

Community Policing in a Multicultural Australia

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We are all acutely aware of the impact the advancements in information technology and physiological and biological sciences have had upon practically every aspect of our lives over the last decade or so.

However, there still seems a tendency among many of us to believe, at least at first thought, that multiculturalism has only meant a greater selection of food or entertainment. There would be very few of us who do not work with, or come into contact almost daily with, someone who has migrated to Australia or is a first generation descendant of an immigrant family.

The impact of the cultural intertwining of immigrants from many different countries, for police agencies, has been quite dramatic.

I have been privileged to share more than thirty-three years of the police interaction with a variety of ethnic groups and this paper draws subjectively upon some of my experiences. There is an abundance of people more capable of providing an academic overview of police ethnic relations.

To give some perspective to my views I should point out I was raised in a small Victorian country town in the southern Mallee. Like much of the Mallee, the town was populated by people of primarily Anglo-Saxon descent, but with a great many of German origin.

Racist bigotry was not unknown. During the Second World War the Lutheran Church had been burnt to the ground. This sad episode apart, however, those from all ethnic origins seemed to live in reasonable harmony and contentment. One of my best friends at school was a Koori (except then we called them Aborigines or even Abo's without offence being given or taken) and no-one seemed to notice he was black, and I express it that way deliberately. Greeks traditionally ran one local cafe and the greengrocers were almost always Chinese whose ancestors had arrived during the gold rush of the 1850s. People seemed generally to treat others simply as people and the only bigotry occasionally noticed was religious.

I joined the Victoria Police in 1957 in the post-war era of industry reconstruction which stimulated a vigorous immigration policy in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, refugees and displaced persons from Northern Europe and Germany, together with Dutch and Scandinavians, migrated in numbers to Australia to compliment the traditional settlers from Britain and Continental Europe.

Support could be given to the theory that the foundations of multiculturalism were laid throughout Australia's short history rather than being of recent origin. Regardless of any debate concerning its birth, the fact remains that today people from over 140 countries live

within the boundaries of Australian states and territories. Four out of ten Australians are immigrants or children of migrants. The 'original Australians' also cannot be forgotten.

By the 1970s Australia was a 'melting pot' because of the many diverse cultures sharing its boundaries with immigrants from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, India, Vietnam and Malaysia. The 1970s also signalled a change in immigration philosophy and a change in public perceptions.

By the mid-1970s the new emphasis was on cultural diversity and pluralism yet at this time this cultural diversity and pluralism was not reflected in police recruiting which remains disproportionately Anglo-Saxon based. Police recruiting practices simply failed to recognise that anything had changed and at this time the idea of police responding to community demands for service, instead of dictating to the community what service would be provided, was not within the contemplation of most police.

Over the years it is apparent that the policy directions pursued by police agencies inadequately catered for the diverse cultural composition of Australia's society. The challenges facing police today in providing the service demanded by a richly diverse community are great and policing for the whole community has become the accepted and preferred strategy.

The Challenges Facing Multicultural Policing

Although I consider I did not have a racist attitude when I joined the force, until comparatively recently my sole overseas experience had been confined to a visit to New Zealand. This was hardly the ideal background for one charged with the responsibility for meeting the challenges facing multicultural policing—particularly as there is a belief among many in the police services that community policing in a multicultural society is at the crossroads. These concerns were the catalyst for the conduct of a Conference on 'Police Services in a Multicultural Australia' hosted by the Victoria Police Force in Melbourne on the 28-31 August 1990. The Conference was sponsored by the Australian Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation and initiated by the Commissioners of Police of Australasia and the South West Pacific Region.

It was, in part, my lack of first-hand knowledge of others in their own environment that led me to travel overseas several times in the past three years. I had also noticed a proliferation of signs in foreign languages around Australia and a certain hostility among some members of the public to those signs. Signs in foreign languages seemed to somehow be thought of as un-Australian. Yet, if one was to question Australians of Anglo-Saxon origin regarding their racial prejudices, most would present the view that they do not harbour feelings of resentment towards individuals and groups from non-English speaking backgrounds. The answer would, in most cases, be believed to be a truthful answer.

