

Reid between the lines

Dr John Reid, the Home Secretary, gives his thoughts on police officers, mergers, the criminal justice system and neighbourhood policing.



Photography: Sebastian Studios

They say the Home Office is the toughest job in Government – after my first few weeks I think I agree.

But among the flurry of bad headlines there have been some high points and one of them was being able to address the conferences of the Police Federation and the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Nothing can be more important for a Home Secretary than to protect law-abiding citizens and bring criminals to justice. I have the utmost respect and admiration for the bravery and skill of police officers who risk their safety and, tragically sometimes their lives, to ensure people feel safe and secure in our society.

In the current climate I think it is worth stating that we are succeeding in tackling crime - crime is going down and your chance of being a victim of crime is at its lowest for a quarter of a century. However, despite this significant achievement, we do need to do more to restore people's faith in the whole criminal justice system.

I believe that my job, and the job of everyone working within the Home Office and the police service, is to reduce fear, provide security and increase fairness.

At the moment people just don't think the system is fair. They think that the rights of criminals mean more than the rights of victims and law-abiding citizens. They see decisions being made about offenders that appear to be incompetent or unfair. To address this we need to rebalance the criminal justice system to protect the public from those who commit crimes in our communities.

I believe the safety and security of the individual must be weighed against the protection and safety of the public, who are also individuals - millions of them – and these responsible hard-working people deserve to see their rights being adequately protected. This is not something I will shy away from, even if it brings me into conflict with the civil liberties lobby.

I think we also need to reduce fear and provide security by controlling immigration, protecting the public from terrorism and tackling the harm caused by drugs and anti-social behaviour. I cannot stress too much the importance of high-quality visible neighbourhood policing in achieving this.

It is commonsense that we feel safer when we see highly-skilled police officers and community support officers on our streets. But, significantly, it is also the visibility and accessibility of these officers that makes them effective in gathering intelligence about crimes from local communities. That information can then be used in local strategies to tackle issues such as anti-social behaviour and by the police to tackle serious and organised crime.

I was very pleased to be able to see for myself the impact these officers and their teams are having in making communities safer when I met neighbourhood policing teams in Hendon, London and Bournemouth. By 2008 every neighbourhood – typically covering the size of a couple of local council wards – will have a dedicated neighbourhood policing team. This way of working will make officers rightly accountable to their communities and allow people to influence the policing in their area so the crime they are most worried about is dealt with and dealt with quickly.



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We must also continue our reforms to secure our borders and hit the big league criminals who bring misery to our communities through drug and people smuggling.

This is the context in which we are trying to reshape our police forces to create new more strategic forces which will be better able to fight serious organised crime and terrorism through having more permanent capability.

Restructuring will also strengthen neighbourhood policing because forces will be big enough to cope with major incidents without having to take neighbourhood officers off the streets to deal with other issues as can happen at present.

However, while I am committed to restructuring the police service, I understand there are very real issues about timing, governance, council tax and local accountability for police services. So I have asked the police minister Tony McNulty to look again at how we

are taking these reforms forward and to meet with chief constables and police authorities so that we can work together on getting the process right.

It is absolutely vital that a public service as important to the health and wellbeing of our country as the police is in the best possible shape to function effectively in the 21st Century.

I recognise that Home Secretaries and the police service aren't always going to see eye to eye on everything but I came away from both conferences I attended impressed by the dedication and commitment of the officers I have met in my first weeks in the job and I am determined to work with you, and not against you, to continue the programme of reform already underway.

It will not always be a straightforward road, but I am looking forward to travelling it with you.