

In the hot seat

Paul McKeever, newly elected chairman of the Federation, talks to Tony Judge about priorities for a new policing agenda.

Whatever motivated Paul McKeever's decision to join the police, it wasn't the money. After leaving London University in 1977 with a BA (Hons) in Geography and Social Anthropology, he found his take-home pay as a probationer was less than he had been earning as a casual dishwasher. "I suppose I was impressed by the way the Met handled the street riots in the Seventies and this made me think that police officers do a worthwhile job," he says; a reaction far from typical of the students of the Seventies.

It was not until the early nineties that he was persuaded to stand as the sergeants' rep at Orpington. "I said 'No' at first, but they were persuasive, and so I started my Federation career. I enjoyed helping colleagues with problems, including discipline, medical retirements, and so on."

At the time of the 1993 Sheehy Report, which recommended short-term contracts, 40-year pensions and performance-related pay for officers, Paul found himself lobbying MPs and writing letters to prominent figures. "I was incensed by Sheehy. I did everything I could to make sure that colleagues understood what was being proposed. I knew every one of the 117 recommendations in that report. It would have been a disaster."

In subsequent years, he took various offices in the Branch Boards, leading to the national office as Chairman of the Sergeants' Central Committee, until his election in May as Chairman of the JCC, and thus the national spokesman of the Federation.

Paul McKeever has taken over the leadership of the Police Federation amid huge uncertainty about the



Photography: Anderson Photography

future of policing. The service remains deeply resentful of the Government's interference with the arbitration award, and hugely disappointed with the outcome of the Judicial Review. Whilst sharing these grass-roots sentiments, Paul sees one positive emerging from the episode: "The Court's ruling makes it clear that the Government has absolute control of the negotiating process, yet I think that in one sense this setback has unified us. This has demonstrated to our entire membership that the Federation can and must play an important part in their lives, and as the London demonstration showed, thousands of officers have become Federation activists.

"Police officers can smell unfairness a mile away. From now on, the fight to achieve binding arbitration is absolutely

central to everything we are doing. This affects every police officer in the United Kingdom, irrespective of rank. That is why we have seen such a united front among the staff associations."

With the exception of the Home Office representatives, all components of the Police Negotiating Board feel that the arbitration award should have been honoured in full, but one major change in the offing could be the replacement of the Police Negotiating Board with a Government-appointed Pay Review Body. Where does the Federation stand on this idea?

"This Government appear to be hell-bent on having complete control over what is paid to the public sector. I find this very disappointing, coming from a Government which is supposed to come from a tradition that fights for the rights of working people, including the right to negotiate fair wages from their employers. The Labour Government these days is working in a similar way to the mill owners of the 19th century.

A pay review body?

Paul believes that the arbitration veto has hugely damaged the status of the PNB. "By and large, the PNB has worked well over the years. This is because it is a genuine negotiating chamber in which both sides fight their corner, but usually emerge with a reasonable compromise. In spite of our differences, the police authorities understand that policing is different from almost every other job, because of the statutory restrictions under which we operate. This makes it essential that the police are not short-changed because they lack industrial

muscle. With pay review bodies, we are confined to making submissions and then the appointed members go away and decide what they think is the right offer. They are not going to be motivated by the same principles of shared responsibility for the well being of the police that have made the PNB a successful body. Under a pay review regime, the staff representatives can argue about the way that the global sum is divided, but they can do nothing about the size of that sum. These bodies are creatures of the Government that appointed them. "The experience of other public employees suggests that we would fare much worse if a pay review body is imposed on us. Just recently, we have seen the teachers going on strike, and the health workers are talking about reopening a three-year pay arrangement that has just been decided, because of fears about inflation. So, if unions are unhappy with awards of pay reviews, they can flex their industrial muscle and force a climb down. We would have to grimace and bear it. No. From our standpoint, pay review bodies are a very bad deal."

PCSO's

What does the Federation plan to do about PCSOs? We hear that the Government wants to extend their role, whilst reducing the numbers of constables by "natural wastage". Paul says the Federation gets "mixed messages" on this subject. Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the Chief HMI, suggests that the numbers of constables can be reduced considerably, but then we hear the Police Minister, Tony McNulty, telling Conference that he wants to maintain the current number of 140,000 police officers. Would the Federation resist Government attempts to expand the role and powers of PCSOs?

"Yes, of course we would. PCSOs have not been properly evaluated anywhere in the country, no matter what the Home Office says. I don't think that the public fully understands the role and powers of PCSOs. At first, they

were generally welcomed as a uniformed authority figure on the streets, but more and more people are saying that they want fully fledged police officers, not simply patrolling uniforms. On the other hand, the anti-social elements of the population are only too aware of their limited powers.. This minimises their effectiveness in maintaining public order and reassurance. We think there needs to be standardisation of their recruitment, training, and powers. They must never be regarded as replacements for highly trained and fully empowered constables, whose training occupies years, not weeks. Unfortunately, some chief officers make no secret of their intention to recruit more PCSOs because they are cheaper when budgets are being squeezed."

Overtime

The Home Office and some chief officers are making noises about the cost of overtime. Is it likely that the service could return to the old days, where overtime arising from occurrences during normal duties was mostly compensated by time-off rather than payment?

"The police service is different from industry. We are an emergency service, and in the course of those emergencies, the need for overtime arises. We cannot plan for overtime that comes out of the blue, but the service must continue to recompense our members for extra time worked."

If the Home Office forces such a change upon the service would the Federation, bearing in mind what has happened to the Inspector ranks following the Sheehy Report, seek to enforce the requirements of the European directive on working time? "Yes, this is an area that might assist us to resist any attempts to interfere with overtime compensation, but the important distinction between police and most other employees is that so-called "casual" overtime arises from occurrences during tours of duty, and the officer is under a legal obligation to follow it through."

Complaints and discipline

Does the Federation welcome the noticeable change in official attitudes to complaints and discipline, as instanced by the introduction, from this autumn, of new police conduct and performance regulations? "Yes indeed. The move towards a "no-blame" culture is a massive change from the repressive system of investigation and adjudication that has existed for so many years. This is supported by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, and the whole idea is to arrive at the truth, and where there is fault, to put things right. In the vast majority of cases, these matters will be settled by first rank supervisory officers. If this is going to work, it will be essential that first-line supervisors, sergeants or inspectors, are not second-guessed by more senior officers, or else the whole system will fail. I look forward to the new system taking full account of shortcomings in supervision, which tended to be ignored or excused under the old regime."

Target chasing

In recent months, we have seen the emergence of widespread disenchantment with target chasing. With several chief constables breaking ranks, are we witnessing a rapid retreat from the targets culture?

"Yes, there is growing disillusionment with the current situation. If you look at what has been happening in other public sectors, there seems now to be total disenchantment, except amongst the bureaucrats who cling to the notion that meeting targets represents efficiency. The rank and file know they do just the opposite. As with the police, so in the NHS and education, the people setting the targets have little real appreciation of what the job is all about. Moreover, the fixation with targets has alienated the police from the law-abiding citizen. It has been very damaging and it is high time that this was realised by the Home Office and all chief officers."