

As police officers' pay packets hangs in the balance, Tony Judge examines why there is more at stake than figures.

Thirty years have passed since the staff side's negotiators on the former Police Council for Great Britain walked out of pay discussions and demanded direct negotiations with the government. This was the start of a sustained and increasingly bitter campaign that saw growing demands from rank and file members of the Police Federation for the right to strike. Eventually, the Labour government was forced to appoint Lord Justice Edmund Davies to chair an independent inquiry "into the proper basis of police pay, with the government committed to accept its recommendations".

The Judge had already been appointed by the government to head an inquiry into the police negotiating machinery, which would result in the abolition of the old Police Council and its replacement by the Police Negotiating Board.

History repeats

The underlying cause of that bitter and prolonged dispute was the official side's insistence that the police were not entitled to an increase of £6 a week, the specified maximum under the government's newly imposed incomes policy. Instead, the official side insisted that the police were only entitled to a much lower award under the second phase of the policy. In this respect, there is a similarity with the official side's refusal to agree to the three per cent increase from the September 1 this year, which is the product of the pay formula that governs annual police pay awards. The formula was devised by Edmund Davies to ensure that his original recommendations retained their value in future years.

Short changing police?



Illustration: Russ Tudor

The power of persuasion

The current dispute, which goes before the Police Arbitration Tribunal this month, raises precisely the same issues that gave rise to the 1976 dispute. Once again, police officers are saying that their employers, the police authorities in league with central government, are seeking to short change the service, safe in the knowledge that the police are extremely limited in what they can do.

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Once again, there is talk of working to rule, refusing overtime, and in some quarters, demanding the right to strike. Times are changing. The Federation’s membership is well aware that the government caved in when faced with strikes by public sector workers whose pension schemes were under threat. We have seen Unison pickets outside police stations as police employees held a “day of action”. The government is facing the threat of a repeat of the 1978 “winter of discontent” as the public service unions challenge the pay policy. We could be about to see a trial of strength in which the industrial weapons available to the unions will force the government into making major concessions.

Meanwhile, the police have to fall back on their only weapon – the power of persuasion, knowing that even if they convince the arbitration tribunal, there is no guarantee that the government will not veto the findings. There is ample precedent, even in the post Edmund Davies era, for ministers to overrule the Police Arbitration Tribunal, as when David Waddington then Home Secretary, refused to implement an award on police housing allowances.

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Many serving officers will recall being among the thousands who lobbied Parliament when former Home Secretary David Blunkett planned to cut overtime rates. The strength of the arguments that were put to MPs by their police constituents that day forced Tony Blair and Mr Blunkett to concede the police case that same day. It was a remarkable demonstration of what we mean by “the power of persuasion”, but the Lobby kept within the strict legal restrictions that are imposed on the Federation’s freedom of action.

At first glance, this current dispute appears to be a quarrel over fractions of one per cent. That is how it may strike some observers and the staff side can expect some flak from media correspondents who will not bother to look for the true causes. There are some police officers who are fearful that the staff side’s refusal to accept an offer below the pay formula could result in no increase

at all. This is not going to happen. The arbitration tribunal is bound to find that there must be a pay award, even if John Reid chooses to amend it to comply with Gordon Brown’s requirements.

Keeping a promise

The dispute is not about fractions, it is about a bargain being a bargain. Edmund-Davies was a watershed in the history of police pay. He set out principles that were intended to govern police pay negotiations long into the future. For the employers and the government simply to ignore those principles whenever it suits their purpose makes a mockery of the bargaining process.

If any police officer doubted the wisdom of the staff side’s approach, John Reid’s speech to last month’s Superintendents Conference should convince them that the Federation is right to take a principled stand. He is of the view that the police pay structure is out of date and must be changed to meet the current financial climate. He showed a dangerous complacency about the current manpower situation, saying that recruitment is extremely strong and retention is “among the best in the public sector”.

When reminded of Edmund-Davies’s insistence that the absence of the right to strike must not be used to deny the police their proper rewards, Mr Reid was arrogantly dismissive. Policing has changed, he said, and therefore pay, conditions and motivation must also change. He added that the time was ripe to look at police pay in the round, within current financial restraints, “to develop a system that meets the continuing need to recruit and retain officers but without putting at risk the investment in optimum level capabilities, officer numbers, or other crime fighting and national security priorities”.

What precisely does this mean? In my opinion, it sounds as if the Home Secretary, along with the official side, is seeking to make the 2006 police pay review the harbinger of the official side’s view of a radical new system of pay and incentives that has not begun to be discussed in earnest in its appropriate chamber – the Police Negotiating Board. There is a whiff of bad faith about this. Is officialdom seeking to steam roller the complex questions arising from pay restructuring through the medium of arbitration? In the past, the Police Arbitration Tribunal has given a robust answer to ministerial attempts to interfere with its deliberations.

Yet again, after months of procrastination, we see the government looking for the quick fix. Make no mistake, these manoeuvrings and the bitterness they are stirring, are not about peanuts, they are about the future status of police officers. Mr Reid and the police employers are anxious to bury Edmund-Davies once and for all. Thank goodness that all the police staff associations are united this time, in contrast with the unfortunate divisions that occurred in 1976. All police officers must understand what is at stake and back their negotiators all the way.