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# Challenges and Prospects for the Development of Inclusive Plural Policing in Britain: Overcoming Political and Conceptual Obstacles

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**P**olicing involves state and nonstate agencies. In this article, we focus upon recent government-led efforts to engage the new realities of 'pluralised' or 'nodal' policing in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Rather than focus on the content and rationale underlying these initiatives, we centre our commentary on the principal obstacles so far exhibited, and likely to persist, for achieving inclusive nodal policing approaches. We then highlight some strategies for overcoming these difficulties.

It is well known that policing is conducted by public, private, and other 'nonstate' agencies (see, e.g., Johnston & Shearing, 2003; Loader, 2000). The acceleration of this trend in recent decades has led to a tendency for liberal states to abandon some of their monopoly claims over security governance. With state police experiencing a crisis of public legitimacy (Reiner, 2000) and a growing number of groups mobilising nonstate security providers, the question of how best to direct the *process* of policing in the 'common interest' has come to occupy both governmental and scholarly thought. Drawing upon our recent research, this paper examines efforts by the British Government to respond to the realities of the 'new' landscape of 'pluralised' (Loader, 2000; Loader & Walker, 2004) or 'nodal' (Johnston & Shearing, 2003) policing in Britain and Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> We focus our analysis on several of the main challenges thus far exhibited for achieving inclusive nodal policing arrangements, challenges which we believe raise some general issues for the prospects of democratic policing reform.

The problem, as it has been defined by policymakers, centres upon the correction of deteriorating police–community relationships in the service of efficient and effective state-directed collaborative approaches to crime prevention. The reform agenda has thus consisted largely of commitments to open public policing up to

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increased citizen involvement at the levels of service provision and police governance. Accordingly, this paper is divided into two sections: the first examining recent developments in neighbourhood policing; the second examining initiatives in — and stakeholder responses to — initiatives in policing governance. We note that initiatives in both of these domains have, thus far, consisted principally of technocratic recalibrations of the composition and role of existing agencies. These efforts have achieved little in terms of inspiring public confidence or participation in networked approaches to policing in the ‘common interest’. This is largely for the reason that questions of policing reform are most often engaged by stakeholders in terms of political contests: disputes which are driven by ‘high’ (ideological) and ‘low’ (partisan) motivations that are simply not amenable to technical solutions. An additional and related obstacle to the implementation of progressive policing policy centres on outdated ‘habits of mind’: that is, a widespread popular failure to conceptualise the limits of public policing in an increasingly pluralised policing environment. We argue for a future strategy that ‘repoliticises’ the policing debate, enabling stakeholders to deliberate about policing issues — from micro to macro levels — in their normative and political contexts.

## **Part One: Neighbourhood Policing and ‘the Police Extended Family’**

Anyone doubting the current British Labour Government’s commitment to root-and-branch police reform need look no further than the Home Office web site dedicated to this objective (<http://www.policereform.gov.uk/>). There they will find a program of astonishing breadth, covering, among other things, workforce modernisation, reduction of bureaucracy, citizen-focused policing, police complaints, leadership, training, and the reform of police pay and conditions. Many of the program’s objectives — including its commitment to partnership-based governance, neighbourhood policing and the ‘police extended family’ — are embodied in the recent reform white paper (Home Office, 2004a). However, potential obstacles are immediately apparent. Not only is there the challenge of delivering a reform agenda of such breadth, there is also a recurrent tension between the Home Office’s ‘high political’ commitment to reinvigorate democratic localised governance and its apparently ‘low political’ (i.e., partisan) desire for increased central control.

In this section we examine the prospects for neighbourhood policing and the ‘police extended family’, drawing upon research carried out in the London Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). For the obvious reason that mainland Britain does not suffer civil conflict to the same degree as Northern Ireland, Britain leads developments in neighbourhood policing. Earlier we referred to the tendency for liberal states to abandon some of their monopoly claims over security governance. However, as with all such general shifts, local exceptions sometimes occur. One such exception is when aspects of security governance with particular symbolic significance are involved. Significantly, the question, ‘Who owns street patrol?’, has been at the centre of recent British debate. Three years ago, Sir Ian Blair, then Deputy Commissioner of the MPS (now the MPS’s newly appointed Commissioner), expressed concern that policing in London might become ‘Balkanised’, due to local boroughs choosing to set up their own police forces or deciding to buy police services

from private companies. In Blair's view, the deployment of a new body of police auxiliaries would provide a solution to this problem, enabling police sovereignty over policing to be reconsolidated (Blair, 2002).

