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Mission creep and the compromising of strategic direction in United Kingdom Police Services. An exploratory study of the evidence.

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Introduction

This paper will examine key problems facing United Kingdom police leaders in 2010 as they strive to meet the service expectations of government and the public in a period of austerity. In particular the issue of strategic discretion is examined, the extent to which the police leader's opportunity to pursue strategic actions appropriate to changing circumstances, has been compromised by 'mission creep'. The empirical evidence presented here is based on a study of one large English police service supplemented by interviews conducted with senior officers in this and other police services.

Given our in interest in mission creep it is important to identify 'core mission' in respect of policing in the United Kingdom. Since the inception of basic 'Peelian' principles in the United Kingdom, police services have enjoyed a relatively unfettered organisational trajectory in terms of delivering what might be considered 'core' policing functions (Emsley, 2009). Indeed, the fundamental 'pillars' of what might be termed the 'police mission' have remained as a relative constant when juxtaposed with the shifting social, political and cultural changes which have occurred in the UK over nearly two centuries (Emsley, 1996; Bayley, 1994; Bayley and Shearing, 2001; Reiner, 2000) Law enforcement has typically dominated normative explanations of what the police do and how they should be guided at a strategic level (Kelling & Moore 2005) On the other hand empirical evidence suggests basic policing roles are dominated by patrolling, traffic control and responding to the public. According to Bayley (2005) only a small proportion of time will be identifiable as direct crime fighting, with law enforcement and actual arrests being rare events for most officers. Instead a far greater proportion time will be given to restoring order after calls to respond to incidents and

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providing general assistance. Around half police time will be largely concerned with officers 'sorting out situations', he concludes based on empirical observations in several countries including England. Criminal investigation will occupy about 15% of police time. This involves the police talking to suspects and witnesses and collecting evidence before deciding on whether a prosecution is merited. Patrol and criminal investigation roles dominated in all the countries Bayley examined – Australia, England, Canada, Japan and the United States. Westley (2005) pointedly notes that the police are generally the first to be called to emergencies and people expect them to do something about it. In addition to law enforcement there is a highly significant role that involves 'dirty work', unpleasant and untidy but absolutely neccessary interventions in communities, for example dealing with drunks, the insane, the dead, the vice-ridden and the ill. 'Sorting out', crime fighting and traffic policing (7% of time), also seem to be what police officers see as the core tasks of 'real policing', mission creep implying a deviation from such a focus.

Furthermore, it may be argued that the broad delivery of the 'police mission' has remained stable, in spite of being subject to various reinventions and pressures over the past fifty years – including community policing, zero-tolerance policing, best-value regimes, technological revolution and the ever changing nature of criminality itself (Jones and Newburn, 2002; Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2001).

It must be noted that many (but not all) of these pressures upon the 'police mission' have tended to be incremental, increasingly testing the capacity, integrity and flexibility of modern policing institutions derived from the *Royal Commission on the Police* (1962; (Emsley, 1996; Garland, 1996). However, it is during the more recent period of New Labour government (from 1997 to 2010) in which the 'police mission' has been subject to intense *new* pressures, which in turn has affected the fundamental, strategic ability of police services across the U.K. From legislative frameworks for collaboration through to performance audit, there has been a ceaseless imposition of both core and ancillary demands from central Government. It is therefore to these factors which impinge upon the 'policing mission' to which the paper shall now turn. Indeed, the aim of this paper is to provide an exploratory analysis of the variety of policy and legislative changes under New Labour which have simultaneously constrained and cajoled the basic 'police mission'.

