

The Police Foundation

POLICE - PUBLIC RELATIONS: THE PACE OF CHANGE

POLICE FOUNDATION LECTURE, 1986

given by

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POLICE-PUBLIC RELATIONS - THE PACE OF CHANGE

On October 6 1985 Constable Keith Blakelock was killed on duty in Tottenham. More precisely, he was hacked to death in a riot. That was a traumatic event and, while the police force may have recovered from the shock, it has changed.

The last time a constable was killed in a riot was in 1833, when PC Robert Culley was stabbed to death in Coldbath Fields in Clerkenwell. After that event Macaulay wrote that "A broken head in Cold Bath Fields produces a greater sensation among us than three pitched battles in India." We may have no more pitched battles in India, but we have regular murders of members of the security forces in Northern Ireland.

Easy parallels between these cases may be comforting. After all, a hundred and fifty years without a policeman killed in a riot is a long time. But the changes in society and in individuals now are far too great for such a parallel to provide any real reassurance.

It was in 1970, sixteen years ago, that Alvin Toffler published 'Future Shock.' It is dated now, precisely because of the accuracy of its main message, that the pace of change is constantly accelerating, and as individuals we find it increasingly difficult to keep up. It is not just those of pensionable age who regret the pace of change, but the middle-aged, those who have to cope with it for the second half of their working lives. Crime has trebled in the lifetime of a twenty-year-old.

If we are to go beyond Macaulay's long historical view, we must understand the changes that have taken place, that are now taking place, in the relations between police and public. There are, of course, two parts to this : changes in the public, in the social fabric which forms the background to police work, and changes in the police themselves. In this lecture I want to elucidate the relationship of some of the social changes to crime, then look at ways in which the police have changed. Finally, I want to consider ways of coping with these changes.

First, then, the effects of the social changes on crime. I shall mention four factors : acquisitiveness, personal standards, unemployment and drug abuse. Two of these, acquisitiveness and personal standards, I want to discuss in some detail.

The increase in acquisitiveness or material ambition has two roots : the standards of the mass communication medium most influential in the 80s, namely television, and the world of credit. In 1984 97% of households had a television set, and 94% of the population watched television for some time each week. In January and February 1985, men watched television for an average 26 hours per week and women for 31½ hours. This is surprisingly close to the average number of hours spent at work. In the seven years between 1977 and 1984 video recorders found a place in a quarter of our homes, and the number continues to rise. Almost every adult regards television as their primary news medium; it intrudes into far more homes than newspapers do. I choose the idea of intrusion deliberately. The television set is a household familiar, a guest with a permanent invitation. It is associated with the normality and security of the home; its images are an extension of the shared family experience. But in addition to this, it carries an air of authority, it provides a daily diet of reliable news reports, and this authority carries over to an extent into the non-news programmes and the commercials. It seems to me that any survey of social change is bound to consider television first.

I do not suggest that television is inherently harmful. As a result of the universality of television, people are better informed, and interest has been stimulated, participation has increased in sports which at one time were the preserve of the few, like gymnastics and athletics. Its triumph in 1985 was undoubtedly the transmission of the tragic reports from Ethiopia which pricked the nation's conscience, together with the coverage of the 'Live Aid' concert which enabled that conscience, particularly in young people, to provide tangible relief from the suffering.

But we should be concerned about the image television presents of what constitutes success. The successful stereotypes in advertising,

and in most television dramas, are people who possess both things and people in abundance. Before the era of television, it was the newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst, who said "News is what somebody doesn't want to see published, everything else is publicity." In the police we have often reason to regret this fact that the news media want to report only bad news. There is a parallel in television drama : the conventional happy family with husband and wife and 2.4 children, and the group in which people treat each other with consideration and concern, are not the stuff of drama. Those who cause conflict and strong emotions through treating people as objects are much more the natural inhabitants of television serials.

I am talking here of the acquisitive ethic encouraged by television as if this issue could be isolated from the others which tend to increase crime. But that would be to misrepresent the situation. I shall be talking later of other ways in which television affects crime. I have already mentioned personal standards, and I think it will be almost universally held that a society which admires acquisitiveness works to a lower moral standard than one which values mutual help. So television is linked to the attrition of personal standards in more than one way. Similarly, if we look at encouragements to treating people as objects, pornography may be identified as an influence, quite separate from television. The spread of video recorders has widened the circulation of pornography, the essence of which is that people are used as objects instead of given respect. So the relationships between the different influences are complicated.