Blair's 'high political' overtures had unambiguously partisan aims: to secure MPS control over London's plural policing networks and, if possible, to put the opposition — both municipal and commercial — out of business in the process. This 'police extended family' model of security governance has now been officially endorsed by the government. In order to facilitate it, the *Police Reform Act (2002)* introduced Community Support Officers (CSOs) into the service. CSOs — uniformed staff working under the direction and control of the chief officer — possess certain limited powers. Their main task is to undertake visible street patrol and to contribute to the reduction of low-level crime and disorder, thereby enhancing levels of public reassurance. Currently, there are about 4000 CSOs operating in England and Wales. However, the government has pledged to finance a further 20,000 CSOs over the next three years (HM Government, 2004).

It is important to note that the extended family model aims to 'kill two birds with one stone'. On the one hand it seeks to undermine the challenge of plural policing by flooding the market with CSOs, thus manipulating market conditions in the police's favour.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, auxiliarisation is part of a wider program to rationalise police organisations, making them more multitiered and flexible, with plural points of entry and modularised training. The combination of these strategies is also likely to undermine the power of staff associations and, if the Police Federation is to be believed, to facilitate 'policing on the cheap'.

In one respect the 'extended family' reforms are already a major success. The initial program was implemented with remarkable speed, providing thousands of additional uniforms on the street within a very short time. However, such is the level of political commitment to the initiative that commentators might be forgiven for regarding it as an 'experiment that cannot fail'. This conclusion is partly confirmed by the research evidence — not least the fact that the future deployment of some 25,000 CSOs is predicated on a model of reassurance policing that, as yet, lacks any significant evidential base (HMIC, 2004; Singer, in Dalglish & Myhill, 2004, p. i)

Yet, however much the reform program is politically driven, it will inevitably face obstacles. Take, first, an example of 'low politics'. Logically, for CSOs to facilitate police sovereignty over security governance, they must be integrated successfully with their newly adopted 'family' members. Evidence on the extent of their integration within the MPS during the first 16 months of the program was, however, mixed. Police and CSOs claimed that the organisation had been poor in communicating information to them about the reasons for employing CSOs. They also cast doubt about the level of support provided by the organisation. Overall, our research suggested that integration posed significant structural and cultural obstacles to the MPS.

Consider next an issue with both 'high' and 'low' political content. The government is pledged to the 'high' political principle that, by 2009, police forces will be 'truly representative' (Home Office, 2003, p. 2) of the communities they police. With a quarter of London's population defined as minority ethnic, the MPS (with 6.3% minority ethnic officers in 2004) will be hard pressed to meet this target. For that reason, recruitment of ethnically diverse CSOs is an important element in

adding to the diversity of the workforce. Our analysis of application and recruitment data showed that 35% of CSO recruits came from minority ethnic backgrounds, a figure well in excess of the 25% minority ethnic recruitment target initially set by the MPS for CSOs.<sup>4</sup> However, while this is undoubtedly a major achievement, the goals of diversity and representativeness involve more than just quantitative considerations. There was strong evidence that pressure to implement the program speedily had led to a lowering of entry standards during the early stages of recruitment. As a result some CSOs were recruited — both white and minority ethnic — who were unsuited to the role. Inadequate support structures, including shortcomings in training and supervision, exacerbated this situation. Minority ethnic CSOs were probably more disadvantaged than their white counterparts in this regard. On the one hand, they tended to have the greatest support needs. On the other hand, as *visible* minorities, they were more easily isolated ‘as problems’ in an organisation unused to integrating minority ethnic personnel. Thus, having been defined as ‘problems’, they were then subjected to disciplinary sanctions. This example confirms that progress towards ‘high political’ ideals, such as ‘representativeness’ may require ‘low political’ support structures to be activated for effective reform to be achieved.