Such pressures may themselves have caused the mission of the police to 'creep' well beyond the parameters of Peel's imagination – along with causing a complexification of *internal*, organisational requirements on police resources to the extent that there are now

distinct limits upon the ability of command teams to co-ordinate such diverse demands into an effective service. On the other hand, the research literature also points to more fundamental, conceptual questions around the strategic viability of modern policing structures to cope with their ever-creeping mission as part of the *external* policing environment (McLaughlin, 2007). It is unclear whether the complex *corpus* of governmental dictats has simply swollen the 'policing mission' beyond the strategic ability of police services to respond adequately or rather that the current institutonal arrangements of United Kingdom police services, derived from the first *Royal Commission*, are no longer fit for purpose to deal with the complex policing demands, of late modern society (Garland, 2001; Topping, 2008). While recognising that police services are encountering something akin to strategic overload, we will not in this paper address the question of whether institutional reform needs to be undertaken to restore their capacity to think and act effectively in relation to policing challenges. Rather it is our intention to examine the extent to which a 'path dependency' has developed which constrains police services in their identification of appropriate strategic action.

Background

As a social institution within society, epitomised through the British 'Bobby', the police have managed to retain their unique political status in the United Kingdom as (relatively) independent arbiters of law and order (c.f. Emsley, 2009). No less in the contemporary realm, under the New Labour Government the centrality of the police in maintaining law and order has been significantly bolstered, with Government spending on police services in the United Kingdom having grown in real terms from £9.8bn in 1999 to £14.5bn in 2009. Indeed, by 2009 police numbers reached record levels with 142,151 officers, which represented a 10% increase in the workforce since 1998 (Mills, Silvestri, & Grimshaw, 2010). In addition, civilian staff numbers have also increased at a similar rate, with the ratio of police officers to police staff (unwarranted) decreasing from 2.3 to 1 in 2000 to 1.4 to 1 by 2009 (Meade, 2010).

However, in spite of the level of central Government commitment to the police services, there remain doubts about the capacity of police services to meet all the demands placed on them by their paymasters. Such growth in police numbers has, according to police leaders, been accompanied by a parallel widening in the necessary strategic focus of police services to incorporate a range of new tasks which have also been imposed under New

Labour. The phenomenon was referred to as 'mission creep' by Sir Hugh Orde (President of Association of Chief Police Officers) in an address given at the University of Ulster (2010). In this regard, the term refers to a strategic failure within police services due to the compromising of core strategic aims through the piecemeal adoption of new and secondary tasks. Central to this argument is evidence around the exponential increase in criminal legislation passed by Labour – calculated by the Liberal democrats to run at approximately 3000 criminal offences through new or amended legislation (reference here). In this regard, it is clear that central government have become more controlling in the United Kingdom with respect to social order and the use of the police to effect those aims (Chriss, 2007; Hughes, 2007). With such increases in *policing* direction from the centre, the arguments around 'mission creep' can more easily be observed.

Moving away from *directed* policing tasks through legislation, it is interesting to consider some of the *indirect* effects of central Government dictats upon the basic policing mission. Taking for example the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994, it gave the (then Conservative) Home Secretary a role in determining national key objectives which local police authorities, who oversee police services, were instructed to use in performance monitoring activities (Reiner, 2000). National police objectives also began to be set and revised on a regular basis by the Home Office. However, it was New Labour (elected in 1997) who continued to promote and develop such centralist, managerial reforms (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2001). Police services were subject to a series of requirements associated with the Best Value system introduced in 2000, with Home Secretary David Blunkett establishing a Home Office 'Police Standards Unit' – which had an operational responsibility to increase police effectiveness and identify issues that could require new legislation.

However, the genesis of such centralising, yet for local police services mission 'stretching' tendencies had already begun under the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, which introduced Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) – causing police services to stray from policing crime *per se*, to dealing with central social policy issues at a local level (Crawford, 1995). The Police Reform Act 2002 for example, placed an onus on the Secretary of State to produce an annual National Policing Plan (NPP), which would include strategic priorities, objectives and performance indicators for police services on a three year cycle. The Act also introduced a new category of civilian staff, Police Community Support Officers[1] (PCSOs), who's impact on the ground and management within the police organisation, has at best, been

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[1] Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) These individuals were uniformed, but less expensive and less well trained than police officers and they lacked the full range of powers available.

questionable (Johnston, 2003; 2005; Crawford and Lister, 2006). In 2004 a new suite of Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) heralded a shift from a majority of process indicators to a larger share of output (for example detections) and outcomes (for example surveys of public satisfaction) indicators (Collier, 2006). The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 further established the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) on the basis of merging earlier national units, created to meet the challenge of national/international crime. Thus, it would appear that it is the *cumulative* and unintended effect of incremental change to the basic police mission which is greater than the sum of individual dictats in isolation. This suggested that a degree of path dependency was likely to be evident.

