

Challenging Charles



It has taken a year to set up this interview, to try to gauge the Home Secretary's thoughts on the future of policing on behalf of police officers, many bewildered at the rate of change, both to their role and the service. I had 20 minutes to get his thoughts on some the 'big issues' facing the service, likely to be the subject of debate at this year's Federation Conference.

Mr Clarke comes across as a man who has firm views; he certainly does not mince his words. Today is no exception, although he speaks in a quite a measured fashion and rarely raises his voice, he often interjects in response to criticism saying 'that's rubbish' or that is 'absolute nonsense'.

Since he took the reigns from David Blunkett as Home Secretary in December 2004, the police service has seen some major changes; greater use of police community support officers (PCSOs), the announcement of neighbourhood policing teams, the historic move to slash the number of police forces through a series of mergers and the recent introduction of the Serious and Organised Crime Agency, with police officers losing their Office of Constable status and becoming 'agents'.

Against the background of a police service increasingly using civilians with a pick and mix of powers that would put a good Woolworths to shame, how does he envisage the service will develop in the future?

"The role of the police constable as an officer who provides the strength of the community is very important and I think it's particularly important as we move into a flexible more fluid type of world," he says.

Perhaps the more 'fluid' and 'flexible' world he is referring to relates to the plethora of traditional police roles being carried out by police staff. He explains: "Now, if you then say what is the balance between numbers of police officers, numbers of PCSOs, numbers of police staff, that is very difficult to predict. Looking 20 years into the future it's very difficult see how that can be. One thing I am certain of is that you need to have in every community a team of people working together, led by the police."

Indeed, Gordon Brown announced in his budget speech that they are releasing an additional £100 million in funding which will more than double the number of PCSOs from 6,000 to 16 000.

The Home Secretary speaks to *Police* about plans for the future of the police service.

Syreeta Lund reports

The move will also mean there will be a neighbourhood policing team, a mix of police officers and police community support officers, in every community – brought forward from 2008 to April next year.

If the Police Federation vote to extend their membership to non-sworn staff, and this is a big if, as the decision will be down to conference and is likely to prompt emotive debate on both sides, would Mr Clarke support the legislation required to open up the doors to the extended police family?

“I have no objection in principle to the Federation taking decisions of that kind. But I am not going to speculate on any of this, if the Federation wants to make an approach to me I would consider it on those terms.”

He adds: “I think the Federation is right to be thinking about its role in the modern world, in this changing picture, so I totally understand it.”

The Police Federation has supported the move to put police officers back into neighbourhoods and accepted that PCSOs have a role as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the service.

However, Federation research on 24/7 response teams, published in the January edition of *Police* magazine, found that many are stretched to breaking point - with officers being pulled from them to plug gaps in other areas. I ask Mr Clarke if there are likely to be any guarantees that these teams will be maintained and officers will not be drafted in to bolster neighbourhood teams, among others?

“There is always an issue about being under pressure. One of the reasons we argued for strategic police authorities is to ensure you can, in a more strategic way, make resources available for emergency response teams’ staffing levels without leading to extractions from neighbourhood policing and so on.”

He adds: “Guarantee is a big word, it depends on the pressure. During 7/7 we put everyone under massive pressure and the police responded magnificently, but it was exceptional. Certainly I believe the reorganisation we are doing will enable response teams to be in a better position than they were.”

Pressed as to whether this would mean staffing levels would be kept at a specific level, he says ‘that is an operational matter’.

The Police Federation would also not want to see the patrol function of police officers hived off in future. Will the neighbourhood policing teams always be led by police officers, or will they eventually be taken completely out of the equation?

Mr Clarke thinks they will always be at the forefront of the teams, adding that the ‘police have both the democratic authority and the respect of the community which no other agency quite can have’.

On the subject of the Office of Constable, which enables officers to be politically independent as they are sworn to the Crown and not the Government, Mr Clarke says that it is embedded ‘very deep in our set of beliefs as a society, it’s an important concept’.

He tells me: “I find it very difficult to envisage how you would move away from that. The police have to exercise that leadership in an intelligent way, which is actually what I think they are doing, and they work fluently with other people. If you weren’t to have that leadership role, I think it would be seriously weak. I think the leadership role of the police is very important.”

However, when it comes to SOCA, the new Serious and Organised Crime Agency, set up to deal with top-level criminals, police officers transferring have lost their Office of Constable status and are ultimately responsible to the Home Office.

But Mr Clarke believes that ‘it would be quite wrong’ to assume the agency might not be politically independent.

