

The Government's real agenda?

Nigel Archer argues recent changes in policing are designed to give politicians even greater influence over the service

It would appear that the current Government has slowly but inexorably been pursuing a strategy aimed at changing policing in England and Wales. 'We know,' I hear from the change-weary amongst you.

But have you bothered to put all of the small changes together to see the 'big picture'?

Serving officers swear allegiance to the Crown and therefore hold the Royal Warrant. Through a series of changes in legislation and initiatives such as workforce modernisation, there appears to be a concerted effort to change this and move to the 'Napoleonic Model' with its greater government control as seen in much of Europe.

Take Spain, for example, where there is the Guardia Civil, a national force divided into regions and controlled by the Government through a minister. Below this level sits the Policia Local, locally employed officers with limited (locally enforceable) powers under direct control of the equivalent of local government, through locally appointed police commanders.

Sir Simon Milton, Chair of the Local Government Association has in fact proposed exactly this in recent months.

To achieve a model such as this there are certain elements to put in place. Many of these have been achieved in recent years, but impatience saw a key milestone being attempted too early and having to be temporarily shelved. I refer of course to the failed attempt at regionalisation of 2006.

This of course is only a temporary setback and will no doubt resurface once more work has been done to remove resistance factors. Let us examine the evidence of key elements in preparation for the completion of the strategy.

- The imposition of central government targets on police authorities and chief constables with the fear of financial penalties if not accepted. These dictate priorities based on political expedience in response to the media scares which may impact on the Government's poll ratings rather than the needs of local communities.

- The compulsory introduction of Community Support Officers to replace sworn officers as the local face of policing. This was swiftly followed by the inevitable clamour to increase and standardise their powers nationally. The result is a 'Policia Local', but with slightly less power than their Spanish colleagues – for now!

- The introduction of the Highways Agency to the policing of the motorway network. Currently in a supporting role, their training is reflecting the likelihood of them replacing police on the motorways. It's then a short step to them becoming the national traffic enforcement agency for all roads policing.

- The introduction of legislation which allows greater civilianisation

of roles in the policing arena, through the provision of powers of arrest to anyone the Government deems necessary, such as enjoyed by SOCA now. CSO, Highways Agency, and who knows who else to follow?

- The removal of the last bastion of 'old style' policing, namely the use of discretion and common sense. This is achieved through the introduction of National Crime Recording Standards, which require every incident to be recorded; if there is a 'crime' made out it must be fully investigated, with all the inherent bureaucracy and time needed to achieve this. Coupled with targets, this has led to a playground fight between two 10 year olds

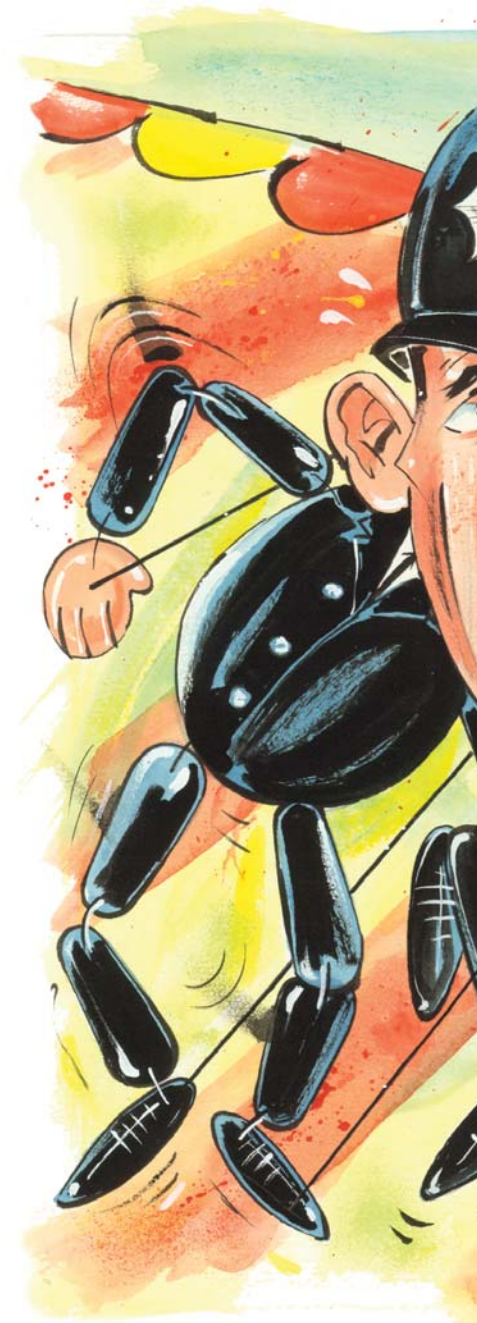




Illustration: Ross Tudor

enjoying the same level of service as the investigation of a serious assault involving weapons, but has meant officers don't have to decide how to deal with an incident, just follow a pre-set formula. The perceived benefits of this in terms of aptitude and training for future officers being lower recruitment standards and reduced training costs.

- The removal of the police from the decisions on who is charged, putting this in the hands of the Crown Prosecution Service, whose targets are set by government and may alter if, say, prison overcrowding meant a reduction in available places. Already the CPS is dictating via the recent

CJSS reforms the level of investigation for offences. An example of this is a simple arrest for possession of an offensive weapon in a public place, which the suspect fully admitted. Despite this, statements, CCTV footage and everything necessary to prosecute a 'not guilty' plea case are insisted upon before a charging decision will be made. The result is that an officer is committed for almost eight hours on an offence which previously would have been dealt with in, at worst, half that time.

So why would they want such a change? The answer is that it is cheaper and gives politicians greater control to use the police as an enforcement arm for their policies,

particularly if they can ensure political appointments to the chief officer and local commander positions. Having been used once in this way to assist the government of the day in their social engineering, with the resultant loss of public support, we should be wary of a repeat of the way the police were used in the miner's strike of the 1980s. Shouldn't we instead strive to be a service which serves the needs of the public, not the political elite?

Nigel Archer is a Chief Inspector with West Mercia Constabulary. The article contains the observations of the author and they are not the views of West Mercia Constabulary.