It was within this framework I went to Rome in 1988 where I visited the Carabinieri Headquarters for a Conference. During the Conference I decided I needed to confirm onward airline bookings and in my few rehearsed words of fractured Italian I asked a young Carabinieri officer if he could direct me to a telephone. To my surprise the officer in a broad 'Ocker' accent said, 'It's over in the corner mate'. Noting my complete surprise, he then said, 'It's all right, I was born in Carlton.' I must have struck the only Carabinieri officer born in Carlton in the whole of Italy, a fact about which, given my language difficulties, I was extremely grateful. On other trips overseas I have often been comforted in non-English speaking countries by an abundance of signs in English and by the prevalence of English speaking citizens.

These experiences were important in that I gained some insight into the problems non-English speaking immigrants have in just surviving in Australia. If we then consider how they

must feel to see signs in their own language in Australia we have the beginnings of understanding. If we add to the language difficulties the lack of knowledge and understanding of policing, we begin to appreciate how hard it is for immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds to approach or deal with police when there is a problem.

Police certainly believe that the law and enforcement agencies treat all people equally, but do we? And is racism solely the prerogative of Anglo-Saxon descendants, or of police? Australia has been fortunate in that scenes of racial violence of the magnitude of those witnessed in the United States or Britain have not occurred here. Notwithstanding this fact, to ignore the presence of underlying problems and tensions would be folly. Tensions are present in our own society and the Asian and Aboriginal populations particularly suffer, disproportionately perhaps, from racial violence in random and individualised instances. Racial violence has also been evident against members of the Jewish community.

If we take the Aborigines (and even that term is offensive to some who want to be called Koories or some other name) as an example, even in urbanised Victoria clan conflicts of a limited kind are not uncommon and kinship relationships are a constant problem for my own Aboriginal Affairs Adviser. Is this not a form of racism? And try to buy real estate in some Asian countries—there will be swift and complete rejection and some of these countries criticise Australia's policies as racist.

My point is that feelings of individual or collective guilt have no place in determining policing strategies and those with Anglo-Saxon ancestry and police do not have a mortgage on racism or racist attitudes. This is an important fact to keep in mind when discussions about multiculturalism arise and the old saying about 'people in glasshouses' ought to be remembered.

Operational police moving among a community of various cultural groups have the benefit of being able to identify conflicts as they arise. In the words of Commissioner, Mr. Bill Horman of the Tasmania Police Force, they do, in a sense, fulfil the role of 'cross-cultural agents'. Recognising the need to understand something of the nature and culture of all the ethnic groups in need of policing services, law enforcement agencies have formalised their role as cross-cultural agents by initiating a number of liaison schemes (both Aboriginal and ethnic).

Liaison Schemes

In 1977 the Police/Ethnic Affairs Liaison Committee was established in Victoria to facilitate greater understanding and positive relations between police and ethnic communities through community education and information. Almost 12 years after its establishment the Committee is still acting as a catalyst for the implementation of strategies to enhance police and ethnic relations. On Friday the 12th October, I attended a Police Ethnic Liaison Function in Melbourne hosted by the Egyptian Federation of Victoria. It was of great comfort to see such a diversity of ethnic groups coming together with police in mutual support and enjoyment.

Apart from the Police Ethnic Liaison Committee, Victoria for its part established an Aboriginal/Police Liaison Committee in 1982 and appointed an Aboriginal Affairs Adviser. The Adviser's broad role is to bring to the notice of police matters of concern among Aboriginal groups, as well as to assist in the implementation of measures to provide a more constructive and effective police service to these people.

The lessons of 'grass roots' policing targeted at the improvement of confidence between police and Aboriginal youth are applicable to general policing philosophy. Socialisation of youth which results in the destruction of bigoted and racial prejudices is a major objective of law enforcement agencies and an integral part of true community policing. Police have a unique role in the community. We are the peacemakers in a troubled society. As

peacemakers, we have a responsibility to police, and to police for, all ethnic groups. That is a responsibility we readily accept.

As part of the acceptance of our responsibility, in Victoria we have implemented and continue to implement initiatives to improve police community relations. Community policing for police is simply treating all ethnic groups as we would like to be treated.

Addressing the needs of both police and ethnic communities has resulted in police receiving lectures in cross-cultural awareness focusing upon such important issues as attitude, cultures, refugees, resettlement and communication strategies and the effective workings of professional interpreters.

