

Nov
26
2013

The Stevens Report is an impressive document that offers potentially interesting templates for the future of policing

Blog Admin



*The Stevens Commission yesterday published its report on the police service in Britain. **Tim Newburn** finds a huge amount that is both admirable and ought in principle to be attractive across the political spectrum. However, the fact that this 'independent' Commission had links – at least in its origins – with one political party may have some impact on its reception. The absence of a clear recommendation on the future structure of policing also means that the heavy lifting in this area of police reform is still to be done.*

78

Tweet

Where once the British police were routinely if rather uncritically referred to as 'the best in the world', they are now just as likely, and often just as uncritically, to be lambasted for a wide variety of perceived failings. These included unresponsiveness, inefficiency, falling short of expected standards of conduct and, perhaps the greatest failing in the eyes of some politicians, for being 'unreformed'. In fact, policing has been subject to fairly constant reform efforts in the last two decades – though until recently the service had fought off many of the proposed changes it was least keen on. Reform remains in the air, however, and by the time we reach the bicentenary of the establishment of Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police in a decade and a half's time, there seems every chance that the landscape of British policing may well be significantly different from the one that confronts us today. Indeed, the current coalition government seems set on achieving radical reform long before that, and indeed the coalition's whole approach has already established a [new politics of policing](#).

The latest intervention in this field comes from the '[Independent Police Commission](#)', established by the current shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, and chaired by Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington, the former chief constable of Northumbria, Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 2000 to 2005. The choice of Stevens is an intriguing one. During his time as Commissioner Stevens was described by all and sundry as a "copper's copper". Chosen to follow the somewhat more cerebral and distant Sir Paul Condon, Stevens was seen as a safe pair of hands, popular with the rank and file, and something of a traditionalist at the top of Britain's largest force. 'Reformist' would have been one of the least likely adjectives used to describe him. Putting him in charge of a full-scale review of policing may therefore be a clever move by Yvette Cooper, for anything radical his Commission says now may just benefit from Stevens' image as 'old school'. Moreover, Stevens comes without obvious political baggage having once been invited by the Tories to consider the possibility of being a Mayoral candidate in London, and having worked as an advisor on international security to Gordon Brown.

So, how radical is the Stevens Commission's final report, *Policing for a Better Britain*? In some respects quite radical indeed. It recommends the abolition of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Independent Police Complaints Commission and their replacement with a combined Independent Police Standards Commission. More radical than this is the proposal that police officers gain chartered status as the basis for a fully professionalized service. In such a model, officers found to have been in serious breach of rules of conduct would be 'struck off' by the Board of the College of Policing.

At its heart, the report expends considerable effort in setting out a case for the reinforcement of a social justice model of neighbourhood policing – a set of recommendations rather misleadingly described in initial press reports as 'putting the bobby back on the beat'. As set out it is much more than this, with both the terms 'social justice' and 'neighbourhood policing' forming central planks of the Commission's vision. The

report outlines a model in which a 'local policing commitment' would be established which would guarantee a minimum level of neighbourhood policing, together with clear commitments to certain standards of emergency response, police assistance, investigation, information provision for victim and witness, and a more generalized obligation to treat everyone coming into contact with the police with fairness and dignity. In offering a view both of the nature of policing, and of its overarching aims and objectives, the Commission departs quite significantly from many aspects of the way in which policing is currently thought about and talked about.

It is also quite radical on police governance. The Stevens Commission is one of two bodies in the past week that have offered a view on Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) – the coalition government's most far-reaching policing reform to date. In a report entitled *The Pioneers: PCCs one year on*, the think tank Policy Exchange – one of the original architects of the PCCs initiative – invited six of the new incumbents to reflect on their first year in office. With a foreword from the Home Secretary who said it 'demonstrates exactly why PCCs are such an improvement on the old police authorities', the report predictably amounted to a tacit thumbs up for this new office. By contrast, the Stevens Commission weighs in with a solid thumbs down. Their reasons? Their argument is that PCCs suffer from a legitimacy deficit, are relatively invisible, represent a 'monoculture', and even within their first year of operation appear dysfunctional in a number of important respects. They may well be right in their appraisal of PCCs but the first anniversary of their introduction feels too early both for Policy Exchange's praise for this reform and the Stevens Commission's attempt to bury them.