Finally, let us consider neighbourhood policing, the latest incarnation of ‘community policing’. Though neighbourhood policing will be applied to many parts of England and Wales by 2008, its precise definition is unclear since it implies a localised, and thereby nonstandardised, approach. In practice, however, it involves the deployment of dedicated ‘neighbourhood policing teams’. Neighbourhood teams (made up of police, CSOs and others) will apply a problem-solving approach to tackling local issues. They will involve the local community in negotiating priorities and in identifying and applying solutions. By ensuring two-way communication with communities they will build trust and cooperation, thereby helping them deal more effectively with crime and antisocial behaviour (Home Office, 2004a).

The neighbourhood policing model has three potential strengths. First, by using dedicated officers it should avoid some of the traditional failings of previous community policing experiments, such as the constant tendency for community officers to be abstracted for noncommunity duties. Second, by drawing upon CSOs who are broadly representative of and knowledgeable about the neighbourhoods they are policing, the potential for genuine communication between police and local communities is enhanced. Finally, by facilitating such communication, an opportunity for deliberative debate about policing needs and priorities may at last be opened up in localities — something we return to in our next section on developments in policing governance.

It also faces challenges. First, to function effectively, neighbourhood policing teams will need to be well-integrated within the ‘police extended family’ and with other local agencies involved in the provision of security. Second, neighbourhood policing encapsulates diversity, being localised, nonstandardised, partnership-based and sensitive to local demographics. However, the extent to which these aspirations can coexist with alternative, centralising, tendencies within the police reform program remains to be seen.

So, will the ‘extended family’ model, in general, and neighbourhood policing, in particular, bring about significant reform? This question will probably be decided by

two things: the capacity of the Police Federation to resist the auxiliarisation that is so central to the strategy; and the police's capacity to satisfy the public's demand for security — now reconfigured as reassurance.

With respect to the first issue, despite the federation's success in resisting similar pressures a decade ago, the chances of them doing so again are limited. Rapid change in British electoral politics, including the absence of any effective opposition to New Labour (Savage, 2003), has severely restricted resistance to police reform. Recent research involving focus group interviews with federation members indicates stoical resignation: 'They recognised that CSOs are established in legislation, they are a fact of life and there is no turning the clock back' (Chatterton & Rowlands, 2005, p. 28). Thus, it would seem that auxiliarisation is bringing about a significant restructuring of police organisations.

Satisfaction of the public's demand for security is likely to prove more difficult. Evidence from both the MPS research and from similar work carried out in West Yorkshire (Crawford et. al., 2004) reveals enhanced levels of reassurance among the public in areas where CSOs have been deployed. However, three caveats should be added. First, the experiment is still in its very early days. Second, it has long been known that partnership policing approaches tend to achieve the least success in those communities where they are most needed. To a significant extent, therefore, the realisation of the benefits of 'neighbourhood policing' will be tied to the success of other governmental initiatives designed to inspire marginalised community confidence in the public police. Third, and perhaps most seriously, in a context where western liberal governments continue to fuel people's insecurities in the name of antiterrorism, the likelihood that security demands will be satiated seems, to say the least, naïve.

The other question is whether the extended family reforms will, indeed, establish police sovereignty over 'everyday' pluralised policing in Britain? Despite the impact of the CSO initiative, that outcome is by no means inevitable. For one thing, demands for commercial and other nonstate forms of security provision are likely to persist for the foreseeable future and competition is unlikely to be eradicated. For another, one has to question whether the state has the capacity (both logistical and financial) to coordinate, let alone control, the increasingly complex model of service delivery (see Home Office, 2004a, especially pp. 22, 52) demanded by 'extended', 'neighbourhood' and 'partnership-based' models.

