POLICE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION: A REVIEW OF CONSULTATIVE STRATEGIES AND NEW PARADIGMS IN POLICING

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Paper presented at the Conference
Reducing Criminality: Partnerships and Best Practice
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology, in association with the
WA Ministry of Justice, Department of Local Government,
Western Australian Police Service and Safer WA
and held in Perth 31 July and 1 August 2000

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“Those involved with [Community Consultative Committees] expressed great dissatisfaction with the strategy and a belief that the strategy was not working”


Introduction

Since the expansion of police community consultation at the beginning of the 1980s, there have been two constants in: 1) every Royal Commission, inquiry, or operations review recommends that there be a core strategy to promote public accountability and foster strategic management; 2) every evaluation of existing committee operations finds that they fall short of expectations and that there is often dissatisfaction on the part of police and citizens about their outcomes.

The aim of this paper is to examine the current situation with respect to community consultation in Australia, review evaluations of community consultation, consider by way of example different community consultation mechanisms in place and to look at new paradigms emerging in the area of police community relationships.

Definition: What is Community Consultation?

For the purposes of this paper, consultation refers to any outside, non-government input into policing, involving individuals or organisations and to the processes used to promote it. This is a deliberately fuzzy definition, given that consultation occupies little more than a conceptual space determined by the confluence of two continuums: a) the degree of control of activities by police or outsiders; and, b) the direction of information flow. Consultation abuts at one end to processes such as police public relations that merely serve to communicate a police agenda and at the other end to community initiatives such as volunteer community patrols that are clearly outside police control. The “balance point” in the definition is that there is significant outside input into policing while at the same time the police organisation maintains some control over the process involved. By accepting that police maintain some control of the process, we are evidently limiting ourselves to a police-centered perspective on consultation.

Consultation covers a range of techniques. It is essentially a “patchwork quilt of day to day consultations” (Morgan, in Hughes 1994, p. 262), that can include surveys, community research, public meetings, suggestion boxes and informal discussions while on foot patrol (see Ward, 1995). Figure 1 represents the conceptual space occupied by consultation and indicates the possible location of various activities.
Even though there are a myriad of activities that can be identified as promoting outside input into policing, almost all discussions on consultation focus on the one technique of consultative committees in their various manifestations as advisory or liaison committees at ministerial, central or local levels.

Consultation is not in itself an issue separate from more global policing concepts such as community policing, community justice or community crime prevention. Moreover, it is intimately related to other contemporary policing issues/buzzwords such as police service (as opposed to police force) and the other labels now commonly put before the word policing such as problem-solving, bottom-up, proactive, cooperative, partnership, and participation as well as what are known as social responses to policing and crime prevention. It is also assumed as a component of the new public management jargon applied to policing such as accountability, liaison, and community relations.

As this paper will demonstrate, consultation is now an integral part of all mainstream policing but it takes on a special significance when addressing issues of the relation between policing and minorities. As Hughes (1994) pointed out, the Scarman Report was a response to a failure of relations with Black communities in England and consultation process are often focused on ethnic and racial minorities as well as other targeted “communities” such as gays, women and youth.
The Rise of Consultation

The U.K. Scarman Report is widely seen as the impetus for the wider use of community policing strategies in Britain and Australia, but the opening of policing to outside consultation must also be seen in the context of wider movements both in policing and in social discourses about consumerist responses to the public sector and in the rise of civil society.

Scarman Report

The Report by Lord Scarman investigated the reasons behind two days of rioting in the London suburb of Brixton in 1981, a year that marked by a number of riots in various British locations. In response to a relatively minor incident, the largely Black community engaged in three days of looting and clashes with police.

While Scarman acknowledged that the root causes of the rioting was poverty and inner city deprivation, he laid a large part of the blame for the rioting at the feet of the police and the deteriorated state of relations between the police and Black community which had resulted from the methods used to combat crime. This was both a result of on-going reactive policing tactics but also a response to a specific “accelerator event”, Operation Swamp, in which police targeted crime in Brixton in a way that was seen as harassing young blacks.

