Going Local:
A History of the Future of the Police

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Introduction

Scenario planning is a useful tool to understand the complex effects of a policy in the long-term future. However the situation in the future is likely to be affected by unpredictable events beyond the control or foresight of the author. The following is intended merely as an interesting exploration of an idea, using a narrative structure, to provoke further thought and debate on the issues involved.

This scenario is a response to some of the issues raised in the Policy Exchange paper Going Local: Who Should Run Britain's Police? (see Loveday and Reid, 2004).

Scenario

The following is an extract from Prof. Barry Cole (2067) The Downfall of the Police Service. London:, Blacklee Publishing, Ltd.

It is possible to track the present situation from its beginnings in the first half of the 21st century. By 2050, all the PCs (Police Co-workers) were organized into small policing units, called Policing Teams (PTs) of around 10 to 20 PCs. These were each headed by a PTL, or Police Team Leader. The PTL had to organize the varying workloads, allocate resources, and try to manage policing on the streets. This was often a highly stressful task and so many PTLs had resigned from stress-related illnesses that it had become difficult to recruit. At a regional force level, the PTLs and policing teams were supported -- or

possibly overlain -- by a layer of management, computer, communications, forensic, scientific, and administrative staff who received information from the public via a wide range of media. This staff also tracked crime patterns, analyzed evidence, advised PTLs, and administrated crime recording and the police arm of the central citizen database. The whole force was led by the Chief Executive of Police (the old post of Chief Constable) who reported directly to a board made up of local council members.

Now that the police were directly answerable to and funded by the local council, the question of local politics had become a burning one for all police forces. The local council formed a sort of executive board for policing issues in their areas, and had the power to hire and fire the Chief Executive of Police at will, depending upon his/her co-operation with their policies and the performance of the force. They were able to allocate money to specific crime areas that the council wanted dealt with as a high priority -- which in practice often became a highly politicized process. The system was intended to be properly democratic, placing the police in the hands of people (or the elected representatives) and making the head of police answerable to the councilors for results. It was argued that whatever the will of the people was, it could not be wrong if it was what the majority wanted. This was, after all, the very essence of democracy. Certainly, the police forces had been unable to argue against it, being condemned in the press as fascist, authoritative, and power-crazed for their opposition. Large police forces had been split into county-sized forces, each police area made coterminous with the local authority boundaries, and the chief executives of the police forces put on short term contracts, hired directly by council leaders.

Local councils had been delighted with the changes, having argued for many years that there was nothing wrong with policing that giving the councils more power over it wouldn't solve. On their side were many years of survey results showing the public fear of crime rising year-on-year, despite the falling crime rate (which had fallen overall since as far back as the 1970s). This, they suggested, showed that the police service had withdrawn from communities and the things that mattered to them. Constabulary independence was seen as insulating the police from local community pressures, and making the police forces un-accountable. In addition, it had been necessary to fund the police from local taxation rather than central government money, so the public had had to be given more direct control over the service.

However, many people had long since lost faith in their own local councils and were dis-enchanted with the democratic process; they did not see real differences between many of the candidates and did not want to vote for a whole raft of policies from a particular political spectrum. It turned out that the recorded rise in peoples' fear of crime was linked instead to much wider social changes, fed by an ever-more hysterical media. The police reforms actually had the effect of increasing peoples' fear of crime more, as they felt less and less protected by a police force clearly in crisis and reacting to every whim of their local council.

As a result, the turnout for local government elections had fallen gradually over the past fifty years, from 25% to less than 9%. It was now possible to become a councilor in charge of police priorities with the support of only 5% of the electorate and no knowledge or experience of the police at all. At the same time, the central Westminster government had devolved much of its power to the local authorities, giving them responsibility for setting budgets and taxes, running all the hospitals, schools, fire services, and police services in their area. Often untrained in manage-ment and uncertain of the issues involved, and unable to devote themselves to managing each service full-time, councilors often struggled to maintain even the standards inherited from the previous system.

The various attempts by the local councils to control policing relied heavily on the statistics produced by the police themselves: a contradiction that many felt gave the police leeway to subvert council decisions. Councils who tried to tighten the reins started to monitor the figures closely, delighted with every tiny fall in crime (which was immediately widely advertised in the press) and furious with every small rise in crime (which the press reported anyway). Their over-reaction to tiny shifts in the crime rates, particularly for crimes which already had low figures (where a small increase expressed as a percentage increase looked like a disastrous trend), resulted in council directives lurching from extreme to extreme, trying to shore up any perceived failing in what was really natural variation in a complex social system such as crime. The public, confused by the wildly varying figures and statistics, grew disenchanted with their police and standards of performance and started to seek an electoral candidate who could really take the public services in hand.

In several areas, the local councils had become vehicles for particular groups who were able to mobilize enough opinion to vote, and who, once in office, were able to wield considerable power. This was often the only way to achieve a clear majority, because communities had less clear identity and were less cohesive than ever before, and so frequently votes were split between many different candidates.