The other influence on acquisitiveness is easy credit. A quarter of a century ago plastic cards were introduced as a means of paying for goods and services by credit. Around 23 million are now held. As with television, I am not suggesting that personal credit is a bad thing in itself. My concern is the tendency to overreach that instant credit produces. According to the National Consumer Council, more than a million council tenants are in arrears with their rent, while 100,000 home buyers are unable to meet their mortgage repayments. A million are in arrears with

their gas bills, and 1½ million with their electricity bills. Excluding mortgage repayments, the average debt per household last year was £1,200.

Such figures indicate a level of stress within our society which, I suggest, is caused in part by easy credit, in combination with acquisitive values which encourage people to reach beyond the money they actually have, and spend in a grey world of credit whose boundaries are often ill-defined. The stress created by debt is one of the causes of fractures of families, and the decline of the family is something to which I shall return.

Acquisitiveness, then, I take to be one element in the growth of crime. On its own it will not cause crime, and a discussion of how it interacts with the other elements will be needed later. Meanwhile, I will go on to the second area of social change affecting crime, personal standards. By this I mean standards of individual honesty, and the use of violence. In relation to acquisitiveness I suggested a cause at one level; in relation to personal standards there are a larger number of causes combining at two levels.

Let me put some flesh on these bones. Crime gets a good deal of publicity. There are two sorts of crime which have been fashionable in the media this year : rape and child abuse. I do not want to enter into the discussion of how much of the recorded increase in such crimes is a real increase, and how much an increase in the reporting rate because of the amount of publicity given to the subject. What the Metropolitan Police can say with some certainty is that there has been a real increase in these offences, particularly in those of the more unpleasant kind. The almost daily publicity given to whatever crime happens to be most popular with the media has an effect on the average reader, listener or viewer. It will make him or her see it as less unusual, less impossible of commission, more normal.

Television, and to a lesser extent other media, has a part to play here too. Although a connection has been denied by some people,

I do not think the role of television in providing a conduit for the germ of riot to spread its infection from one part of the country to another can seriously be doubted. But as well as the (I would like to think) obvious connection here, there is the cumulative influence of the level of violence, and indeed the degree of illicit sex, which appears in television drama. Both are witnessed nightly as the inevitable solutions to problems. In real life, violence is a destructive intrusion into the lives of all concerned, but in televised drama it is a convenient and tidy replacement for dialogue and the sort of compromise which is inseparable from a civilised society. A nightly diet of such material increases the likelihood that we can regard such behaviour as normal. (Of course, that is not to say it will make us more likely to indulge in such behaviour, it may instead have the effect of making us feel more insecure, less prepared to go out after dark.)

In a stable society, one where people are born, grow up, spend their working lives, and die in one community, the permanent nature of the contact with neighbours, with a whole network of other members of the community and relatives, provides a constant reinforcement of the knowledge that crime is not normal, that most people do not commit it. But for many of us, our membership of a neighbourhood is transient; we do not have time to put down roots and to develop relationships which daily reassure us of the normality of being law-abiding. This transience makes us vulnerable to the belief that the crime and violence which we see in the media is normal.

There are then three influences which tend to make the individual think that crime is commonplace : the publicity given to crime; the level of crime in television drama; and the transient nature of our contacts with our community, too slight to provide us with its standards. Indeed, in a community where all or most of the residents are transient, the most influential standards will be those of the media, primarily television. The effect of thinking that crime is normal is to remove a major emotional barrier to its commission, and therefore to reduce personal standards.

The other group of causes leading to lower standards comes under the heading of 'fragmented authority.' The police are of course not the only people exercising authority in society. Others include schools, courts, local authorities, parents, churches and politicians. The basic socialising unit is the family, but our image of the family unit has probably not kept up with social trends. A quarter of a century ago there were 30,000 divorces a year; there are now 170,000. Divorce affects around 160,000 children a year, and an increasing proportion of those children are under five. Single parents now head one in eight of our families with dependent children, and one and a half million children enjoy the immediate resource of only one parent. This is a substantial and growing proportion of our youth.

The one-parent family in a close-knit community can probably call on relatives and friends for help when difficulties arise which a two-parent family could manage unaided. But the transience of urban communities, coupled with ethnic diversity, are likely to make it less easy to call on neighbours and relatives for help. The extent of this diversity is substantial, with ethnic minorities at 55% actually providing a majority of the population of the London Borough of Brent, for example.

