

Blue blood?

Police minister Vernon Coaker speaks on pay, on-call allowance and why he wants a holiday for Christmas.
Syreeta Lund reports

He grew up in police flats and his father was a sergeant in the Met. Most officers would hope this background at least puts him slightly ahead of some of those who have taken up the post of police minister in the past.

Vernon Coaker is personable and comes across as a man of the people; whether he is a man who can be trusted will be a question on many officers' lips following the pay dispute which sowed the bitter seeds of discontent among the rank and file. Does he think officers were given a fair pay deal? "I think the three-year pay deal is a good deal, it's one of the best in the public sector and I am pleased we have managed to settle," he tells *Police* magazine, adding that it gives certainty in the current economic climate. Mr Coaker refers to the fact that Home Secretary Jacqui Smith agreed to the withdrawal of plans to replace the Police Negotiating Board with a Pay Review Body which would likely have seen officers at a disadvantage. But the plans only last for this term of Parliament, if Labour is re-elected and that's a big if at the moment, would they reconsider extending this period?

"I think that the commitment is to keep it up to the next election. What we want to do is work with police officers, work with the Federation and work with the staff side and that's the commitment we have made." Would he be drawn on the possibility of keeping the PNB as it is if it were proved to be an effective negotiation mechanism?

"We are not committed to abolishing it, on the other hand it's not a commitment to say 'don't worry, definitely, forever it will stay as it is' either."

He says that there is 'no ulterior motive, nothing planned, nothing hidden behind that'. Only time will tell.

The PNB is currently looking at an on-call allowance for officers who, in some forces at least, are frequently expected to be on-call out of hours with restrictions placed on their personal lives that can often tip the work/life balance. Will he look favourably at this issue?

"I know it's an area that arouses passions and I want to be fair with police officers; I respect what they do and how hard they work."



Last month officers at the Essex Federation Open Meeting raised the issue that a lack of planning for major events or regular holidays like Christmas mean many officers are expected to be on-call or holiday has to be changed last minute. Perhaps the possibility of financial compensation for officers may sharpen the minds of those in senior management to keep on-call to a minimum?

“I think it’s part of the negotiation, let’s be reasonable with our officers, that planning is done sufficiently in advance and that’s part of the negotiations that are going on as well.

“They are matters for the PNB but I want to make sure we do something that is fair to officers, gives them a good deal but also in the context of what is good police management.”

He should be able to appreciate the idea of work/life balance as many MPs clock up a 60-hour working week; in fact his ideal Christmas present would be a ‘country holiday’ with his family, I imagine many police officers share the same wish list.

Rank and file officers will hope he looks upon the on-call issue fairly and his father, Edwin Coaker, now in his 80s, will be likely to be making a few calls to his son as Vernon says his father’s big bug bear is the issue of respect for police and for the public.

A sergeant in the Met, working at Golders Green, Ealing and Southall, Mr Coaker senior policed a very mixed community and felt mutual respect was incredibly important.

“I mean things have changed but I think respect for authority is important whether it’s police or teachers, these things are important. I think what he would say is that you gain respect from the way you act as well as just

demanding it. The majority of the police in this country do that. I think that sometimes when we see some of these things on the telly there is a feeling we are all doomed and it’s falling apart, I don’t believe that, but there are very real issues and problems. Sometimes we need to be more confident, to say we have a good police force, there are issues but they are dealing with it.”

The government’s policing green paper, certainly focuses on neighbourhood policing teams working closely with communities, but one criticism from the Federation is that CID and response teams, who the public are most likely to come into contact with, are almost missing from the document. Worrying when it’s the government’s blueprint for the future of policing.

Mr Coaker says he believes the balance between neighbourhood policing, response teams, CID and dealing with serious and organised crime, should be decided by chief constables. In practice though, ring-fenced funding for neighbourhood teams and targets which are aimed at NPTs provide more of a carrot for chief officers to focus resources there, where evidence from officers suggests response teams are stretched to breaking point and CID is suffering a skills shortage.

“We have to organise this in a way where it doesn’t become a choice. We can’t have a situation where we say if we do neighbourhood policing we can’t do response properly and if we do response we can’t do serious and organised crime or CID. I think it is a challenge for us but it’s important all of these things play their correct part in the police service.”