What is the alternative? The Stevens Commission recommends making the police accountable at two levels: both to the lowest relevant local authority level (which would have influence on the selection of local police commanders, some control over an element of the precept, and the ability to set targets) and what would become 'policing boards' at force level (again comprising primarily local government representatives whose job it would be to hold the chief constable to account). The Commission stops here, however, fighting shy of one of the biggest questions for contemporary policing (but currently off the political agenda): how many police forces are appropriate for somewhere the size and complexity of England and Wales and what should its future structure look like?

The Commission acknowledges that the current structure of 43 forces is neither cost effective nor equipped to meet the challenges of the crime and order challenges of the modern globalized world. But there it stops, saying that 'there is little or no consensus about a better alternative arrangement', which one can only assume means the Commission itself couldn't agree. This is a shame for despite quite rightly acknowledging there are three possible futures (somewhat ad hoc locally negotiated mergers; regionalization; or nationalization) the absence of a clear recommendation still means that the heavy lifting in this area is still to be done.

The fate of independent commissions such as this is always somewhat unpredictable and it will be interesting to see how commentators line up in relation to its main recommendations and to what extent there is a split along party political lines. Whilst there is a huge amount in the Report that is both admirable and ought in principle to be attractive across the political spectrum, the fact that this 'independent' Commission had links – at least in its origins – with one political party may have some impact on its reception. Given this, it might have been wiser too had the Commission avoided explicit criticism of the current government: on the one hand for its PCC reforms, and on the other for its unrealistic emphasis on crime-fighting and its undermining or 'hollowing out' of neighbourhood policing. In both cases the criticisms are valid, but in neither case do they apply only to the current government. Previous administrations hardly have spotless reputations where either police governance or the police mission are concerned.

None of this should detract from what is an impressive document that offers a series of potentially interesting templates for the future of policing. In his foreword to the Commission's report, Lord Stevens

says that in his management of the work he sought as far as possible to mimic the workings of a Royal Commission. In many respects he would seem to have succeeded for the report is carefully argued, looks to evidence wherever possible, is always thoughtful and, with the exceptions above, is not obviously partisan. As I suggested above, we live in febrile times so far as policing is concerned. Matters such as the phone hacking scandal, 'plebgate', allegations of misconduct and corruption, undercover policing, the massaging of crime statistics and numerous others have led regularly to demands for new, independent scrutiny of the future of the police. One measure of the success of the Stevens Commission will be in whether calls for the establishment of a Royal Commission now become less frequent.

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.

About the Author



Tim Newburn is Professor of Criminology and Social Policy at the London School of Economics. He is the author or editor of over 30 books, including: [Handbook of Policing](#) (Willan, 2008); [Policy Transfer and Criminal Justice](#) (with Jones, Open University Press, 2007); and, [Criminology](#) (Willan, 2008). He is currently writing an official history of post-war criminal justice, and was the LSE's lead on its joint project with Guardian:

Reading the Riots. He tweets at [@TimNewburn](#).

Like 6 Tweet +1 Share

[Share / Save](#) [f](#) [t](#) [r](#)

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [Back to the future by way of an Independent \(Police\) Commission: The Stevens Report in effect only pursues an established police agenda](#)
2. ['Policing for a Better Britain': It is high time to revisit our model of policing and re-fashion the police service](#)
3. [Predictions of doom have not materialised and PCCs are proving they have the potential to be an effective catalyst for change](#)
4. [Elected Police and Crime Commissioners: some caution is certainly required](#)

This entry was posted in [Tim Newburn](#) and tagged [police and crime commissioners](#), [policing policy](#), [Stevens Report](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

One Response to *The Stevens Report is an impressive document that offers potentially interesting templates for the future of policing*



Russell Webster says:

November 26, 2013 at 10:07 am

Thanks for such a balanced piece, Tim. I absolutely agree that it's much too soon to judge PCCs. I'm feeling increasingly split on the issue – the calibre of the "First Generation" is variable to say the least and plans for them to be in charge of local criminal justice systems, emergency services etc. seem very premature. However, the creation of a clearly visible figure for police accountability does seem to have gone down well and gives a clear focus for public debate on policing and crime issues. As usual, party politics makes it hard to plot a straightforward development path...

[Reply](#)

[Bad Behavior](#) has blocked **15472** access attempts in the last 7 days.



This work by [British Politics and Policy at LSE](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported](#).