From the perspective of this article, the limitations of the sovereign project are no bad thing. In the past, 'community policing' has been a mechanism by which the police have sought, periodically, to reinvent themselves and, by so doing, to 'keep control of the steering of security governance' (Johnston & Shearing, 2003, p. 74). Consequently, old-style community policing has been dominated by top-down 'consultation' with, and 'mobilisation' of, narrowly defined publics. The limitations of the sovereign project might just provide the catalyst for neighbourhood policing to facilitate genuinely deliberative processes within localities and, by so doing, to become something more than a rehash of past failures. Many of these deliberations will likely take place within the institutional settings of our evolving structures for policing governance — the second major prong of recent policing reform efforts — to which we shall now turn.

## Part Two: Policing Governance

The *Police Act 1964* established the tripartite system for police governance in Britain, wherein responsibility for shaping police policy, practice and expenditure was divided between Chief Constables, the Home Secretary and local Police Authorities (originally comprised of local councillors and magistrates and later to include a complement of independent members). This model was translated to the Northern Irish context in the *Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1970*, with several important modifications that tilted the balance of the tripartite system in favour of the Chief Constable and Secretary of State, owing to what was regarded as their 'special security role' in the province.

The tripartite structure has been characterised by constant power struggles both in Britain and Northern Ireland. At the time of their inception, police authorities were charged with the nebulous responsibility of securing the 'maintenance of an adequate and efficient police force'. Such role ambiguity allowed the conception of the 'operational independence' of the Chief Constable to flourish: many chiefs argued that they ought not to be directed in any sense by any political or corporate body, as they were accountable to the law alone. When pressed on these issues by activist police authorities, courts in Britain tended to support expansive interpretations of the 'operational independence' construct proffered by Chief Constables, despite the fact that there was no formal legal articulation of this conception in British constitutional law (Lustgarten, 1986).

Relationships between police authorities and government have also been strained as a result of ambivalence between the latter's high political ambition to 'open policing up' to citizen involvement and its more partisan desire to increase centralised control. Since the late 1980s such control has been facilitated by Secretaries of State in both Northern Ireland and England and Wales securing increased command over the policing purse strings (Jones, 2004; Jones & Newburn, 1997).

Through these processes, police authorities in both Britain and Northern Ireland have been rendered ineffectual and largely timid over the years — though there have been notable exceptions (Jones, 2004, pp. 614–616; Jones & Newburn, 1997). As such, they have accomplished little in terms of inspiring public confidence in policing — or, indeed, even widespread awareness of their own existence (Home Office, 2004a; Jones & Newburn, 2001; Myhill, Yarrow, Dalglish, & Docking, 2003).

In an effort to get things back on track, recent initiatives in Britain and Northern Ireland mark an apparent shift to the 'high political' objectives of rendering these bodies increasingly activist in a strategic sense. This fundamental 'rethink' of the role of police authorities received much impetus through the publication of the Patten Commission Report (Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, 1999). This body produced a blueprint for the reinvention of the policing system in Northern Ireland as part of commitments made in the territory's broader peace pact, the Belfast Agreement, which was formalised in April of 1998.

In addition to many 'standard' policing reforms, the Patten Report also contained a 'radical stream' concerned with rebalancing the distribution of authority within the tripartite structure and, further, broadening its ambit to regulate the many nodal agencies involved in policing on behalf of the 'common good'.

Specifically, the report called for the replacement of the deeply mistrusted police authority with a Policing Board. The board's extensive powers included the right to demand reports of the Chief Constable, the right to initiate inquiries into any aspects of policing when not satisfied with such reports and the right to set midterm policing objectives. By recommending that the Policing Board should have full legal powers to proactively shape policing policy and demand accounts of operational decision-making after the fact, the Commission aimed to make the Chief Constable 'operationally responsible' to — rather than 'operationally independent' from — the new body. In addition, being equipped with a *policing* budget — rather than with a *police* budget necessarily earmarked for the public police — the board would, in theory, be able to exercise regulatory authority over nonstate bodies seeking the funds that would enable them to contribute to the 'collective' policing function.<sup>5</sup> The board would also be connected to local District Policing Partnership Boards that would execute similar functions at the local level.

