

Look back to the future

Police officers are facing performance-related pay, could be leap-frogged by an 'elite' cadre of senior staff and see their career prospects being limited to dealing with low level crime under the latest Tory thinking on crime and policing. Tony Judge reports

As Home secretary John Reid announced a top level inquiry into the police service, David Cameron unveiled new Tory thinking on crime and policing which could have far-reaching implications for police officers.

The simultaneous publication of the government's self-congratulatory policy review, *Building on progress: Security, Crime and Justice* and the Conservative's document *Policing for the People*, can be seen as the first round of fire in the law and order election battle.



One thing is clear, there is no chance of the two major parties reaching a consensus on crime and policing issues. Where Labour boasts of record police numbers and further falls in such areas as the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, the Tories offer a gloomy analysis of policing in Blair's Britain. They ridicule the government's insistence that crime has fallen, adding that the extra money spent on policing since 1997 has failed to cut crime. By any measure, they say, police productivity has fallen and taxpayers are being short changed. They claim that less than a quarter of the public think that policing has improved under Labour.

The Tory paper identifies five key challenges facing the service. They are: the terrorist threat, the protective services gap, where crimes cross force borders, developing community policing, increasing accountability to local communities and delivering value for money.

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The policy paper blames excessive bureaucracy, central interference, an inflexible workforce, inefficient processes and political correctness for hindering progress. They insist that the workforce must be reformed to ensure that it is flexible, well trained and highly motivated, with a diverse range of skills and expertise.

What will this mean for officers? The Tories agree with ACPO that the day of the omnicompetent constable is over. This concept, they say, must give way to teams of officers with diverse specialist skills that should be reflected in a radically different pay structure, based on skills and posts rather than rank and length of service. This is one

area where they are not out of tune with the line taken by the Home Office under Labour. The Tories say that police pay should acknowledge their special status, or what would be left of this, and it must be affordable. Here they refer to some 8,000 officers currently on restricted duties and suggest that sick pay should be better managed.

The Tories are now calling for a senior staff college, similar to those in the armed services, and they argue that there is a “strong case” to encourage talented people to enter the service at a rank above constable. Presumably, it would be from this elite cadre that the students of this senior staff college would be selected. The already severely limited opportunities for rank and file officers to reach the highest ranks would all but disappear.

The paper says that the government's proposals, now abandoned, for strategic regional forces were too remote from the public. It offers two options; approximately 43 forces with stronger local accountability and effective central leadership, or 43 forces concentrating on low-level crime, with a new Serious Crime Force answering to the Home Secretary, assuming responsibility for serious and organised crime.

The latter proposal would have serious implications for serving officers as it would restore the old borough and county forces to deal with low-level commitments, leaving the sophisticated tasks to the Serious Crime Force. This prospect is unlikely to commend itself to career police officers who would become lower grade employees. However, it fits the tone of a report that regards the “workforce”, as inflexible and obstructive, most of whom would be likely to find themselves occupying the bottom echelons of a reconstructed rewards system.

In their paper, the Tories go even further back into history by partly resurrecting the Hendon Scheme, introduced in the 1930s by Lord Trenchard, the former Metropolitan

police commissioner. He fast-tracked future police leaders, drawn from public schools and universities, and recruited constables on short term, non-renewable contracts. Although a small number of Hendon graduates went on to serve with distinction in chief officer posts, the scheme was widely judged to have failed, and Trenchard's successor closed the college after four years.

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Finally, reference must be made to the ‘support your local Sheriff’ notion that David Cameron finds so attractive. He wants elected police commissioners in every force area, to replace the current police authorities, which, after all, were the creation of Michael Howard when a bright young “adviser” called Cameron worked in his office. These commissioners, who could be elected with or without management skills, would decide police budgets in consultation with the voters, set the targets and policing plans, and hire and fire chief constables. This half-baked attempt to translate an American system on to the body politic of British policing has to be the most bizarre so-called reform since 1829. The founder of the modern Conservative Party and the modern police service, Sir Robert Peel, must be turning in his grave.