When we interviewed senior police leaders it became abundantly clear that the need to respond operationally to new laws was both expensive in police resource terms; but also potentially debilitating in the respect of the maintenance of strategic direction, especially at the BCU (Basic Command Unit) level, where core policing roles are mostly performed. It also became clear during interviews that police leaders have had to respond to changes in the standards of the criminal justice process, such as meeting evidential quality burdens and creating and paying for the accompanying labour-intensive bureaucracies. In one example, it was recounted by a police commander that for one case, 60,000 documents had to be examined as part of disclosure procedures.

The creation of collaborative relationships has also been a keystone of the strategic 'stretch' which police services have undergone since Labour. In this regard, the Government have relentlessly pursued a range of policies which have obliged the police to become involved in partnerships with other public service providers, such as the NHS, social services and local authorities. (Newburn, 2002). In addition to a loss of traditional command and control capacity by police commanders, there are also the demands on senior officer time which such partnerships often demand.

Throughout the New Labour years, there have also been significant national requirements for police services to invest heavily in neighbourhood policing under the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) (Innes, 2005); and to provide a counter-terrorism role necessitated by post-2001 era (HM Government, 2010). Indeed, such vertical pressures upon police services through central Government have been compounded by horizontal pressures, such as health and safety/risk audit and management as part of police work. It was put to the research team by one police leader that the implementation of a recent Health and Safety Executive directive around first aid training would, if followed exactly, would tie up the equivalent of 200 police officer 'years' to meet training requirements. In this

regard, the rise of performance audit, the risk society and the need to respond to multiple audit agencies has become a costly commitment, which have further detracted from the focus on core policing strategic aims. (Loveday, 2000; 2006; Maguire and John, 2006)

This point in relation to the overarching issues of 'mission creep' was succinctly captured by one senior officer, describing the situation as 'unsustainable' – with the service close to 'breaking point' as it tried to support it's 'new mission which comprises extremely complex 21st century problems'. Contextualising this point, it must be noted that the last fundamental review of policing took place in the early 1960s as a response to the acknowledgement that the United Kingdom was no longer a borough, or even a city-based society. Indeed, significant social change from the 1960s onwards, such as 'the car and the M1' (the United Kingdom's first motorway) changed the capabilities criminals and how they operated (Garland, 2001). By the 2000s, crime has become a *de facto* global activity. Although when looked at objectively, in spite of such social changes, the police in the United Kingdom are still based upon a structure designed to tackle criminality on a county level. Thus, such evidence raises fundamental questions around structure of the police in the U.K to meet the complex demands of the twenty-first century – to which a favoured solution offered to the research team was a review policing and rebuild the structure of policing around larger service units.

However, having explored some the contextual issues around police and 'mission creep' in the U.K, it is the intention of the paper to now examine a case study of the practical impacts of such Governmental and structural constraints upon the police mission.

Method

The data referred to in this study has been derived from annual reports presented by one large English police service ('Blueshire') between 1997 and 2009. The information extracted from these documents has been supplemented by interviews conducted with senior police leaders in two English police services. Annual reports represent the best published source for identifying strategic actions completed by police services over an extended period of time. While they are not complete records in the sense that they document every single action taken by a police service during the course of a year, it is reasonable to regard them as a basic record of the strategic course taken over time. Interviews with a small group of senior police leaders were conducted during July and August 2010. The researchers organised interviews

around the principle of conducting a 'grand tour' of the subject matter, whereby subjects are guided towards a small number of subject destinations, but are encouraged to range freely across related issues in their responses to questions (Undheim, 2003).

