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Preserving Institutional Memory in Australian Police Services

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Recent years have seen significant and monumental changes in policing. To be a police officer a generation or two ago, one had to be big enough; today, one has to be smart enough. During this (crudely characterised) transitional period, a number of Australian police commissioners drove and presided over organisational, cultural and operational change. We at the Australian Institute of Criminology thought it would be valuable to capture the frank and candid observations of police commissioners who were in office while these changes were taking place.

Following a commitment of confidentiality and non-identification, interviews were recorded on behalf of the AIC by a retired police commissioner, and the tapes of these interviews are now in the process of being analysed. These oral histories will eventually be lodged with the National Library of Australia. The existing tapes cover the experiences of 10 commissioners. The AIC would very much like to conduct interviews of this nature with all commissioners as they retire, so as to develop a unique repository of knowledge and observations on change in our police services.

This paper by Dr Benoit Dupont, who is analysing the tapes, is an initial outline of some of the unique material, and a precursor to future analytical papers from this rich information source.

Adam Graycar
Director

In times of unprecedented economic and social change, police services in Australia and elsewhere are being asked to address a growing number of complex—and sometimes conflicting—issues. Police organisations are not limited to their traditional crime detection and law enforcement functions anymore. They are being reshaped into knowledge brokers (Ericson & Haggerty 1997), social service referrers, or problem solvers (Goldstein 1990)—to name just a few of their new responsibilities. It is not the aim of this paper to list the causes of this new complexity in policing, but the globalisation of criminal activity and increased demands for improved services and community consultation have played a significant role to this end. The constraints of fiscal austerity, the imposition by governments of shorter policy cycles and the dilution of power that has accompanied the "new managerialism" have created additional pressures for police services and tested their ability to successfully implement change.

In the past decades, public enquiries and royal commissions have been highly critical of police agencies and their reluctance to adjust to this new environment (Lusher 1981; Fitzgerald 1989; Wood 1997). Academic commentators have also made vigorous contributions to the debate on police reform, highlighting structural, cultural and managerial deficiencies (Chan 1997; Dixon 1999, 2001; Goldsmith 2001; Palmer & Cherney 2001). Amid this barrage of

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criticisms, very few studies have attempted to examine on a systematic basis what police leaders are doing to steer their organisations towards more effective and efficient practices, and how they are doing it.

This type of knowledge is nevertheless essential in order to understand what makes certain police services more or less successful, whatever the accepted measure of success might be. Police commissioners play a central role in the definition of goals and objectives that satisfy governments and civil society. The media and political leaders often attribute the successes and failures of police reforms to the commissioners' skills and vision, or lack thereof. Their leadership exerts a strong influence on the structure of the organisation and how it interacts with its environment.

The publication of personal memoirs has been a long tradition among police leaders, who have followed the example of Fouché (1825), the French father of modern high policing. These hagiographic accounts of their careers may provide titillating details about certain high-profile incidents, but they are mainly intended for popular audiences (for the most recent examples of this trend, see Williams 2002; Whitrod 2001; and, in the American context, Bratton & Knobler 1998). In recent years, several academic studies have sought to lift the veil on the top echelons of the police organisation, but apart from a local exception (Moore 1994), they are confined to the British context (Reiner 1991; Wall 1998; Loader & Mulcahy 2001). The present paper makes an Australian contribution to this growing body of literature by reporting the preliminary findings of an oral history project initiated by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Research Material

The oral history project was initiated by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 1999, when former Tasmanian police commissioner John Johnston interviewed 10 active and retired police commissioners. His involvement at the highest level of policing allowed him privileged access to the interviewees, unlikely to have been enjoyed by a more "traditional" scholar, who would not have been able to secure that kind of access without investing a considerable amount of time and effort (see for example the experiences of Reiner [1991] in England, whose research proposal was initially rejected by the Association of Chief Police Officers in 1979, and who had to wait until 1986 before his project could finally begin).

The questions covered a broad range of issues. Those related to the personal and professional profiles of the commissioners sought to chart their career paths and explore their values, motivations and disappointments as they progressed through the ranks. They also reflected on the evolution of the commissioner's job, from training and selection processes to their relationships with governments, unions and other stakeholders of the criminal justice system. Themes such as police integrity, the development of common police services, the expansion of community policing and new strategies in traffic policing were then explored in detail. Finally, more general issues such as change management techniques and technological innovation were canvassed.