Police practices had lead to such lack of confidence by the local citizens that when police had attempted to genuinely assist a stabbing victim, both the victim and the crowd that gathered saw them as the enemy. As Scarman noted:

“The history of relations between the police and people of Brixton has been a tale of failure.” (Scarman 1981, section 4.4)

“Many young people had become indignant and resentful of the police … and the worst construction was put on police action.” (Scarman 1981, sections 4.1 and 4.3)

Even though the Report could not be considered highly critical of the police it was not accepted without criticism of both the interpretation of the events and its recommendations. One conservative MP said: "the police are victims of a campaigns of hatred organized by elements that wish to disrupt our society (quoted in Benyon 1984, p.5)”, and during the Inquiry there were attempts to deflect criticism of police claiming that they were the scapegoats for more intractable problems (Benyon 1984, p 7), but in the end the police authorities, association and media accepted, but not without reservations, that criticisms were justified and the recommendations needed to be assumed.

The recommendations about policing were only one section of a slew of recommendations that included policy reform in the areas of housing, education and employment. Moreover, consultation was only one part of the police recommendations which included other areas of addressing ethnic issues (recruitment, training and addressing prejudice) and the handling of public disorder.

His recommendations regarding consultation boiled down to recommending the establishment of statutory liaison committees and to exhort both the police and the communities to work positively to establish relations of mutual trust and respect.
He built on experiences already being practiced in many parts of the US and Britain as well as in France and Holland (see Presdee and Walters 1997), and as a result of his report consultation became enshrined in UK legislation and became a widely used practice in policing in liberal democracies.

Wider context

The changes brought about as a result of the Scarman report have to be analysed in light of the wider social and political changes which saw the rise of police consultation coincide with other shifts in the relation between state and non-state institutions. The increased emphasis on civil society, the rise of new democratic processes and reforms brought by new public management clearly have resulted in profound changes in the way in which all public sector organisations operate.

There is considerable debate about the degree of changes demanded of policing and of its capacity and willingness to respond. Many argue that “few public services have faced so much pressure as the police to render themselves more accountable to local people” (Squires 1997, p.172) and that police are held to a higher standard because of the extraordinary powers over the lives and rights of fellow citizens they receive by consent of the public.

Evaluations of Community Consultation

Evaluations of consultation have included Royal Commissions, operations reviews commissioned by police, academic evaluations and commentaries, as well as diatribes in magazines and newsletters of all persuasions and the “general word out on the streets” expressed by police officers of all levels. While most of the evaluations continue to express support for consultation, this appears to be more for the theory than the practice, and while there are case studies of “success stories”, the more common theme is a negative evaluation of the outcomes.

The evaluations – which, as mentioned above, tend to focus on the work of consultative committees -- are based on a variety of discourses that range from the prosaic to the theoretical. One level of criticism targets the operations of the committees, pointing out that despite their claims to be representative of communities, participation is usually restricted to a small coterie of interested parties, often a priori supportive of current policing. This was anticipated early on, as evidenced by Alan Goodson (1984), the then chief constable of Leicestershire, who wrote that,

"I have no doubt that practiced 'committee men' will be falling over themselves to get on these committees. But are they people we want?"
(p.146)

Another level looks more at structural issues. As Sarre and Tomaino (1999) observe:

“What is conceptualized in theory, however, many not translate well into practice. Asking police to become problem-solvers and expecting them to be constantly engaged in widespread community consultation involves a fundamental challenge to police leadership and culture. Given the current culture, reward structure and community expectations, translating rhetoric into reality has proved to be a formidable task”. (p. 103)
Do police support consultation? Yates et al. (1997) in a study on the level of support for various community policing strategies, including consultation, among officers in England and the USA see “significant support” for a range of measures. However, their interpretation of the findings appear to be a case of seeing the glass as half full, given that the significant support they identify is expressed in the following terms: “Well in excess of one third to one half of police officers popularly support the community policing philosophy” (p. 113). Even more significant appears to be that at least half, possible even two thirds don’t support it!

The critiques of the impact and effectiveness of consultation can be classified as ideological, structural or operational:

I ideological

The are criticisms of consultation from both progressive and conservative perspectives.

a) Progressive. Hughes (1994) identifies three progressive analyses of consultation:

- Left-radical critiques reject the tokenism of consultation and claim it serves only to break down community dissent, distract citizens from other more possible conflictive agendas and to enhance the articulation of traditional, patriarchal values of security, property and privacy, while allowing issues such as sexual and racial harassment, domestic violence slip from the agenda.

- Left realism attacks the lack of democratic control of current consultation processes due to police and state domination of the consultative processes, while continuing to seek community crime prevention through a social democratic vision of self-directing citizens.