In some force areas, councilors represented extremist right-wing parties, or were elected on the strength of single-issue policies such as getting

the litter cleaned up from the streets, improving the performance of the local schools, or getting more ambulances out onto the streets within ten minutes of a call.

Sometimes the councilors had no interest in the police at all: others had very strong views about what the police should do. Either type was regarded with deep suspicion by the police and often resulted in worse policing. Policing had become extremely varied across the country, depending upon the type and diversity of the community, the political color of the council, levels of funding, and the rural-urban mix of the area. The worse the policing record, the more likely that a candidate would be elected on promises to improve police performance. At that point, the chief executive would promptly get sacked and the force would be thrown into chaos with the imposition of harsh new rules. Morale in the police was low and the difficulties of being a police leader, especially a chief executive, were such that hardly anyone could be recruited to the role. Chief executives were made personally responsible for the performance of their force and were often used as scapegoats by councilors anxious to explain away poor results at election time. Invariably, this undermined the PCs confidence, and many would leave or reduce their hours. The council would turn to other public interest topics, and so the whole cycle - or spiral - would turn again.

A step-change in the system of democratic control of the police was the election of Councilor Robin Hayes to the local council authority in 2048. This was a new twist in the spiral, or "balance of democratic policing" as it was called by the government. Robin Hayes was elected on an unusual and innovative political agenda. Realizing that perhaps 10% of the potential electorate were themselves criminals, the councilor had promised to protect them against the police. This, of course, handicapped the police from catching or

prosecuting criminals. Hayes was elected by an overwhelming majority of the vote despite the electoral turn-out reaching a ten-year high of 18%, with people both in favor and opposed to the scheme mobilized to vote. Fourteen percent had been in favor of reducing police "interference." The coalition that supported this emerged, surprisingly, not only from the criminal fraternity but also from many who felt the police were useless, targeted the wrong people, or - infringed upon individual choices. "Targeting the wrong people" included motorists who felt they should be allowed to drive how they liked without penalty, people opposed to immigrants being allowed to settle in their area, people who felt the police did not do enough to catch and punish pedophiles and sex offenders (a rising area of crime which had been given a high profile in the press), and those who simply objected to a police force enforcing laws against them.

As a direct result, there were huge changes to the role given the police service. The police beats were generally restricted to low-crime middle class areas where people felt reassured to see them. The chances of catching any criminals there were small, and levels of arrests and convictions had naturally fallen sharply. In the high crime areas, a kind of crime "mafia" had arisen, running its own illegal and vigilante-based policing system. This, in fact, succeeded in bringing down the rate of reported crime dramatically. The fall in crime had been seized upon by the council as prima facie evidence of success, and was a major selling-point in the run-up to the next elections.

The argument went that peoples' natural moral sense would provide sufficient in policing and controlling bad behavior. Moreover, it would operate more effectively and efficiently than the police force ever could. Others argued that the already large proportion of unreported crime had simply grown larger because people preferred to

deal with crimes themselves in their own community, according to cultural customs, rather than through laws of the country. In other words, criminal activity has simply become lost in the anarchy.

The loss of many facets of the role of police workers through the restrictions placed upon them had, oddly enough, chimed well with the changes already underway in the police service. It had become ever more difficult to impose a strict interpretation of justice and the law on an increasingly diverse and individualistic population. People had lost trust in institutions generally and no longer believed that professionals should have any authority over them. Uniformed police officers telling the public what to do and what not to do were an anachronism, widely perceived as disrespectful for one's rights and one's own personal opinions. People preferred to judge according to their own opinions and moral standard rather than the law.

In recent years, the theory of policing had become confused and almost logically unsustainable. As a result, many people recognized that, as an institution, the old-fashioned police service was unsuitable for the modern world. In addition, the old-style police officer was gone: after the reforms giving power to elected local councilors, police officers had become increasingly cynical and disillusioned with their jobs and what they were being asked to do. They were annoyed with the frequent changes in policy and changes in local councilors, and felt they were no longer able to do their jobs. Many people left, nearly halving the size of the police service in only five years. As the police were therefore less able to do the job asked of them and control the rising tide of anti-social behaviors, people felt the police were useless and unreliable. They grew to prefer the anti-police agenda of their local council. After all, wasn't vigilantism or community control working much better?

The downfall of the police service between 2050 and the present day has been hailed by many as the natural disintegration of an outdated and institutionally old-fashioned organization. Others bemoan the "golden age" of late 20th and early 21st century policing, where it could be argued that democracy, peace, and tolerance were at their zenith. It is undeniable that since this period, crime (especially violent crime, gun-crime, and hi-tech crime) has risen dramatically. But in this modern information-based age of diffuse organizations, diverse workforces, and a large disaffected youth and ethnic population, it was impossible that a police service would be able to cope. Modern solutions, such as electronic tagging, the national DNA database, all-scientific cyber-analysis of crime-scenes, and technological crime prevention wherever possible, seem more likely to resolve the current crime problems. Self-policing communities, able to administer their own forms of justice in accordance with their own culture and belief systems, became the norm rather than the exception.

Endnotes

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References

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