Of course there is no reason why people from varied racial and cultural backgrounds should not become good friends and neighbours, and there are innumerable examples of just that happening. But effort needs to be put into this by everyone concerned, by individuals but also by local agencies and by national figures. Contrast the attitude of some of those in public life who, rather than appeal to the community as a whole, make a policy of appealing to the minorities in it. There have been recent examples of stances taken in order to appeal to sectarian, racial and sexual minorities. Now I do not wish to suggest that there is anything wrong with a politician espousing a popular cause - that is the way our representatives are elected - but to support only the causes of minorities is to treat the nation as a collection of minorities rather than as a whole.

which comes from such a variety of places, few of them within the sphere of influence of the police.

But first it is necessary to look at the changes that have been taking place recently, and are currently taking place, in the police. I see four areas of current change in the police : in our response to public disorder; in coping with new legislation; in the effects of hostility in the policing environment; and in our reaction to an increasing workload.

In relation to public disorder, the major changes over the last decade can be easily followed. In 1976, following the riot at the Notting Hill Carnival, defensive shields were introduced; five years later, after petrol bombs were used, we added flameproof clothing and metal helmets; and last year, after the police were shot at, plastic baton rounds were deployed, but not used. This shows a change in the severity of public disorder, but such extreme violence occurs only on rare occasions.

There is, parallel with this, a change in the severity of the comparatively frequent public disorders with which police are confronted. I am thinking of the level of disorder seen at demonstrations and on picket lines. As the intensity of violence experienced in riots has increased, so, at a lower level, has the violence on the more regular public events. Indeed, the current disorder at the News International plant in Wapping has reached the level experienced at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976, which at the time was unique.

In response to this frequency of disorder, the police image changes. This has to be so, in order to provide officers with a reasonable level of protection against attack. But this change has been comparatively rapid, so that the average member of the public with no first-hand experience of such disorder may be inclined to see police riot dress and tactics as contributing to the disorder rather than as a necessary response to it. We need more public understanding of the situations in which police are placed, and we need intelligent debate about police public

Whatever hopes I may have for a larger number of police officers, that is certainly unrealistic. So the era when officers could question all victims and examine all scenes of crime until the clues were exhausted is gone. The service that the victim of a burglary now receives, if there is no immediate likelihood of the culprit being found, would probably have been considered peremptory by the standards of twenty years ago. Better public understanding is needed of the requirement to deploy resources in the most effective fashion, and of the efforts made in that direction.

I have come repeatedly to the conclusion that improved understanding is necessary. In a way, that was bound to happen because understanding change is a pre-condition for coping with it. The police need more knowledge of how they and their environment are changing, and the public need more understanding about how and why the police are changing. Saying that and achieving it are of course two very different things. For the remainder of my time I shall explain briefly how I think the police as an organisation fit into the changes happening around them, and conclude by suggesting ways in which mutual understanding, and improvement in police-public relations, can be achieved.

The police are expected to be reassuring and solid, but effective. In times when change is slow, that may not give rise to any dilemma, but when change is as fast as it is now, and particularly when crime is increasing so fast, it does.

In their reassuring aspect, police are change absorbers, 'shock absorbers' in Alvin Toffler's terminology. The events which are crises for members of the public are expected to be dealt with routinely and without panic by the police. The police are resilient, an unarmed force who by coping with anything thrust their way show that society, while having its problems of course, is basically sound. People are traditionally reassured by the sight of a policeman walking down the street. This is not just because he is someone there to help if needed, but also because the fact that he keeps the peace by patrolling on his own is a sign of social order.

largely beyond the control of police, and the sort of role the police are called upon to play, with its occasional contradictions. I hope that what I am saying today may provide some degree of improved understanding of the problems.

And finally, a means of promoting mutual understanding which is of benefit to both sides is research. And this is where the Police Foundation comes in. There are so many areas of ignorance in the relationship between police and public. The problems of mass urban crime and disorder demand a co-ordinated strategy contributed to by Government, police, social agencies and communities. But in a context of plural values and cultural conflicts, how can such a strategy be devised so as to command some reasonable level of understanding and consensus? Moreover, how will we assess whether or not such a strategy is effective? This is the critical area for research and for the generation of understanding. But there are other such questions bearing upon the relationship between the police and the public. I look forward to the Foundation taking an active role in encouraging such research and enabling it to get wide publicity.

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