Recent proposals to rebalance the distribution of power within the tripartite structure in Britain (e.g., Home Office, 2004a, 2004b) appear to have taken much of their cue from Patten, though the 'radical stream' for developing nodal policing governance arrangements as a whole have been significantly watered down: there are no proposals for the creation of one macro 'policing budget' controlled by police authorities in Britain or the Policing Board in Northern Ireland. In place of this has been the establishment of local 'community safety grants' that are ancillary to the central public police budget whose allocation are controlled by the government in both Britain and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, recent proposals issued by the British Government incorporate Patten's language of 'operational responsibility', and attempt to reinvigorate the role of police authorities as regulators of local policing (Home Office, 2004a, p. 128). Though the focus of the approach in Britain has been largely 'technocratic', entailing altering appointments processes and management procedures in seeking to render governance bodies more efficient and 'representative' of the community (see Hamer, 2003), authorities will soon be required to liaise with local agencies involved in 'neighbourhood policing', with a view to playing a coordinator role (Home Office, 2004a, p. 126).

The experience of implementing the radical Patten program in Northern Ireland highlights a number of key obstacles that have significance for reform initiatives in Britain. First of all, stakeholders in policing reform initially responded to radical plans to develop 'networks' for policing in terms of both their 'low political' preferences and broader 'high political' aspirations for the nature of the polity. Predictably, British Unionists and Loyalists resisted the development of devolved policing forms on the grounds that they would signal a diminution of British sovereignty, thereby making concessions to the governance aspirations of Irish Nationalists/Republicans in the territory. Conversely, Nationalists and Republicans publicly embraced nodal policing as enabling their own communities to take power away from the British state over the business of policing. Thus, in a public capacity, arguments were waged largely in terms of the 'zero-sum' game of partisan politics. Yet interviews with key stakeholders suggested that underlying these predictable partisan arguments were deeper 'high political' beliefs about what would be best for *all* communities in Northern Ireland. Prior to the establishment of the new post-Patten institutions, however, groups did not feel able to engage these 'high political'

arguments publicly, perceiving other groups to be unwilling or unable to respond in kind to such high political overtures.

Departure from Patten in the British Government's first rounds of implementation (see Kempa & Shearing, 2002; Shearing, 2000c) was interpreted in the worst possible light by all concerned. Critically, no groups in Northern Ireland trusted the intentions of the British Government in tilting Patten's proposed recalibration of the tripartite structure back in favour of the Secretary of State. In the event, two years of boycott and further negotiation preceded legislation that was further in line with Patten. Thus, the *Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2003* saw all groups, apart from Irish Republicans, sign up to support the novel policing dispensation and participate within the new policing governance structures.

While the political context is more settled in Britain than it is in Northern Ireland, the fact that radical policing initiatives are often received and contested in partisan terms — while perhaps being interpreted in deeper ideological ones — bears important lessons for 'radical' policing initiatives there and elsewhere. Since the way policing is done affects the distribution of both capital resources and physical and ontological security, stakeholders will engage with it — and contest with one another about it — in political terms (Bayley, 2001; Kempa, in press; Reiner, 2000). For that reason it is highly unlikely that any particular 'technical fix' involving legalistic adjustments to the distribution of authority in policing networks will inspire groups to set aside their partisan differences and work towards the 'common good' of collective security.<sup>6</sup>

Recent research commissioned by the Home Office in Britain has also indicated that the public exhibits little *awareness of the existence* of Police Authorities, let alone a nuanced comprehension of the precise division of powers within the tripartite structure (Jones & Newburn, 2001; Myhill et al., 2003). The research further indicates that much of this disinterest is linked to an overinflated estimation of the efficacy of the public police in combating crime. These 'conceptual obstacles', reflecting outdated 'habits of mind' developed in a bygone era, are also unlikely to be overcome through technical recalibrations of the policing system.

