

# Democracy experts are divided on Lord Stevens' proposals to reform police accountability

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Last week the report of the Independent Police Commission, led by the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner John Stevens and commissioned by the Labour Party, was [published](#). Its recommendations included the abolition of the post of Police and Crime Commissioner – introduced in 2012 to establish a new form of democratic oversight of the police – and the replacement of the Independent Police Complaints Commission. In this post we ask experts in democracy and police accountability to respond to the proposals and consider the implications of further reform.*

## **Dr Dominic Wood, Head of the Department of Law and Criminal Justice Studies, Canterbury Christchurch University**

*I am intrigued by the extent to which the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) has, paradoxically, heralded the revival of operational independence as a core principle within debates about the democratic accountability of policing. Independence had appeared to be declining significantly in importance as respective governments took greater control over the direction of policing. The introduction of PCCs appeared to be the final nail in the coffin.*



*However, this has not been the case. Operational independence is back in vogue. But it is hard to see how it can survive today, beyond the rhetorical support it receives from all quarters, if we are truly concerned with reconfiguring policing at a local level through community engagement. Irrespective of what happens to PCCs – reject, reform or reinforce – the zeitgeist clearly favours a form of policing by consent that is expressed in electorally representative terms. In which case, the real challenge is how we prevent the police from becoming the means by which the majority within a community impose their will against minorities.*

## **Dr Megan O'Neill, Lecturer, University of Dundee**

*Police and Crime Commissioners were created to increase police accountability through a democratic process and to represent the views of local people on crime and safety. This project will be very difficult to achieve. PCCs represent areas larger than most parliamentary constituencies, meaning that their 'local' areas can be extremely diverse. How one person can adequately capture this wide range of opinion and represent it appropriately is difficult to see. In addition, the gathering of 'local' views is also fraught with problems. Many PCCs rely on 'town hall' style meetings where members of the public can attend to voice their views, or have online debates through media such as Twitter. Both methods carry the inherent risk of reaching out to the same, vocal minority (or technologically-savvy minority), and not those populations who most need to be represented.*



*The other inherent danger here is that PCCs, as elected officers, will be tempted to take action that*

will get them re-elected, rather than what is best practice based on research evidence. This means that initiatives like Neighbourhood Policing, which is widely regarded as a milestone in police work, is being eroded in many areas in order to save money (for example, through the reduction in Police Community Support Officers). I feel the PCC project, although still young, has very little going for it and should be reconsidered.

**Ben Bradford, Departmental Lecturer in Criminology, University of Oxford**

The [Commission's proposal](#) to abolish the office of PCC in its current form is a welcome one. While increased, local, democratic oversight and control of policing are important goals, PCCs, as constituted, seem ill-suited to delivering them. Moreover, PCCs risk active harm to the relationship between police and policed.



For most people, most of the time, crime and policing are above all local issues. PCCs cover too much ground, geographically and socially, to effectively and fairly mediate competing claims on police resources. This may lead to significant tensions between police and community. Equally, police legitimacy depends on rising above party (and personal) politics in order to ensure the decisions officers make are fair and impartial; and, crucially, on communicating this to the public. PCCs, whether associated with a political party or not, aggregate so much influence in one individual that this may undermine the perceived neutrality of 'their' force.

I also therefore support the Commission's proposal to localize and pluralize democratic decision-making. Bringing more local voices into the discussion should enable clearer communication of community priorities, and avoid associating the police with a particular individual or party.

**Dr Louise Westmarland, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Open University**

As the Commission points out a 'spate of organisational failures and scandals over recent years has badly damaged public confidence in the integrity of the police'. In order to put this situation right the Stevens' Commission has proposed the abolition of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC).



In Chapter 6 of the 'Policing for a Better Britain' report the Commission suggests that they are concerned with 'How to ensure the police are both held to account but unencumbered by bureaucracy'. One of the proposals is to recommend the replacement of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and of the IPCC with the creation of a new single Independent Police Standards Commission adding to the so called 'alphabet soup' of agencies.

There are some benefits to this proposal such as the clarification of roles and the taking of responsibility by the College of Policing. The Commission points out that they 'envisage that the new body would be a 'prosecution authority' for serious complaints' but as the College of Policing will be responsible for managing the 'new professional competence and conduct panels' (or what would have been the old disciplinary procedures), will public confidence in accountability be enhanced?

*One of the problems I can see with the proposed system is that the police need to be seen to be accountable, and critics might see the new system as a way of the police monitoring themselves, circumventing external scrutiny which the IPCC provides.*

**Dr Adrian Barton, Associate Professor in Public Management and Policy, Plymouth University**

*Lord Stevens' criticisms of PCCs comes as no surprise to those who have watched the development of this well-intentioned but doomed attempt to increase the democratic control of police forces. The main reason for the failure is a lack of engagement by key players.*



*In the selection, election and support of the PCCs the political classes' engagement is poor. Candidates are not representative of communities and in an era where getting people to the ballot box is increasingly difficult the lack of interest shown by the major political parties led to an unsurprisingly low level of voter turnout. Police engagement is equally lacking. There is no history of meaningful police engagement with the community at governance level due to the police seeing themselves as 'special' and enthusiastically keeping public scrutiny at a distance for nearly two centuries: PCCs are another example of this. If both the political classes and police appear not to be engaged with PCCs, why should the public?*

*In a mature, progressive and increasingly diverse democracy we need a fully accountable and wholly transparent police force answerable directly to the communities it serves. In theory, PCCs were designed to provide this but have failed because of a lack of will on the part of those leading the change to fully engage with the process. Accountable policing must be achieved but it needs to be properly and enthusiastically led by government and police forces both of which understand that in an era of transparency and openness there can be no special cases.*

**Barry Loveday, Reader in Criminal Justice Administration at the University of Portsmouth Institute of Criminal Justice Studies**

*In its recommendation to abolish Police and Crime Commissioners the Independent Commission is likely to find a lot of support. The PCCs have proved to be something of a curate's egg – and their public reception and continuing hostile coverage in the media has done nothing to alleviate the pain associated with them. Yet as the Commission's Report clearly argues finding an alternative is not in fact that easy and the suggested creation of indirectly elected Policing Boards to replace them is not very persuasive. These are likely to be more remote than PCCs and certainly will prove to be if as is argued they prove one potential platform for further police force amalgamation to which the Commission is apparently wedded.*



*The Commission raises a number of objections to PCCs and describes them as being 'riddled with failings'. It would be churlish not to admit that some PCCs appear to have at times gone out of their way to bring a degree of public opprobrium unto their office. Employing old colleagues or campaign*

*managers as deputies or mis-claiming travel expenses do not exactly add to their charms. However despite the reservations frequently expressed about them PCCs can offer a new opportunity to bring about local police service delivery that reflects local need and which challenges the professional dominance of the police which has traditionally characterised it. While the Commission frets over problematic relations between PCCs and chief officers, the public can relax in the knowledge that there will always be police officers ready and willing to work within the new governance arrangements and which will ultimately provide a more responsive and accountable police service.*

Democratic Audit published an [earlier post](#) on this topic featuring responses from Police and Crime Commissioners.

Reactions to the review's proposals from [Charlotte McLeod](#) and [Tim Newburn](#) can also be found on the LSE British Politics and Policy blog.

*Note: This post represents the views of the authors, and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before commenting. Shortlink for this post: <http://buff.ly/18NbpZI>*

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