

Political forecast

Massive police reform will be on the cards in the looming general election, says a political commentator with his ear close to the ground

When Prime Minister Gordon Brown decides to go to the country and fight his first general election as Labour leader, police reform will once again come under the microscope. Restoring police discretion, cutting bureaucracy and even the prospect of an annual fitness test for officers are among the policies being put forward by the three major parties. But by far the most dramatic changes being faced by forces in England and Wales centre on the same issue – accountability.

The Conservatives have, of course, pledged the most extensive reforms in this area, ones which arguably alter the face of policing. Their plans for elected commissioners have been painted by some within the service as the most critical since Sheehy.

Some within the ACPO ranks privately oppose the idea as “madness” – possibly because they have the most to lose and, more charitably, because the concept of direct political intervention into policing priorities in this country is almost completely uncharted territory.

What the Tories have pledged to create are directly-elected “police commissioners” who will set the police budget, have powers to hire and fire the chief constable, monitor targets and gather views from the local community on what the policing priorities should be.

It is certainly controversial, and means that non-police officers will effectively be running the show. For evidence of how political intervention in policing can have explosive results, one only has to look back at Mayor of London Boris

Johnson’s role in the departure of Sir Ian Blair from the Met, or five years ago, at David Blunkett’s role in the fall of chief constable David Westwood from Humberside Police in the wake of the Soham inquiry.

Viewers of the seminal US cop show *The Wire* will know how political intervention “down from City Hall” can skew, frustrate and undermine American policing. The question about the Tory plans is whether they can find a workable British compromise once the detail has been hammered out.

David Cameron, the Conservative leader, is known to be very committed to the policy and its introduction seems certain if the Tories win the next election, which must be held before June 2010.

Labour’s policy on accountability is less radical. They want to establish monthly “beat meetings” where residents can tell officers about their concerns, a policy which builds on the Labour government’s successful roll-out of neighbourhood policing teams.

The party also stresses its ongoing commitment to the teams, and in the wider criminal justice arena has pledged to provide 15,000 prison places by 2014. Labour’s investment which has seen police numbers boosted to record levels faces an uncertain future because a forthcoming “spike” in retirement rates combined with widespread pressures from the economy make it seem almost impossible for any political party to maintain.

The current administration has not set out detailed plans for any savings, but

they have portrayed Mr Cameron as “Mister Ten Per Cent”, insisting that a Tory government would cut public services by that amount across the board. Such a move would see chief constables face some very difficult decisions, with cuts most likely being manifested in a recruitment freeze. Conservatives have responded to Labour’s taunts by promising to protect “frontline public services” – which they have not defined. Policing was noticeably absent from reassurances spelt out by Andrew Lansley, the shadow health secretary, in June when he said that the NHS, schools and international aid would be exempt from the cuts.

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One area that is sure to feel the squeeze, unless we witness an economic miracle, is pay.

Once the current deal comes to an end, there seems little prospect of an agreeable settlement for the staff side of the Police Negotiating Board, whatever party is in power. The strait-jacket which has been tied around public funds will mean the next government will have to step extra carefully in its pay bargaining, and attempt to rebuild the trust which



evaporated when former home secretary Jacqui Smith phased the previous pay award.

The Conservatives have also announced plans for a “bonfire of the quangos”, with the policing sector no exception. The National Policing Improvement Agency, the Police Standards Unit and ACPO (though not officially quangos), and possibly HMIC and the IPCC, could face the prospect of mergers or have their wings clipped in other ways.

Conservatives have also pledged more cuts to police bureaucracy, including scrapping forms for stop and search and reintroducing charging discretion to the custody sergeant for all triable summary offences, and possibly either-way offences. They estimate this move alone will save one million hours of police time a year.

Labour’s new Border Agency would also take on police responsibilities under the Tories, which could cause some local difficulties for forces covering ports and airports. The Liberal Democrats set out highly detailed plans for police reform at their annual conference last year, but they came with one all-important rider – they had not been costed and it was probably impossible to afford them all in one go.

They pledged to scrap the national ID cards scheme and use the savings to put at least 10,000 extra police officers on the streets. Their stance on accountability is to introduce direct elections for two thirds of the elected police authority members.

They also propose an annual fitness test for frontline officers, with those who fail being moved to a desk job, or even a civilian role. Lib Dems also said they would review entry terms into the police, to “modernise the police contract”.

There is a wide spectrum of policies being offered across the political parties, particularly when it comes to accountability.

In the months ahead, and in the election campaign itself, it will become clearer exactly what promises are being made on public sector pay and police staffing levels. Law and order has been comparatively low down the political agenda under Gordon Brown’s premiership, but the subject invariably takes centre stage on the hustings. So for police officers, the next general election will be the most interesting and, perhaps, the most ominous in many years.