- Skeptical pluralism shares the left realist analysis of lack of democratic control but sees the domination shared by a wider range of local elites.

b) Conservative. Conservative analyses stress crime fighting and social controls which reject consultation-related strategies. They call for a return to “traditional” reactive policing and wrap themselves in a “get tough on crime” rhetoric. While this dialogue also takes place outside policing, it is most often characterised as part of an internal clash between “hard” and “soft” policing, between the “real” police and the “do-gooder, touchy-feelies”. Moreover, the police are to be seen as the professional arbiters of crime fighting strategies and anything that threatens the ownership of their domain is to be resisted.

These represent the “pure” and polarised forms of the ideological arguments, and while they are occasionally expressed in these terms, they are more often couched in the context of the structural and operational analyses that indicate qualified support for consultation.

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1 Note that a wide range of ideologies lay claim to “tradition” in policing. Here, tradition refers to motorised, reactive policing, but others would argue that traditional policing is based on the Peelian notion of the beat police and that “the people are the police and the police are the people.”
While most commentator express tacit support for consultation and community, they criticize current processes as less than optimally effective due to structural impediments which serve to exclude meaningful participation of the community and individuals. These criticisms are most often in the orbit of left realism and skeptical pluralism, but are often also used by conservative commentators.

The most fundamental criticism is that consultation doesn’t reach the people it theoretically targets. Numerous studies document that Goodson’s “practiced committee men” are in fact the most likely to participate in consultation processes and officers often deride committees as little more than “talk-fests” for the “blue-rinse set”. The reality is that most “community” consultation is dominated by representatives of organisations such as local councils or business groups or a self-selected influential section of the target population, who are likely to be biased towards majority and elite interests. Another reality is that communities most in need are often the ones where community participation – in any form – is hardest to engender (O’Malley 1997; Squires 1998, Hughes 1994).

What is the impact of these biases is in terms of making policing more responsive to community interests? While more radical critics argue that this excludes effective response to broader social needs, others argue more in line with changing equilibrium between police and non-police interests that can potentially engender more pluralist policing. They see that a “new officer class” has emerged made up of an elite of local politicians and organised interest representative that can provide “critical and constructive dialogue”. These are the new local corporatist, and the police can become colonised by organised interests (Hughes 1994). Squires (1998) maintains that there is evidence that robust community representatives and well-organised consultative partners are capable of far more than relatively passive acceptance of the police line.

Another area of criticism focuses more on the uneven power relationships in any consultation process. According to this perspective, the police control the agendas and, at best, pay lip service to consultation. The control of agendas is attributed to both the ideological imperative of maintaining control and demonstrating police expertise in crime fighting and to the organizational imperative of determining priorities by other means which may not coincide with those that emerge from consultation. Consultation therefore becomes little more than a communications exercise for police and excludes ascribing any decision-making powers to consultation processes.

Finally there are a group of internal police structural-procedural issues which appear to militate against effective consultation. On one hand, consultation activities are often not fully covered under overtime provisions or in performance and promotion criteria so participating officers do not feel they receive professional recognition or sufficient compensation for participating. On the other as a result of internal debates over policing strategies, many officers see consultation and community relations work as undervalued by their peers (they are derided as the “meet and greet cops”) and often has low formal status on the job hierarchy.

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2 See page 5.
3 Underlying these debates are the broader one of “what is community?” This issue will not be addressed in the current paper, except to note that some authors respond to criticism that elites do not represent any community by declaring that, “They may not be the community but it is a community” (Squires 1998, p. 171).
Operational

The criticism of “… but it doesn’t work in reducing crime” is usually attributed to conservative ideologies, but in the current context it is reinforced by managerialist and neoliberal discourses about performance indicators and measurement that argue that if you can’t attribute quantifiable reduction in crime to an identifiable strategy then its continuation cannot be justified⁴.

Community policing and consultation process related to it are somewhat under siege in current policing trends and some commentators see it as possibly reaching the end of a cycle if it cannot coherently argue its relation to crime reduction or it simply loses the ideological battle (Bayley 1999, Murray 1999).