He admits it will be a ‘challenge’ and that there is a ‘capacity issue’ but that it is also about organisation of resources. Mr Coaker did say they would revisit some of the concerns raised about the green paper and would



look at how collaboration between forces is developed to tackle some of the issues. He added: "I accept it is crucial to ensure that is seen as important."

He seems to think that the policing pledge outlined in the green paper will ensure there is a balance as it sets out criteria for 999 calls to be answered within a time limit.

"As I say I come from a police family and I know the worries sometimes that people have but the vast majority of police in this country are doing a decent job, sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I think the majority of people recognise that and I want to be their spokesman for that while at the same time bringing forward some of the change that's needed."

Mr Coaker says his father thinks it's important police officers are visible and accessible and he agrees but I wonder what a former police officer would make of the increasing civilianisation of the police service.

The police minister says PCSOs do a 'distinct but important role' in the country but also that warranted officers will always have a place. Yet many police officers have contacted federation representatives to flag up examples where PCSOs are being used inappropriately and inconsistently across the country, sometimes being put into confrontational situations which they do not have the powers and skills to deal with.

Mr Coaker says that in most of the NPTs he has seen PCSOs are very integrated with Police officers, which may well be true, but the concern lay with what the role of a PCSO really is and why it does not appear to be consistent in different forces.

He says he believes PCSOs are used appropriately in most forces but adds that there is a review looking into the standardisation of powers. If the role is distinct from that of an officer, will PCSOs be given a uniform which does not make them look like a police officer?

"Uniforms [PCSOs] are going to be standardised," he says, although at this point they are not sure what it will look like. Let's hope Mr Coaker listens to the concerns of officers, he certainly would like to be seen as someone who listens and is fair.

He tells *Police* magazine: "That's what I want to bring to the role, a hands on type of approach, someone who will listen, I don't promise to always agree and do what everyone wants but to have mutual respect.

"As I say I come from a police family and I know the worries sometimes that people have but vast majority of police in this country are doing a decent job, sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I think the majority of

people recognise that and I want to be their spokesman for that while at the same time bringing forward some of the change that's needed."

He has been getting around; he's recently been out with Specials in Nottingham and to Liverpool and Newcastle to see what is happening on the ground. He has met with Federation representatives and attended some of their meetings, but the proof of listening to concerns will be in the action taken.

In terms of offering protection for police officers, I was keen to know his thoughts on the roll out of Taser to all frontline officers, something the Federation has been pushing for some time?

As we went to press, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced funding for another 10,000 Tasers to be rolled-out to more frontline officers. This follows a successful trial of the less lethal kit in ten forces.

"I know there is a strong feeling, officers have said to me this is a good use of non-lethal force, it gives us an option which we can use in certain situations. I know how strongly the police feel about this and will take it into account, Mr Coaker says."

Watch this space.

Other topical issues for police officers which relate to protection, include the continuing debate around trying to get all 43 forces to agree to a purpose-built police car for officers which offers the right kit and allows them to safely transport detainees.

Mr Coaker seemed refreshingly open to the idea of finding a way forward, probably partly due to the sensible cost savings that could be made by forces using the same manufacturer and getting the vehicles in bulk. "I have already spoken to officials about it. It has been raised with me and it's something that if it's possible it's certainly something we would like to try and take forward. It seems to me that it is a great saving of money. I know there has been a lot of discussion about it and it's something I am keen to pursue, again we can't force everyone to do it, but it does seem a sensible way forward."

Finally, Mr Coaker says he would like to put pay to the idea that all politicians do is sit in their ivory towers. "That's what I would like to bring to this [role] is getting out and about as well as sitting in a nice office in Marsham Street."

Mr Coaker thinks that politicians can be seen as 'a bit out of touch'. In his own constituency he says he is met with expressions of surprise while doing normal activities: "If I go shopping in Tesco's people say, 'What are you doing here?' And I say 'I'm shopping'."

Let's hope he remembers the supermarket's modest catch line, 'every little helps' when it comes to looking favourably on the fortunes of police officers.