

Future force

Will the recession give the next government an excuse to downgrade pay and conditions for police officers, push through mergers and civilianise the UK's forces? Industrial relations expert, Professor Roger Seifert, writes



There is an ancient Chinese curse: 'may you live in interesting times'. Well we have been truly cursed and no doubt are happy to curse back. The recession will hit all public services hard whatever the outcome of the May 2010 General Election, but the impact on all services, including the police service remains unclear. That in itself is a cause for concern. So what will happen to pay and performance for the police?

As a labour intensive service everyone is interested in police pay: government as the main funder and policy setter; local employers as budget holders and policemen and women as the workforce. The overall level of police pay on the main career grades has been decided through comparison with a basket of other pay rates, and has, not surprisingly, moved (more or less) in the same overall direction as other public sector pay based on basic grades. In addition, as we know, the Home Secretary has the power to reject, accept, or phase any pay agreement reached through the negotiating machinery.

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The extent to which the index works and the extent to which the current machinery is fit for purpose partly depends on the rate of inflation, government pay policy, and the attractiveness of the job when compared with like professions. Overall police pay has not been rising in the 2000s as much as was hoped for and promised. This resulted in a harmful breakdown in trust between the Police Federation and the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith in 2007 to 2008; and much heated talk and action over the reform of the pay system based on the Booth reports (2007 and 2008).

With an avowed pay policy from both main parties of one percent per annum until 2013 nothing appears to be about to take police up the pay ladder. In addition promised cutbacks, which many believe will be far greater after the election, will fall heavily on the police service. As before when cuts are announced alongside virtual pay standstill, the public as service users and citizens are promised no diminution of quality. The usual suspects from neo-liberal think tanks, free marketers, and a range of ill-informed politicians talk of efficiency savings, waste elimination, regional pay, and therefore the provision of the same

service at lower unit costs. This is an illusion.

There are three old chestnuts that will re-emerge: firstly, the police force merger debate (a proxy for regional pay) was based on some weak research and skewed reasoning about the efficiencies of the economies of scale – the bigger the better. The Police Federation managed to argue against mergers on several grounds: loss of links with the local community; that the planned mergers looked somewhat random; and that no notice was taken of the diseconomies of scale – small is beautiful.

Secondly, the civilianisation programme was seen as part and parcel of a general government move similar to classroom assistants in schools and healthcare assistants in hospitals. The view was that such staff would be paid less, have less secure employment, and substitute for better qualified and better paid professional staff. Overall the reception of these grades was mixed: the political leadership of all parties are in favour as a cheaper way of delivering the service; the new staff were pleased to have the work and training but felt like second class citizens; the professionals felt that the new groups were helpful but were unsure of the job boundaries; and the general public were also unsure who was qualified and able to do what in certain circumstances.

Thirdly, the performance/efficiency argument has two separate but related elements. Most ministers, employers and senior managers discuss ‘efficiency’ in the sense of the relative costs of various inputs, including staff, needed to produce any given unit of output/outcome. In other words if driving around becomes much more expensive than walking the beat, then there will be more walking and less driving assuming this has no impact on the service delivered. In this sense of efficiency the measurement is based purely on what we can see and what we can measure within the limits of policing. That itself is important, but cannot be the end of the discussion. Efficiency must also be over time, beyond police force boundaries, and in terms of the impact on other costs in the system such as prison and probation, health, employment, and feelings of well-being and safety among the wider public. Police efficiency does not start and stop with preventing and detecting crime.

Finally, the recession: deep, wide and shifting the balance of public perception and public need away from essential citizen services towards debt servicing. Pay and pensions will be tightly limited and police staff will feel that they are falling behind. Staffing levels will fall among Police Federation ranks, with more rationalisations and civilians, increasingly outsourced to the private sector. The only way to counter the worst aspects are to join with other public sector services to argue against cuts in pay and budgets – to argue as many other countries are that the best way to pay for the recession is steady long term growth based partly on a strong state sector. In addition the police service must remain true to its core principles and duties whatever the recession inspired attacks: no to mergers; no to any further dilution.