Victoria Police identified that sections of ethnic minority groups were being subjected to unlawful racial practices and in 1985 the 'BAO VE' (Protection in Vietnamese) Investigation Group was formed as part of the Crime Department. The group has now been reorganised to include all Asian communities in Victoria.

Of more recent note is the formation of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit. Praise must go to the Vietnamese Community and the Footscray City Council for their contribution to the Unit's existence.

The Unit has the objectives of:

- increasing migrant confidence in the police and criminal justice system; and
- the reduction of crime levels in their specific geographical areas.

The Unit's very being is standing illustration of the level of cooperation which can be achieved by organisations concerned for the promotion of community values.

Police and Community Relations

The concept of community policing is not new. In a sense we have reinvented the wheel. Sir Robert Peel espoused his perception of police/community relations in 1829 when he stated:

The police should at all times maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historical tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police. The police are only members of the public who are paid to give full time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interest of community welfare.

Ideally no separation should be evident between police and community but it is apparent that the perception among some is that police are failing to protect the rights of disadvantaged and powerless members of our community. Too frequently perceptions are that police are either unresponsive to racist violence or themselves commit acts of racist violence, according to submissions to the National Inquiry into Racist Violence.

It is not hard to comprehend why people who come from countries where the police are the enforcers of undemocratic and stringent government policy sometimes view our members with distrust and apprehension. What is more alarming, however, is the notion that our police forces possess a 'police culture' which effectively prevents the development of meaningful community relations. Greta Bird, the Director of the National Centre for cross-cultural studies in law at the Monash and Melbourne Universities asserts that:

There is within the police force a dominant culture based on common values and aspirations, arising out of a need to be able to depend on other officers in times of physical danger and mental stress. There is also a tendency for the police to be, because of their profession isolated from the general community.

I believe Ms Bird's conclusions are largely historic, but, in any event, the critical linkage between community values on one hand and notions of police culture on the other is professionalism. Professionalisation of policing is a primary goal of all senior police administrators.

It is imperative that organisational policy and procedures affecting the personnel infrastructure of a police force be kept in line with the current cultural social structure of society. Put another way, police must serve all elements of the community. Police are not ignoring the challenge. Entrance requirements for a policing career which may have inadvertently discriminated against applicants from minority groups have been abolished. Additional emphasis is being placed upon attracting persons possessing linguistic and cross-cultural skills and the advantages of present recruiting practices cannot be overstated.

The problem still is that police endeavours only provide answers to half the problem. Some ethnic groups consider it undesirable to serve in a police force and it is vital that we recruit people from all ethnic groups who are blessed with broad social backgrounds or who can be given adequate cross-cultural training. It is necessary to break down the barriers remaining within those ethnic communities where policing is not viewed as a desirable profession to enter.

Migrant groups do suffer from an unfamiliarity with police procedures and lack of understanding of their rights under these procedures. Now, at last, police now have at least the beginnings of understanding of the problems of migrants and the pressures of multiculturalism—and we share a determination to police for everyone in the community. In Victoria we are actively encouraging police to use discretion when dealing with people from non-English speaking backgrounds and to consider a person's understanding of the law and the English language and their differing customs. The contradictory demands of consistency and flexibility will pose problems, but police are no strangers to difficulty.

It is hoped that such positive steps will go a long way towards rectifying past oversights.

Conclusion

Police forces in this country and throughout the world have drawn closer in recent decades with many integrated strategies and co-operative arrangements. The same approach is now being developed for policing in a multicultural society. Most significant innovations in the past have been implemented with very little feedback between one police service and another and usually with little liaison and networking between departments and agencies. This is changing very rapidly. Within the wider community there is a wealth of resources with which police can interact and networking strategies aimed at tapping into these resources are now a primary objective. Police forces now have the infrastructure and policy developers to link policing strategies with community resources.

There is no doubt that the establishment of harmonious relations between police and immigrants founded upon mutual understanding, tolerance, respect and trust, is an essential condition for the delivery of an effective police service in our society.

Much is still to be achieved but we have the collective skill, ability and will to effect enormous improvement to our policing of a multicultural society. We are entering a new era—an era of challenge and excitement. The beneficiaries will be all of us—whatever our ethnic origins. Community policing is alive and well.