions, given the aforementioned points, then what or whom fills the void?

The Coalition's 'Big Society' project has made much of the potential for the private sector and volunteers to provide functions as the state contracts. In particular, the 'third sector' and communities themselves are increasingly encouraged to be involved in policing. The model of Neighbourhood Policing – introduced by New Labour and currently adopted across England and Wales – has at its core the involvement of residents in policing decisions through various public meetings and consultations. Such 'bottom-up' involvement fits neatly with 'Big Society' agendas; and regular beat meetings are proposed under Coalition plans.⁴ However, concerns have been raised about the extent to which citizens get involved in such forms of direct democratic processes. There is by now a relatively long history of police-public consultation, and it is clear that it is difficult to persuade a cross-section of the community to engage with the police service both in terms of setting the agenda for policing and providing services. Whilst *some* citizens have certainly taken to *some* policing initiatives – such as Neighbourhood Watch – involvement in other forms of provision may well be much harder to achieve. Indeed, in her paper Karen Bullock provided empirical evidence to demonstrate that public participation in neighbourhood policing is low and, even where there is active participation, police officers do not always take the public's concerns on board. It is also difficult, she argued, to persuade citizens to get involved in actively providing policing services within the community. On top of this, the police themselves may be sceptical about what communities can achieve. The notions of both accountability and responsabilisation embedded in the Neighbourhood Policing model thereby have to be questioned. More generally, Simon Holdaway's paper provided a warning that attempts to re-orient the activities of police officers, and so the police service, may be mediated by the occupational culture of the service. Classic studies on policing from the 1960s onwards have found that police occupational cultures are resistant to change.⁵ Whilst some question the characterisation of policing as

'monolithic' and unchanging, recent ethnographic research by Bethan Loftus⁶ has found that police cultures are *still* often resistant to change. If the way policing priorities are determined is to be re-imagined, then so too must the culture of the police.

Conclusions

Like other public and private sector organisations, the police in the UK have to make cuts in budgetary expenditure. Where these cuts come is a difficult decision and will be a major concern inherited by the new Police and Crime Commissioners. However, rather than seeing the cuts solely as a problem, they also provide the opportunity to reconsider what policing should be about. Post-austerity policing may need to be leaner and fitter, but it might also be better focused on core order maintenance and crime control responsibilities. Furthermore, it might be better able to respond to public demands (so long as it is not tempted by populism).

Over recent years a process of 'policification' has been witnessed, where the police's roles and responsibilities have expanded to cover other non-traditional duties. These are areas where contraction could (and perhaps should?) occur. Others will need to take up the slack, and the Coalition's 'Big Society' project might provide the vehicle for this to occur. Yet, in the current state of austerity, tough political decisions will be needed to provide support for those who get involved.

Mechanisms for citizen involvement in policing decisions already exist through the Neighbourhood Policing project. The danger with Neighbourhood Policing – and other public consultation or involvement – is that it can attract the 'usual suspects', those with sufficient political capital rather than marginalised or minority groups. Young people in particular are often excluded. If the police are to respond to public demands, this needs to be inclusive of all publics whose views and experiences need to be taken seriously. For various cultural, pragmatic or other reasons, the police may not always take recommendations on board.

An important consideration for post-austerity policing will be fairness and respect for all. An emphasis on 'procedural justice' may be the way forward – that those who encounter the police feel their concerns are treated seriously and that all are treated equally. Whether this will be a priority for the new Police and Crime Commissioners, we shall wait and see.

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⁴ Home Office, *Policing in the 21st Century: Reconnecting Police and the People*, Cm 7925 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010).

⁵ See e.g. R. Reiner, *The Politics of the Police, Fourth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ B. Loftus, *Police Culture in a Changing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).