Path dependency and strategic discretion in the direction of police service

The theory of path dependency plays a significant influence on institutionalist analysis in both economics and political science and has previously been applied to the case of strategic control over policing in the UK. (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009) Path dependency theory emphasises that institutional history matters in understanding how new problems are encountered and why strategic possibilities are identified, missed, rejected or adopted (Pierson, 2004). The theoretical terms used in path dependency analysis are relatively straightforward and readily adaptable to the problem of strategic control over policing. Path dependency refers to the influence that events happening at a certain point in time have on subsequent events. For example police services in the UK invested heavily in both capital and in the development of operational methods during the establishment of motorised patrols beginning in the mid 1950s. Up until then, a model of policing which relied on foot patrols and officers on bicycles had endured for over a century (Emsley, 2009).

The adoption of the patrol car thus represents a *punctuation* in the policy history of policing. To a certain extent the punctuation had been forced on the police through the increasing realisation that the motor car provided the criminal with greatly enhanced mobility, creating a new class of problem. On the other hand, the motorised patrol would impact heavily on the way in which pre-existing policing challenges were dealt with. The assumption that police officers work in patrol or response cars would quickly become dominant. Alternatives were difficult to conceive of, let alone accept. It could be argued with some conviction that much of what passed for standard policing quickly became reliant on the practice of placing police officers in motorised vehicles. With the establishment of a motor car based patrol and response practices an option-limiting *path dependency* was created. Either *new* or old policy issues re-emerging in a *cycle* would be dealt with in terms which were to be found along the path. Unless police services decided to break away from the path, they would continue to react to both existing and new criminal activity through a strategic action model which placed the patrol car in a prominent position. The practice of police officers patrolling and responding to calls therefore became a *self-reinforcing* process.

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It became difficult to discuss policing in terms which did not include the patrol car as a key resource. The use of patrol cars produced *positive feedback*, in the sense of delivering results which were calculated around a range of post-patrol car policing concepts, such as speed of response and miles patrolled.

On a more general level, positive feedback was provided by evidence to suggest the patrol and response car based police services could match the newly mobile criminal and bring them to justice. A strategic developmental path had been set down which police services would find it difficult to ignore when, for example, the political call to adopt community policing strategies became prominent. 'We will put bobbies on the beat', meaning police officers will adopt foot patrol around the streets, is an extremely popular political offering to the UK electorate. The delivery of pedestrianised policing is not an easy task. 'Traditional' policing has taken place in motor cars for 50 years and deviating from the path is difficult. Police leaders would find it difficult to guarantee standards if significant percentages of patrols and response units were removed from the motor car.

Analysis

The study identified 56 'strategic actions', which were defined as the conscious implementation of discretionary initiatives designed to deliver stated goals. (Table 1.) Of these 'strategic actions', 32 were responses to central government policy, while the remaining 24 were local in origin. Only seven of the strategic actions could be deemed short term, in the sense that the initiatives were formulated with a pre-determined timescale in mind and an exit point identified. For example the 2003 Annual Report of Blueshire makes reference to its response to the central government promoted *Street Crime Initiative,* which was formulated as short-term strategic response on the basis that a goal could be attained within a specified timescale and resources then moved elsewhere. Most of the strategic actions identified clearly involved a medium or long-term commitment of resources. For example the allocation of officers in 2001 to meet the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), which aimed to improve the efficiency of the criminal justice system, is a medium or long term commitment depending on the timing of further reform.

Table 1 Strategic actions taken by Blueshire 1997-2009.