“The chief executive is a former constable, it has very strong policing approaches, and its strategy is laid down. I suppose the cabinet committee is similar to a police authority that exists, it only discusses things at a very general level, and it does not discuss operational matters at all.”

However, police authorities are generally made up of 13 members, five of which are independent. Could a committee of Government ministers be deciding on strategic direction?

“It would discuss what are the issues SOCA should be looking at, for example, should it be focusing on drug dealing or not? But only at that completely mega level,” says Mr Clarke.

Is there a potential for issues highlighted by the media then becoming a priority for SOCA?

“I don’t think that is a fair concern at all. The idea there is some kind of political determination of what the agency should do is completely incorrect.”

In which case, how much does he value the political independence of the police service or does he think the Government should be able to wield more control?

“I think the operational independence is absolutely essential. I think it is the core of policing in Britain today and I think if we were to go down any different route, it would be very, very dangerous.”

He confides: “By the way, no politician on any side of Parliament would want that to be the case. The Tories have talked about elected chief constables so maybe they want it a bit, but I don’t think even then they want to

change the operational independence of the police.”

Senior police figures and members of the opposition party have criticised the quick pace at which force mergers have been pushed through and there have been accusations that, again, the Government is trying to tie forces with political boundaries in order to take more control.

Mr Clarke disagrees: “I would like to get rid of a couple of urban myths. It’s not about political control of policing in any respect, it’s not about what I think should happen.

“It’s simply recommendations HM Inspectorate of Constabulary has made. The view was put to me very clearly that the current structure of policing was not fit for purpose so I asked HMIC to look at that, they concluded that was the case, them not me. I then set out the position very clearly to all chiefs and all police authorities and asked people to think about that. The idea it’s been rushed is complete nonsense.”

He adds that two or three forces have been ‘vociferous opponents’ of the mergers and I ask if forces who put their own ideas forward on mergers have been told to ‘go back and redraw the lines’.

“No, that’s not correct, the HMIC has made clear recommendations in each area, it’s looked at each of proposals put forward and has come to a view.

“Should we just say if West Mercia says, ‘we stand alone and bugger everyone else’, we don’t go, ‘that’s alright we don’t mind the other forces in the region, never mind what Warwickshire, Staffordshire and West Midlands want, that’s fine’. Should we say that?”

Looking to the future and the changing nature of the police service, which will be the focus of the Federation’s main conference this year, I ask if Mr Clarke, like Sir Ian Blair, believes, that the police officer civilian split is much more likely to be 50/50 in the future? Mr Clarke is non-committal on the subject, saying, “I wouldn’t either agree or disagree with it.”

He qualifies: “We certainly don’t have any intention of reducing the number of police that we have and we have got the intention of increasing the number of PCSOs, but whether you would increase them to that level, I mean, we are nowhere near 50/50 at the moment, not remotely. I certainly can’t see it on any likely agenda, in that way.”

When it comes to trying to pin him down to any estimates on what he thinks the percentage is likely to look like in the next decade or so, he proves a slippery customer.

Mr Clarke tells *Police* magazine “The numbers game, I don’t have any interesting things to say about that, I’m only looking in the next five years, where I see a steady increase in the numbers of PCSOs and basically the number of police officers being held, at least, where it is.”

However, speaking to officers in different forces, they recently highlighted that while the recruiting of police officers appears to have been frozen, recruitment of PCSOs was increasing, fuelling concerns that their numbers are likely to diminish.

“I know that’s been a worry but the facts just don’t stack it up, I mean you go to every force in the country they have a record number of police officers today, as we speak,” Mr Clarke says.



“I think the police themselves have to face up to the flexibility of the modern era. They could come into difficulty if they don’t do that.”

Although currently, Government funding has been set aside to recruit PCSOs, what are the guarantees for the future if police authorities are suddenly expected to fund the costs or will council tax have to be raised?

“We are guaranteeing a level of funding in our settlement for the foreseeable future which will continue a level of funding for PCSOs.”

But could council tax-payers end up footing the extra in their bills if they want extra cover from PCSOs?

“Well they might, what you are doing is asking me to speculate about things. People may be talking about it, but actually, I doubt it.”

In fact, Hazel Blears, the Labour Party police minister, outlined the possibility back in an interview I carried out with her a few years ago.

I would hazard a guess that Mr Clarke dislikes being interviewed, but he eyes the camera of the photographer, who has accompanied me, in a media-savvy fashion. His manner visibly changes and he relaxes a little when I ask him whether he watches *The Bill*.

I find he’s much more a *Life on Mars* man, the BBC series based around the main character, a police officer, who falls into a coma and goes back in time to the 1970s to when policing seemed a much simpler task. I am sure many police officers would agree with him on that point.