

Prepare for war

The Police Federation may have won the battle on police pay this year, but Tony Judge takes a historical look at lessons learned and how the war is still to be fought

The police staff associations have every reason to be pleased with the Police Arbitration Tribunal's decision on the 2006 pay award, but it may be some time before the dust settles on a dispute that became increasingly fractious as the Official Side used every possible device to get out of its obligation to honour the longstanding agreement on annual pay uprates.

The frustration felt among the negotiators who spent many months in fruitless discussions with the employers' side of the Police Negotiating Board (PNB), was more than echoed by the anger of rank and file officers throughout the country. It became clear that the paymasters were seeking to renege on their obligations as they sought to hide behind government policy.

In some ways, the rebuff that the employers have suffered from the arbitration result might lead them to a more belligerent and time restricted approach to further modernisation. That would be a big mistake. After all, the government has been talking about police reform for years. The project has suffered enough setbacks already.

A less politics-driven approach is needed, with a greater appreciation of what can be done, at what cost, and when.

Since the inception of the PNB, following the report of the Edmund-Davies Committee of Inquiry in 1978, it has been regarded by the PNB as the guarantee that the service will be treated fairly when it comes to pay and conditions of service. When Edmund-Davies laid down the standards on which police pay should be based, together with the annual review mechanism, it was expected that the service could avoid the divisive and morale-sapping manoeuvres that had caused the Police Federations to lose confidence in the previous

Locking horns in the pay dispute



machinery. The PNB was to be the means by which the police could rest assured that the statutory restrictions on industrial action would not be exploited by authority.

In the years since then, there have been some dodgy moments, not least when the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, just a few weeks into office, set up the Sheehy Committee, looking into pay, conditions and structure of the police service. The committee reported in 1993, producing proposals that would virtually dismantle the entire structure of police pay and destroy, once and for all, the concept of policing as a life long career.

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Whereas four previous independent inquiries into police pay and conditions had all recommended substantial improvements, Sheehy took a totally opposite view. Besides calling for police numbers to be cut by 5,000, he wanted a constable's starting pay to be cut by £2,000. He called for housing allowance and free police accommodation to be ended for new entrants. All recruits would be engaged on fixed term appointments for ten years. These could be renewed at the option of the chief officer, but not the constable, for five year terms up to the age of 60. Besides new entrants, these conditions would apply to serving officers on promotion, with full pensions payable only after 40 years' service. The incremental scales would be scrapped,

as would the principle of equal remuneration within a rank. These would be replaced by performance related pay and the evaluation of roles and responsibilities.

Sheehy claimed that his proposals would give officers the opportunity of earning up to £8,000 a year more than they were getting. The Federation retorted that a careful analysis of the scheme revealed that no officer with less than 15 years service would gain a penny. The Federation gave examples to show that the pay of a beat officer in Brixton would fall by £2,600, and constables in other areas would see their pay fall by £5,000 a year.

We can look back with justifiable pride on the campaign that was waged by the Police Federation to ensure that the worst aspects of Sheehy were defeated, but less attention was given to how much that “victory” cost police officers, especially those who joined from September 1994 onwards. Clarke's successor, Michael Howard, mindful of the concerns of government supporters in Parliament, to say nothing of the opposition, was only too pleased to get rid of his unwanted legacy from his predecessor, and announced that he was rejecting a substantial part of the Sheehy plan. However, he grasped the chance to end housing allowance and free accommodation for new entrants, and froze the housing allowances of serving officers. He also decided that, as Sheehy proposed, future pay increases would be based on the annual survey of non-manual private sector pay settlements, which is less favourable than the index preferred by Edmund Davies. In total, Howard's decisions cut an estimated £70 million from that year's police pay bill, according to an article by Professor L. Hunter, independent chairman of the PNB, in the British Journal of Industrial Relations, March 2003, and the accumulated saving since then is now above £1 billion. In contrast, the package of compensation payments offered to serving officers came to about £45 million as a once for all charge.

In one or two areas, the service has been able to recoup some of the monies lost in the Sheehy/Howard swoop. In 2002, it became obvious that the Metropolitan and South Eastern forces were facing a crisis because new officers could not find affordable housing in those areas. This led to payments to post-September 1994 officers in those forces. More recently, as part of the police modernisation project, we have seen the introduction of competence related threshold payments and, more controversially, special priority payments. It is arguable that police officers have experienced a progressive decline in their remuneration package since 1992.

It became obvious during what passed for negotiations on the 2006 pay review, that the employers wanted to push workforce modernisation through the PNB. This subject is part of the remit of the Police Advisory Board. Once the PNB has reached understandings on the various roles required of police officers in a modernised workforce, then and only then, the appropriate rates for the jobs can be negotiated within the PNB.



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