The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour, with one interview exceeding two hours and one barely lasting twelve minutes. While some of the interviewees answered the questions freely and reflected upon their career quite informally, others had prepared a written statement, which they read in answer to the questions that had been submitted in advance of the interview. These "prompted" contributions tended to restrict the possibilities of unforeseen but meaningful recollections. However, they still proved to be very valuable to the project, as much for what the interviewees said as what they did not.

The following paragraphs are the result of a preliminary listening to the recordings, during which detailed notes were taken. It is expected that a full transcription of the tapes will be possible at a later stage of the project and that a computer-aided qualitative data analysis will be carried out. For obvious reasons, the quotations found in this paper cannot be attributed.

Commissioners' Profiles

Although their career paths differed significantly, and despite the small size of the sample, a picture of the average commissioner would read as follows: after having joined the police at the age of 19.3 years and spending 31.75 years progressing through the ranks, he was appointed at the age of 51.5 years and retired 8.25 years later.

The interviewees were all males; the first Australian female police commissioner, Christine Nixon, was appointed to head the Victoria police in 2001, after the interviews were completed.

Very few of the commissioners interviewed joined the police with formal qualifications, some of them having left school at a very young age. However, most of them demonstrated a strong commitment to academic studies once they had reached the commissioned officer level. On retirement, a few even started a second career in academia as

adjunct professors in police management with various universities—a clear indication that their leadership experience is recognised as a unique asset by tertiary education institutions. Most of them mentioned the paucity of internal executive development programs offered by police services 20 years ago, having had to rely instead on external courses not always adapted to the demands and constraints of their work. The role of the Australian Police Staff College (now the Australian Institute of Police Management) was widely acknowledged as instrumental in having provided an opportunity for those who attended its courses to "have their minds stretched". However, it was generally felt that this training came too late in their careers.

In the lead up to their appointment as commissioners, many experienced selection criteria and procedures that were rudimentary and clouded to a large extent by political considerations. The composition of selection panels was often dictated by governments' priorities. Personal connections and patronage also played an important role. Most of the interviewees admitted that what might have been appropriate procedures at the time were not suitable anymore, and that more thorough and rigorous assessment processes, such as the use of assessment centres, were needed.

The recent trend towards outside appointments was predictably well accepted, since several interviewees directly benefited from the new opportunities it opened up. It was perceived as a way of "injecting new blood in an organisation that would otherwise have become moribund". One commissioner employed a more colourful set of metaphors to justify the recourse to external appointments:

> Having presided over a huge change program, it could not have occurred with the same vigour and the same unquestioning direction if one had spent one's formative and developmental years, and most of one's working years working within the organisation and all its holy cows… And also because of the bias and baggage you acquire on your way through the organisation. I used to talk about the four-B factor: you need brains, balls and an absence of bias and baggage, and it just gives you so much.

The mobility of commissioners across states was also said to have improved the level of cross-jurisdictional cooperation. However, words of caution were spoken about the limitations of such a system, especially when the organisation comprises many cliques and confederations of people with shifting allegiances. Understanding the distribution of power and influence then becomes a vital skill that an outsider is unlikely to possess, hence weakening his legitimacy. Another voice highlighted the unique geography and structure of Australian policing, and questioned the wisdom of appointing overseas candidates.

Managing the Police

As chief executives of large organisations, police commissioners are at the epicentre of complex and enmeshed relationships with external stakeholders such as governments, police unions and other law enforcement agencies. The general public is also taking a strong interest in the internal machinery of policing. Very rarely do these stakeholders share the same interests, a situation which is often the source of tensions and frictions. The relationship between police commissioners and governments, for example, has always been a vexed issue in Australia (Finnane 1990). Most of the participants signalled that policing had become the subject of intense political pressures over the past 20 years, and that commissioners had no chance of being effective without a healthy dose of "political acumen and awareness", as distinct from being merely politicised. Some were thankful to have received the full support of governments, which ensured they obtained the resources they needed and the legislative powers they requested. Whilst one experienced "a total lack of understanding for the doctrine of the separation of power", others reported a more subtle process of negotiation with governments insisting on more direct forms of control over the running of the police. To explain this high, if sophisticated, level of interference, one interviewee offered the extreme view that "no government is comfortable with autonomy of policing".