There are number of current trends which serve to centralise police decision making and remove public safety issues from ambits where they can be possibly open to consultation. These include:

- “Zero tolerance”
- Intelligence-based policing, which relies on sophisticated crime-statistics analyses to determine priorities.
- The privatisation of policing through the private security industry that reduces the space covered by publicly accountable services.
- Professionalisation and higher educational qualifications of are seen as a way of better integrating police into the wider community, but may also reinforce the idea that as the educated professionals they are the experts.
- Performance contracting and the hiring of top staff from outside the jurisdiction or outside policing may bring in people with fixed ideas who are under pressure to produce demonstrable short-term results.

Supports for each strategy is the subject of apparently opposing discourses. While one conception is that upper management has no real commitment to consultation, the opposing view is that consultation is a policy created and supported by people at the top who have lost touch with police operations. An apparent policy dichotomy exists between the “street cops” and management.

Examples of Community Consultation Mechanisms

Victoria

The Chief Commissioner of the Victoria Police recently outlined his vision for the future of the organisation and in doing so officially launched the Victoria Police Local Priority (LPP) Project in September 1998. Local Priority Policing is the model for how Victoria Police will deliver policing services to communities in the future. The model maintains that the local community will be an active participant in shaping police service priorities and local police will be even more accountable for the quality and mix of services they provide. Each of the state’s seventy-eight Local Government Areas will have on a line manager at the level of

⁴ Evaluations of community policing in fact often find a short-tem increase in reported crime. This is usually attributed to the increased confidence that residents have in reporting crime to the local police they now regard as more accessible (Collins 1996).
District Inspector who will be fully responsible and accountable for all police service delivery in that area. As part of their duties each District Inspector will be responsible for the establishment of a Local Safety Committee. The committee will have input into local policing initiatives, become a forum for police to account for local strategies and practices as well as identifying local crime and public safety issues.

The organisational philosophy of the LPP model is not simply about management restructure but rather is about how to effectively deliver customised police services to satisfy local community needs and expectation. It is about exploring ways to integrate and coordinate police services with community safety and crime prevention service providers at a local level (Comrie, 1999:2). The principle components of the LPP model are:

a) A Community Safety Planning Process which is appropriately linked to Victoria Police planning processes
b) Strategic partnerships (Local Safety Committees, Senior Management Teams as well as issue-specific groups or forums)
c) A program of extended community consultation
d) A strategic management model, as developed through ‘regionalisation’, including the generation and application of management information
e) Work force reform and organisational alignment
f) Progressive process improvements
g) Strong centralised support through policy, research and guidelines
h) Inter-agency commitment to a whole of government community safety model
i) Training
j) Performance assessment (Victoria Police, 1998:2)

The components of this model are based on community consultation programs from around the world. In Victoria LPP is an internal management process and there appears to be no basis in legislation. To date this internal management process has been a challenge as partnerships with other government agencies have been difficult to secure and continuity of the process is difficult when key players move on.

**New South Wales**

The organisational philosophy behind community consultation within the New South Wales Police Service Police Service is based on the mission statement of the organisation that states, “To have police and the community working together to establish a safer environment by reducing violence, crime and fear.” There appears to be no legislative provision for community consultation within New South Wales. Current activities are based on organisational imperatives and internal management policies and guidelines. Administratively consultation falls under the Director for Operational Programs, which comes under the Deputy Commissioner of Field Operations. Consultation activities within the state have different establishment dates and regulatory basis.
Based on the New South Wales Police Service Annual Report (1998-1999) consultation activities include the following:

a) Customer Councils
b) Partnerships with other departments (eg DOCS, RTA)
c) Community Sagely Officers
d) Safely House and Neighbourhood Watch Programs
e) Partnerships with ethnic communities (PACT)
f) Special liaison with other groups (eg youths)
g) Special accords with business
h) Police open days

According to the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service committee style consultation began around 1989 as a patchwork of strategies including: community attitude surveys, focus groups, safety audits and neighbourhood watch groups. As the committee structure of consultation can be problematic in some areas it was recommended that consultation be handled through local audits of consultation arrangement, establishment of suitable patrol based mechanisms, advisory councils for groups with special needs and high level community advisory through standing council or short term commissions of experts.

New Paradigms in Policing

There can be little doubt that policing has taken on the new rhetoric of civil society participation and sought a new equilibrium between itself as an agent of the state and the citizens it polices.