Again, recent experience in Northern Ireland suggests that an adaptive way forward lies in a deliberate effort to 'repoliticise' the policing debate. This does not mean encouraging partisan contests over resources and symbolic issues. It means creating opportunities for groups to come together and encouraging them to approach the policing issue in terms of broader normative questions regarding the appropriate nature of the polity in uncertain global times. In Northern Ireland, this has been achieved naturally through the attachment of the 'policing reform' question to the broader governmental restructuring project that took place around the Belfast Agreement: the entire ethos of Patten's program for policing reform being aligned with the negotiated 'vision' for the polity that had been agreed at the time of that Agreement (Kempa, in press; Shearing, 2000a, 2000b). Following on from Patten, the operation of the Policing Board provides an encouraging indication of the ways in which stakeholders may respond to such a deliberative invitation: groups that had for years bitterly contested the policing question in nearly wholly partisan terms quickly came together to settle a series of challenging policy issues in terms of what they considered was best for all communities in Northern Ireland (Kempa, in press). Critically, our interview data suggested that the success of the board in this regard can

be attributed to the members' united perception that they had the authority and mandate to take control over the *policing* project, broadly conceived. They read the source of this authority not in terms of any particular technical powers that had been awarded to them in legislation, but, rather, in the *removal* of what they understood as undue *strictures* on their ability to hold the Chief Constable operationally responsible that were included in earlier rounds of legislation.

Further experience in Britain suggests that centripetal deliberative processes that pitch the policing debate onto the ideological plane will be likely to bear fruit: multi-agency consultation between police authorities, police agencies, health services, and marginalised (i.e., 'hard to hear') groups, rather than multiple instances of single agency consultation, appear to have achieved the most in terms of inspiring positive citizen engagement in pluralised policing approaches (Home Office, 2004a). It would seem that empowering stakeholders to deliberate about policing in a normative and political context will best facilitate their responsible engagement.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the principal obstacles to the achievement of inclusive nodal policing arrangements are contests conducted in both the high and low political domains, coupled with outdated 'habits of mind' that relate to overestimations of the efficacy of public policing. Forty years' experience suggests that technocratic efforts to recalibrate the legislative details of policing will never inspire stakeholders to the 'leap of imagination' demanded by nodal policing arrangements. In place of this, we have suggested that centripetal deliberative processes that invite stakeholders to debate — and empower them to shape — the full range of policing issues, from the very micro to the very macro, will prompt such action. While we cannot be sure that empowering stakeholders — including lay members of the public — to deliberate on the problems of pluralised policing will yield inclusive solutions, such action is preferable to having debate hijacked by those wishing to maintain an increasingly untenable status quo.

## Endnotes

- 1 The governance of police in the United Kingdom is overseen by separate departments for England and Wales (The Home Office), Northern Ireland (The Northern Ireland Office) and Scotland (The Scottish Office). Though we refer to 'Britain', it should be emphasised that in this article we only address developments occurring in England and Wales.
- 2 This work is divided into several projects that are supported by multiple sources. Michael Kempa is currently engaged in a project examining the background, design and implementation of policing reforms in Northern Ireland. This has involved fieldwork in Northern Ireland, consisting of a review of public archives, semistructured interviews with stakeholders representing the full range of political opinion, and an ethnography-inspired observation of the operation of new and reformed policing institutions in that territory. The project is co-conducted with Professor Clifford Shearing of the Regulatory Institutions Network at the Australian National University, and is funded by a grant

provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that is housed at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. Les Johnston carried out research on Police Community Support Officers (CSOs) in London over a 16-month period during 2002–2004. The research employed a variety of methods including field observation, workplace and public surveys, semistructured interviews and an analysis of CSO recruitment data. The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the authors.

- 3 The market is also manipulable by making police responsible for accrediting the very security companies with which they are in competition.
- 4 Based on an analysis of 2025 applications processed during the year April 1, 2002 to March 31, 2003, 25% of the sample were women, which is 3% below the MPS target for female recruitment.
- 5 In public utterances made by members of the Patten Commission, it is clear that not all members were equally committed to the most 'radical' interpretations of the concept of a broader *policing* budget.
- 6 In this vein, we might go further to ask whether technical efforts to achieve effective police–community partnerships that work towards the maintenance of the socioeconomic status quo (especially in the 'Majority World' of economically marginalised communities and nations) entail social justice at all (Agozino, 2003, 2004; Alexander, 1996; Loader & Walker, 2004, pp. 225–227 and footnote 2)

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