

Policing & Politics: no longer, 'just good friends'

Peter Squires, University of Brighton

Ever since the Police Federation broke protocol in 1979 and selected a parliamentary spokesman from the party of Government, rather than the Opposition, on account of its claimed lack of confidence in the Labour Party, the relationship between the erstwhile 'party of law and order' and the police has been an especially interesting study in public policy. In the wake of the 1981 riots, Margaret Thatcher made particular efforts to appear 'onside' with the police, having already promised to implement a generous new pay award and later asserting 'we will never economise on Law and Order'. With the Miners' strike looming, Malcolm Young's observation 'no-one gives you money for nothing'¹ was rather prescient.

In the light of this history, Home Secretary Theresa May's first speech as Conservative (not Coalition) Home Secretary was intriguing, to say the least. The year before she had literally torn into the Federation leadership, citing a long list of policing indiscretions and public relations disasters. These included, the Leveson Inquiry, the 'Plebgate' affair, the publication of the report into the Hillsborough disaster, the death of Ian Tomlinson and the sacking of PC Harwood, the dismissal of a Chief Constable for 'gross misconduct' and ten further investigations into the behaviour of senior officers, allegations that crime statistics were being rigged by target-sensitive forces and, even closer to Home, uncomfortable complaints surfacing about a culture of bullying within the senior echelons of the organisation and junketing on the Federation credit card. Finally there were the recommendations of the Normington Report (2014), intended to encourage the organisation to become a partner in policing reform rather than the rear-guard for indefensible past practices, which, she implied, the Federation had been slow to embrace.

Returning to Bournemouth in May 2015 barely two weeks after the election to deliver the Cameron government's law and order message Mrs May faced a potentially hostile audience. She was met by a Police Federation chairman who described their meeting as 'Groundhog Day', and continued: "*Home Secretary, we are not good friends... police officers have to deal with whatever is thrown our way. Our professionalism means showing toleration even in the face of provocation. We learn to put up with the criticism. The abuse. The jeering and dirty looks. The scowls of anger and derision. And that was just from you at our conference last year, Home Secretary.*"

¹ Interviewed in the TV documentary, 'Who Killed Dixon?'

Yet despite such an inauspicious start, it was clear that the Home Secretary had the upper hand. First there was Normington's Report which, as was claimed during the Home Affairs Select Committee hearings into the Police Federation, fully 91% of Federation members supported, and then she addressed a series of proposals designed to tease out the approval of delegates even despite the scepticism of the Federation leadership. Prominent amongst these were better safe and secure provision in the community for the 4,000 or so people detained annually in inadequate police cell provision under sections 135 and 136 of the Mental Health Act. Responding to projected police budget cuts earlier in the year, Sir Bernard Hogan Howe, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, had articulated the concerns of the Met and ACPO when he revealed that fully 40% of calls for assistance from the public involved someone with a mental health issue.

The remark is likely to find support amongst the rank and file, as police staff interviewed in a Policing and Mental Health project undertaken at the University of Brighton revealed that police officers often felt poorly prepared and ill-equipped either to recognise or to deal with people facing complex mental health issues. Furthermore even as they tried to achieve 'right' or 'favourable' outcomes, they recognised the acute limitations of custody accommodation and the limited help and support available in police custody centres (Menkes and Bendelow, 2014). Perhaps without stretching a point too far, the same might be said of the policing of homeless street drinkers or people with chronic substance misuse issues. In either case, with the political will and alternative resources, the police might also transfer an acknowledged burden to far more appropriately trained personnel and far superior environments than custody centres. And that may be the dilemma, in the context of austerity spending cuts and an increasingly contractually bound non-statutory sector, the withdrawal of the police as social service or 'community safety partner' may mean that the difficult issues and the vulnerable people lie where they fall. We hear rather less about the 'Big Society' these days.

The Home Secretary was less likely to have approved of Sir Bernard's other comments regarding the police 'rationing' of the services they provide, as they were required to "pick up the pieces from society's failings", but she promised a new Police Bill designed to streamline police administrative duties whilst refocusing the police work back onto 'crime fighting'. This "freeing up police time" and "putting policing back in the hands of the professionals", were it to be followed through, would likely be music to the ears of both the Federation and the Commissioner. But there lies the wider problem, refocusing policing, much like Blair's 'rebalancing justice' of a few years ago, entails shifts and compromises, doing more of some things and less of others. Can the crime fighting police be abstracted from the 'community reassurance' police and the 'intelligence-led'

police without fundamental changes and deleterious impacts on performance, culture and consent?

Federation representatives were accused by the Home Secretary of 'crying wolf' but, aside from the fact that, as one of the delegates pointed out, there *was* a wolf and it *did* eat the shepherd, chief constables have already begun to make significant changes. The curious decision, followed by a denial and a climb-down, by Scotland Police, to deploy armed officers to routine incidents has been followed by a number of English and Welsh forces. It is a direct consequence of policing cuts; the police may argue that such officers are 'constables first and armed response officers second' but it still represents a major unintended consequence of austerity, rather like water-cannon on the streets of London, the wrong decision at the wrong time. Likewise the single-crewing of police patrol vehicles and the related morale and vulnerability issues which have galvanised the call for a more widespread deployment of tasers: tasers are an unlikely solution for poor morale. Hogan Howe is not the only police spokesman to imply that a more streamlined crime-fighting police force is likely, of necessity, to become a more robust enforcer of the law. We know where that is likely to lead and where the strong arm of the law is most likely to make itself felt. Platitudes about 'One Nation' (from the Queen's Speech) or that 'we're all in it together' ring increasingly hollow.

It has sometimes been said (Faulkner, 2006) that, contrary to expectations, Conservative Home Secretaries have had significantly more 'room for manoeuvre' and have sometimes achieved more success in criminal justice reform. Perhaps Theresa May has a similar opportunity, not just to drag the Police Federation into the 21st century, but to refocus the expensive police power to criminalise away from the minor illegalities of inequality and vulnerability and more squarely onto our major criminal harms. All things considered, however, the former seems much more likely than the latter. The Thatcher Government was accused of having 'killed' Dixon; it would be unfortunate if austerity finished off policing by consent as well.

Faulkner, D. (2006) *Crime, State and Citizen*, 2nd Edition. Waterside Press.

Menkes, D. B. and Bendelow, G. A. (2014) "Diagnosing vulnerability and "dangerousness": police use of Section 136 in England and Wales." *Journal of Public Mental Health* 13.2 (2014): 70-82.

Normington, D. (2014) *The Trusted Voice for Frontline Officers: Final Report*. Police Federation Independent Review. London, The RSA.
