

Fever pitch

Think tanks can often form the power behind the politics in terms of generating ideas which sometimes turn into policy. Emma Bingham, the Police Federation's parliamentary researcher and policy advisor writes

Unlike England v Brazil in the World Cup final, the general election is a definite fixture for 2010. The question is when? Pundits and pollsters are currently busy pencilling possible dates in their new dairies with the smart money on May 6. However, there is much truth in the cliché that a week is a long time in politics.

The political football of crime and policing remains a favourite with the major parties as they warm up their top strikers on the sidelines. It's now time to start putting the manifestos together but what will fill in the gaps between the glossy photos of party leaders taking tea with pensioners and smiling at young children? When it comes to filling in blank pages with policy ideas, politicians often turn to a think tank.

Technically speaking, think tanks are charitable organisations and as such have to state their political

neutrality but they are in reality the engine rooms of much party policy. Certain think tanks find favour with particular parties and all the main ones have had something to say about policing in the last 12 months which, if implemented, could have a significant impact upon recruitment, retention, pay and conditions of service for police officers.

In November the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) published their thoughts on the subject in a report entitled *Arrested Development – unlocking change in the police service*. Alongside calls for direct entry into the police service and performance related pay, the main tenet of their proposal is that the police service has managed to duck out of the Labour reform program that has been imposed upon schools and the NHS. They suggest that the main blockage to reform is a governance system that is no longer fit for



purpose. They argue that the current tripartite system, which allows chief constables discretion over local policing matters, is not robust enough, essentially allowing the police service to ignore the so-called modernisation agenda. Their solution is to reform police authorities so that they would be more closely mapped to individual Basic Command Units (BCUs), influencing the appointment of BCU commanders and holding them individually to account. Each authority would have control of all or most of the local precept. In forces where the county council boundaries match with the force, the council will simply become the police authority. Anyone reading the recent government white paper *Protecting the Public* may have noted a ring of familiarity about these ideas.

The IPPR paper holds little comfort for ACPO ranks as they advocate creating a National Policing Agency (NPA) by merging the operational functions of the NPIA and ACPO. Whilst the author of the report attempts to allay any fears that this would be a national police service, he envisages that the agency would have mandatory powers to compel forces to undertake prescribed collaborative and financial procedures. And fear not, because the government would still have their hand firmly on the tiller as the agency would be headed by an individual handpicked for the job by the Home Secretary.

Meanwhile, in the blue corner, Policy Exchange also published their report *Partners in Crime – Democratic Accountability and the Future of Local Policing* in November. For a long time now the Conservative party have been

wedded to the idea of directly elected commissioners.

Partners in Crime puts a bit more meat on the bones of this idea. Under their proposals, the locally-elected commissioners would represent people in constituencies that align with BCUs. Each commissioner would liaise with the BCU commander. Police authorities would be abolished and replaced with police commissions composed of all the commissioners in that force area with responsibilities including force-wide budgeting, setting priorities for the force and appointing the chief constable.

There is scant support for elected commissioners from within the police service. The Federation, Superintendents' Association and ACPO all expressed concerns that directly-elected commissioners are a serious threat to the political independence of the service bringing as it could the opportunity for individuals with single agendas or extremist views to influence operational decisions. Policy Exchange propose to counter this by making each commissioner swear an oath "to restrict their public remarks to their area of responsibility and to consider the impact on diversity and community cohesion". It remains unclear how this would prevent extremists being elected in the first place and stop them pursuing their personal political ambitions behind closed doors.

Whichever party has their hands on the prize come the summer months it looks certain that the arena of crime and policing will remain a political playing field for the inhabitants of Whitehall and Westminster long after the celebratory team bath.



Illustration: Russ Tudor