

Police and Crime Commissioners are likely to be constrained by the need to swear allegiance to a political party

Stephen Brookes argues that the biggest change to police governance since the formation of the modern British police service is about to go ahead almost unnoticed by the vast majority of the British public. The reforms may well strike at the very heart of police independence.



A Newsnight report on the BBC on 19th July 2012 underpinned many of my reasons for deciding not to stand as an independent candidate in my home county of Staffordshire (see also this [Guardian article](#)).

Lord Prescott, candidate for Humberside, concluded a studio debate with Sir Hugh Orde (ACPO President) and Ian Johnstone (former Chief Superintendent and Independent Candidate for Gwent), by saying “lets see how it works” as the discussants debated the inevitable tensions that lie ahead. Not that inspiring for such a radical change to governance!

The central message of the debate seemed to be that the government was making this difficult in terms of engaging the wider public and there is no doubt that the election of political candidates is preferred.

It was interesting that the debate was preceded by a report from the streets of Nottingham, traditionally the city with the highest rates of crime per thousand people in the population in England and Wales. On appointment as one of the ten founding Home Office Regional Directors (HORD) for the East Midlands in 2000, I worked closely with the Chief Constable at that time who had taken on a force that had metropolitan problems but which was funded provincially. Not an easy task and he wasted no time in introducing significant changes which I described at the time as trying to turn an oil tanker in the mouth of a narrow river. At one point, he drew public attention to the problems of nighttime violence in the city and called for greater support from government, the local authority and the licensing industry in regulating the negative impacts of alcohol. The local politicians, incensed by the impact that this may have on the vibrant night-time economy, systematically ‘jumped on the bandwagon’ of critics of the chief constable.

My team at the government office researched the problem of crime in Nottingham. This illustrated that it was historical and its causes lay beyond what the chief constable could do in the short term. We even showed that ‘pounds per officer’ in relation to the ‘crime problem’ were woefully short, placing Nottingham second to last in shortage of resources. The Home Office told me not to release these findings. Pressure continued to mount on the chief constable and, despite my protestations that he was the right person for the job, but needed time, he left his role prematurely. That was also one of the reasons why I decided to leave policing/civil service to join the academic community where my independence of mind could be openly expressed. I was unable to do so as a senior civil servant and given that the role of HORDs is the closest that we have had to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), I am absolutely certain that it will be even more difficult for elected police and crime commissioners to be independent of politics.

As the Newsnight feature illustrates, Nottingham in 2012 seems to be no different as the public on the one hand have no idea about (or seemingly any interest in) the forthcoming elections and the current Acting Chief Constable (‘acting’ no doubt pending final approval by the incoming PCC) told us that the debate had stopped. The government had spoken and it is his job to make it work. It is significant that both Theresa May and Ed Miliband were briefing their political candidates separately.

In May last year I attended a conference of police chiefs in Philadelphia, USA, accompanying the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, Sir Peter Fahy, and other members of his senior leadership

team. We had a discussion with some of the most senior chiefs in the US with regard to their experience of political governance (the model that the conservative party has chosen to replicate). One of the major challenges that faced chiefs in the US was described as the 'management of misery'. This related to the financial conditions and its impact on allocation (and reduction) of resources, pay, conditions and other hygiene factors, whilst coming under increased scrutiny in relation to policing outcomes from politicians.

A second major challenge discussed was that of declining trust. Trust has always been a critical part of policing by consent, and community policing both in the UK and the US is its manifestation. It is about coproduction, encouraging a willingness to cooperate and introducing procedures that create legitimacy and cooperation. Police leaders should not be reluctant to involve the community in the creation of public policies and be prepared to seek their views in the development of policing. Many do this well. Thus, the principle of direct accountability to the public through PCCs can build on this. However, the strong sense of political direction, illustrated by the swearing of an allegiance to a political party, could defeat this. Police chiefs in the US felt constrained by the political governance processes and seemed amazed that the UK was about to follow their model rather than the other way around.

Greater community engagement is to be welcomed, but as Lord Prescott told us, we will have to 'wait and see'.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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