Commissioners and police associations have traditionally enjoyed tumultuous relations (Finnane 2002), despite the fact that the former have sometimes been members of the latter's executive. Valuable and constructive collaborative arrangements were identified, but it was generally agreed that commissioners and police associations were part of a "love–hate relationship" that seemed impossible to transcend. Most of the commissioners tried to establish open channels of communication with the associations, hoping to engage them by favoring a consultative style of leadership. However, significant changes in the federal industrial legislation and a more concerted approach by the unions through the national Police Federation seem to have injected a dose of antagonism in the commissioner–union relationships. One of the interviewees likened this more vigorous approach of the unions to the "managerial" approach taken by commissioners in the running of their organisations.

Media reporting, particularly in cases where commissioners were appointed with a reform mandate, was often experienced as heavily biased, often manipulated by interest groups and generally opposed to any form of change:

> The media, I had great difficulty with the media. My view… They would disagree with this, in this respect… When we launched the […] project, we had the media there, gave them the briefing, gave them material. At the end of my comments, and you know, this was profound, radical, essential necessary change… What I am getting at is, the media, that you have to use to communicate to the broader community, were either unwilling or unable to take on board these changes, what they meant, why they were necessary and what could be achieved through them. At the end of a briefing, when we first launched […], the two questions I have got: Mr […], does this mean the police will arrive more quickly at the scene of an incident? And Mr […], does this mean there will be more police on the beat? And I was devastated.

By contrast, commissioners who had been appointed in a more stable environment seemed to enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with the press, giving them the ability to establish a regular and unchallenged presence in the eyes of the public.

There is no argument that over the past 20 years the responsibilities of police commissioners have expanded exponentially, under the global gaze of governments, the media and concerned citizens. Law and order has become a high-profile issue, taking centre-stage at state elections. Swept by the waves of public reforms that have engulfed the Australian public sector (Clark & Corbett 1999; Considine & Painter 1997), police services have evolved into complex organisations that must be managed efficiently and with a high degree of accountability. Commissioners cannot afford to go home for lunch every day anymore, or speak to the media once every four years, as was the case a few decades ago. Commissioners have become inescapable public figures who need to develop the relevant skills:

> In states and the Commonwealth, among managers of executive arms of government, including heads of departments, none are known like the police commissioner. No one knows who runs agriculture, for example, or transport. I have been retired five years and I am known wherever I go. It would not matter where I go. People stop me in the street; complete strangers are still stalking me in the street.

It is not only the new policy and media environments that call for better-prepared commissioners. The current militaristic model of policing has clearly reached its use-by date: with a tertiary-trained workforce in search of rewarding careers, and a healthy economy offering a lot of professional opportunities, police organisations have realised that they must provide a more democratic and less hierarchical workplace in order to retain their best elements. Nevertheless, old habits are still entrenched in the police organisational culture. Autocratic styles of leadership remain predominant in many services and sections (Murray 2002). Most of the commissioners interviewed concurred, explaining how they had tried to rid the police of this organisational sclerosis. The following quote is representative of the opinions expressed:

> I believe that there is a need to fundamentally reshape the way in which policing does business, the way in which we select and train our people, the way in which we develop and demonstrate trust in them… We moved right away from a paramilitary structure to a much more flexible evolved team structure. I have had a ceremonial burning of the rules and regulations and we've turned many of the rules and regulations not required by legislation into simply guidelines of a previous way to do business, on the basis that I want people's minds to run fertilely and flexibly and if they can think of a better way to do business, providing it is lawful, I am delighted to hear about it… Even those people who like the idea of [reform] were threatened by it, because they only have experienced, and are used to, total command and control and people who would always complain about not being given enough autonomy were nervous about the responsibilities that went with it. And in fairness to them, it took me a while to really appreciate the fact that they had not been trained or prepared for the acceptance of them.

