


View from the chair

Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation, writes on why he intends to fight for negotiating rights on police officers' pay as a Pay Review Body is set to be imposed

A portrait of Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation. He is a middle-aged man with short brown hair, wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket, a light blue and white striped shirt, and a purple tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred office setting.

“With a stroke of the pen, a Home Secretary in what purports to be a Labour government, intends to abolish the rights of 140,000 police officers in England and Wales to negotiate freely with their employers, as befits a democratic society.”

Not since Kenneth Clarke tried to destroy the living standards of police officers through his 'independent' Sheehy Inquiry has a Home Secretary proposed to do identical damage. But this is exactly what Jacqui Smith has done with her declared intention to abolish our negotiating machinery and replace it with a pay review body (PRB), nominated entirely by her. The implications for our members are so serious that, unless wiser counsels prevail, we are heading for a confrontation with this government as serious as the bitter arguments that raged in the mid 1970s. These were resolved eventually by the government handing the dispute to the independent Edmund-Davies Inquiry, which set new and hugely better pay and conditions, and crucially, led to the establishment of the Police Negotiating Board.



Photography: Jeff Moore/Empics Entertainment/Jeff Moore

Home Secretary: a bitter dispute over pay could be on the horizon

It is no coincidence that the current Home Secretary has declared her intentions shortly after the unhappy saga of last year's pay negotiations, and her indefensible decision to stage the arbitration award. When it became clear that, in this year's negotiations, the staff side was in no mood to toe the government's restrictive pay policy, and accept a derisory increase once again, she announced her intention

Thousands of officers march as part of pay campaign



to appoint a pay review body. It was obvious to the staff side negotiators that the Home Secretary was determined to avoid a situation in which the PNB came to an agreement, or the Police Arbitration Tribunal, awarded us an increase above the government's declared norm. Her decision calls into question the continuation of the current reference of the 2008 pay award to the tribunal. Ms Smith, in her lame attempt to justify her actions, relies on the report by Sir Clive Booth of his review on police pay arrangements. Sir Clive was required by the government to consider the option of a pay review body to replace the PNB. He argues that such a body 'improves industrial relations'. This view is hardly borne out by the recent experiences of the teachers and NHS employees, including doctors and dentists, nor is the prison service showing any signs of harmonious relations brought about by its PRB. Just about the only area in which a review body appears to be benefiting the employees, is the Senior Salaries Review Body, where pay rates are in the stratosphere, compared with the rest of the public sector. The review bodies do not make the decisions; they make recommendations to Ministers. There is nothing to prevent Ms Smith from treating a generous proposal from a PRB with the same contempt that she showed for the arbitration award. This nullifies the view of Sir Clive that a PRB for the police would have to provide safeguards and take account of the inability of police officers to take strike action. Ms Smith will have the last word.

With a stroke of the pen, a Home Secretary in what purports to be a Labour government, intends to abolish the rights of 140,000 police officers in England and Wales to negotiate freely with their employers, as befits a democratic society. This after all, is the party that swiftly restored full representation and negotiating rights to the staff of government communications headquarters (GCHQ). But then, the unions pay for the party.

It will be interesting to see what happens in Scotland, where the Nationalist Government cocked a snook at Whitehall by conceding the 2007 arbitration award in full. Ms Smith proposes a PRB for the United Kingdom, but with the flexibility to recommend different approaches in areas "should the requirements of devolution demand it". This means, in practice, that a UK wide pay review could result in different outcomes in the four countries.

Early this year, our federation members gave a splendid demonstration of their solidarity and their anger. Now we are faced with a far greater challenge. It took the Police Federation 50 years to secure our negotiating rights. This Labour government intends to take those rights away with the stroke of a pen. The first task of a Police Pay Review Body would be to make wholesale changes to pay and allowances and the entire structure of rewards. The police PRB, whose members will be chosen by Ms Smith, will rubber-stamp the proposals emanating from the Home Office and the Treasury. Our only legal weapon is the force of persuasion. In the coming months, we have work to do.