Table 1 interprets changing paradigms in Australian policing a using seven-factor framework developed by Kenneth Andrews in The Concept of Corporate Strategy (1980) and adapted by Kelling and Moore in The Evolving Strategy of Policing (1988) and presents a possible emerging scenario in which consultation is rolled back through the emphasis on the centralising tendencies list above.
Table 1: Paradigms in Australian Policing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Colonial Era (to early 20th C)</th>
<th>Technology Era (1920s to 1970s)</th>
<th>Community Era (1970s to ???)</th>
<th>New Era ???</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Government Law</td>
<td>Law Professionalism</td>
<td>Community support Law</td>
<td>Law Technology Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Law enforcement Order</td>
<td>Crime control</td>
<td>Crime control</td>
<td>Crime reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maintenance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Design</td>
<td>Centralised at the state level</td>
<td>Centralised</td>
<td>Decentralised Task forces</td>
<td>Move back to centralisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Relationships</td>
<td>Remote from community, Class directed</td>
<td>Professionally remote</td>
<td>Consultative</td>
<td>Communication of expertise and results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>Managed by heads of police departments</td>
<td>Channeled by central dispatch activities</td>
<td>Channeled by analysis of underlying problems</td>
<td>Public and private interests considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics</td>
<td>Reactive, repressive at times, Government functions performed</td>
<td>Preventative patrol, Rapid response, Specialised squads</td>
<td>Foot patrol, Information gathering, Community organising and consultation</td>
<td>High specialisation, more private policing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Outcomes</td>
<td>Order maintenance, Political satisfaction</td>
<td>Crime control</td>
<td>Citizen satisfaction, Better quality of life</td>
<td>Measurable reduction in crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the authors

Projecting Into the Future

The conclusion, almost 20 years after Scarman, is that consultation continues as a key element in strengthening the relationship between police and the wider civil society, but it has never really been implemented or trusted and despite its continued use, it may be under threat as a tactic as politicians and communities demand more measurable outcomes.

Nevertheless, consultation is not likely to be fully abandoned, as it is forms an integral part of a wider movement of citizen participation and public sector reform. It will continue to be a fundamental part of the core policing strategies as it establishes legitimacy with key stakeholder communities such as business and community elites, local activists, and specific ethnic and racial communities, and it continues to be an integral part of the new public management frameworks that are being applied to policing. Consultation processes continue to be essential for mobilizing support for the police among the middle and respectable working classes (Squires 1998) and for responding to the consumerist rhetoric which dictates perceptions of effectiveness and demands an ethos of service and responsiveness to clients.

Despite flaws, consultation continues to reinforce the current agenda of serving the community and there is widespread support for it, which accepts the contradictions found by researchers and commentators. The NSW Wood Royal Commission, for example, did a good job in summarising the current state of research on consultative committees and the problems this research identifies, but then the recommendations simply recreated those same flawed systems (Dixon 1999).

For those seeking to make consultation more meaningful in order to ensure that it remains a core strategy in the face of competing centralising tendencies, the following options should be pursued.
a) Continue to address the ideological issues to ensure that this is not the soft option that takes time from “real” policing.

There must be a commitment at all level to the continuity of a service orientation and participative policing as core strategies. Given that many elements of these strategies are being questioned by new trends, continued research and dialogue must take place that explores the compatibility of different approaches.

b) Promote a broader view of consultation that looks beyond police-controlled committees.

The community must not only be consulted through committees, but “engaged” through a greater emphasis on a range of police-initiated activities and police participation in existing community structures that they do not necessarily control.

c) Implement technical changes/improvements in existing consultation processes.

Part of the failure of consultation can be attributed to a lack of knowledge about the processes, lack of training in group dynamics, lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities of those participation. Training and support must be provided to police and civilians who participate in the process, and the resource and industrial relations issues for officers must be addressed.

d) Address the issues of evaluation and performance indicators.

There is a need to create a new equilibrium in the tension between the two realities: on one hand, modern public service demands evidence of performance; on the other, it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure community consultation outputs. As Squires (1998, p.177) indicates “Community policing may not be easily expressed in terms of standardised performance indicators, but it is undeniable popular with the public and if for this reason alone, cannot be overlooked in a customer-sensitive police service “

In addition to the work that has been done with customer survey and output indicators such as reported crime and intelligence gathering, more work needs to be done with audit evaluations, that give police more flexibility to demonstrate their engagement with communities and to identify a range of outcomes.

e) Explore the means to incorporate privatized policing into consultation structures.

As police services increasingly become mediators between citizen concerns about safety and crime and a more multi-faceted industry of public and private policing, they must develop new models to ensure that public oversight extends to private security.
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