The management of police integrity has been one of the major problems faced by police commissioners in the past two decades. All the interviewees acknowledged the risks posed by scandals such as those which have rocked police organisations in New York City, Queensland or New South Wales. All indicated that they had learned lessons from them, and outlined the policies they designed and implemented to remedy a perceived accountability deficit. The commissioners were divided in their appraisal of external oversight bodies, which have proliferated nationally and internationally (Chan 1999; Lewis 1999; Goldsmith & Lewis 2000), self-regulation being generally presented as the most attractive option:

> I think that self-regulation is absolutely essential to the policing profession. If the only way by which they can be expected to play by the rules or practice appropriate or best practice is if an external body is oversighting that behaviour, well, obviously we are a long way from where we need to be. It's a little bit like a football team that only trains if the coach is

> watching. They are not likely ever to achieve their potential. So I think self-regulation is essential and I think organisations have an obligation to put in place internal audit and security measures that are likely to operate as early warning systems that have the capacity to run random audits across the organisation… just to test and assess whether things are working to the level they should be, whether people are in fact practicing according to their requirements or guidelines, to identify deficiencies or faults where they occur and to self-regulate and continue to improve, and that should be seen as a very positive part of the internal process.

However, this position should not be construed as a lack of resolution, and the statement that "when you have to draw a line in the sand about what is not acceptable, sometimes there will be some crosses on the hill" seems to encapsulate the commitment of police leaders to the integrity of their organisations. As chief executives of complex organisations, external regulation was perceived as impacting negatively on operational efficiency, mainly because of the cumbersome procedures involved and their effect on officers' morale. But there was also a realisation that external oversight, despite its perceived shortcomings, was essential to restore a deeply eroded public confidence.

Past and Future

There is not enough space in this paper to explore the commissioners' responses on issues such as community-oriented policing, road safety, the role of common police services, change management strategies and impediments to their implementation, or the impact of new technologies on policing. The analysis of this fertile research material has just begun, and will be the basis of more detailed publications on the oral history of police commissioners. In due course, the original recordings will also be made available to the National Library of Australia's oral history collection. Far from being irrelevant to today's police executives, this research has some highly practical applications (Laycock 2001).

If this project is by nature historical, revealing a lot about the governance of Australian policing in the recent past, it also has an underlying prospective value for police leaders who will face similar problems to those discussed by their predecessors. Clearly, through their calls for more inclusive, stimulating and individualised forms of leadership, the majority of commissioners invoked the ideal of the transformational leader (Densten 1999), whose innovative vision cascades down every level of the organisation and revitalises its values and effectiveness. Traditional "command and control" leadership was not discarded entirely, but was only considered a viable alternative in the context of emergency and crisis situations. However, "transformational leadership does not happen by chance" (Avolio, Waldman & Yammarino 1991), and the development of leaders operating within this framework entails the design and development of learning systems that facilitate the acquisition of the required skills and mentalities.

These systems should not be conceived as management "cookbooks" full of ready-to-implement recipes, but rather as knowledge compasses to help police leaders steer their organisational "vessels". Needless to say, a compass is useless without a chart: personal experiences, but also the explicit and tacit knowledge accumulated by past commissioners, constitute this organisational map (Nonaka & Takeushi 1995). To push the maritime metaphor further, every time police commissioners retire without having the opportunity to pass their knowledge on to their successors, the chart is losing a landmass, making the navigation more hazardous for the disoriented organisation—even more so when the new appointee is an outsider.

Hence, an ongoing oral history program would give the opportunity to every retiring commissioner to share experiences and reflections with peers, and would unlock, consolidate and extend the stock of organisational knowledge available to police leaders. This learning system would represent an innovative tool for the national dissemination of best practices in policing and police management. Of course, other instruments are already available: at the national level, the Productivity Commission produces every year an impressive compilation of performance data on government services, including police agencies (SCRCSSP 2002). However, this approach focuses exclusively on aggregate outcomes and outputs, treating police services as "black boxes" (Pawson & Tilley 1997). What makes these "black boxes" more or less effective, their internal processes and practices, remains largely unknown. Other countries, partly to answer this question, have established inspectorates, whose primary mandate is to ensure the maintenance of agreed standards and the identification of best practices (HMIC 2000). However, police inspectorates tend to focus on operational matters and very rarely tackle the more controversial issue of policy formulation and implementation. Furthermore, they are usually seen as additional layers of accountability rather than as neutral agents of change.

In conclusion, a more thorough analysis of the data collected so far would extend our

historical knowledge of a little-known but increasingly important field of public policy: police leadership. Furthermore, the expansion of the commissioners' oral history project would be instrumental in filling some of the "knowledge black holes" created by the federal structure of Australian policing. It would guarantee the integrity of the police services' Strategic Leadership Memory, allowing it to flow freely between leaders and organisations for the benefit of the community.

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