	No.	Short	Med/ Long	New	Cycle	Path	Punc.	Cap.	Man.	Lead	Local	Centr.
1998	7	1	6	3	4	4	3	1	7	7	4	3
1999	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
2000	4	0	4	1	2	4	0	0	4	4	0	4
2001	7	2	5	4	2	3	2	3	7	7	1	4
2002	2	0	2	0	2	2	0	1	2	2	1	1
2003	4	1	3	1	3	3	1	1	4	4	0	5
2004	3	0	3	1	3	2	2	0	3	3	1	1
2005	10	0	10	2	8	8	2	2	10	10	7	3
2006	10	2	8	0	10	10	0	0	10	10	3	7
2007	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
2008	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	2
2009	6	1	5	1	6	6	0	0	6	6	5	1
Totals	56	7	49	16	40	44	12	10	56	56	24	32

Interviews confirmed the perceived timescale of investment made in this particular area. The study in identified 49 medium or long term strategic actions, which in effect tied up resources for extended periods of time, thus eliminating a certain amount of discretion on the part of Blueshire to respond to alternative (or necessary local) strategic goals. The nature of the investment made in relation to strategic actions is itself of some significance. None of the 56 involved solely capital investment, which is predictable in an organization which is delivering a principally people-based service, typically amounting to around 85% of expenditure. Virtually all the strategic initiatives involved both leadership and manpower, either in the form of police officers or civilians. Given that many of the strategic actions require staff to be trained or specialist recruitment, with nearly all dependent on a certain level of experience, it may be argued that resources are not readily 'convertible' for use in alternative tasks beyond the immediate remit of the initiative. For instance, specialist forensic

staff recruited to meet new standards in the presentation of evidence cannot be readily redeployed with any degree of immediate equivalent effectiveness in, for example, traffic policing. Similarly the experience built up by staff working on a business crime initiative will represent a specific range of skills predisposed to working with, and involving the commercial community.

Only 16 of the 56 initiatives were classified as strategic actions which related to new issues. An example would be the response made in the form of establishing an Abusive Images Unit to combat child pornography, as a crime facilitated by new technology. Another example of a new issue prompting strategic action would be the more explicit recognition of hate crimes as a separate category of offence, reinforced by various legislation passed since 1998. In response, Blueshire established 160 Hate Crime Reporting Centres in the BCU to enable the public to report crimes to agencies other than the police. The vast majority of strategic actions were in fact responses to issues which were coming around on a policy cycle. By this, it is meant that Blueshire would make a strategic response to an issue or problem which had been around for some period of time.

Using another example, community policing has become an established issue in policy making terms since around the 1970s in the United Kingdom (Reiner, 2000). Community policing provides a classic example of how problems are not resolved and policies are redesigned, repackaged or just re-launched time and again. Consequently Blueshire was required by central government to establish Neighbourhood Policing Teams in 2005, which represented a redesigned strategic action made to offer better community policing. Also in 2005, Blueshire established the Drug Intervention Programme to help break the link between drugs and crime by offering help to drug using offenders. This was a direct replacement for the Criminal Justice Intervention Programme which was the immediate predecessor in an enduring policy cycle. A third example is a road safety partnership arrangement, entered into by Blueshire with several local authorities including the Highways Agency (central government) and local National Health Service bodies. Traffic problems do not really go away and provide endless cycles of public policy.

When examined in more detail, 44 of the strategic actions were classified as path dependent, with only 12 punctuations identified. Examples of path dependent strategic actions include a partnership initiative between Blueshire and the district general hospital, involving police officers being in attendance at certain times with a view to reducing violent crime in the hospital. This was categorised as path guided, since it was the latest action in a long series dealing with broadly the same issue. To make the categorisation clearer, had the

strategic action consisted of a Blueshire decision to fund the hire of private security guards then this could have counted as a departure from the path and been classified as a punctuation. Another example of a path guided action is Blueshires response to a central government initiative 'Safer Streets', the funding of which allowed the police to employ a range of existing tactics to deal with different types of robbery. An example of punctuation was Blueshire's creation of an Economic Crime Unit which was tasked with the going through the finances of convicted criminals with a 'fine toothed comb' alongside criminal justice partner organizations. This was an action which took the criminal investigation strategy in a new direction and was facilitated by the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Another example of punctuation was the creation of Family Liaison Officer posts in 2000-1, to support bereaved families in the course of murder investigations. This followed a national inquiry into the murder of a black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent identification of shortcomings in the way the police liaised and supported families of victims. (Macpherson, 1999).

In the absence of data describing the nature of strategic action in other public services it is not possible to conclude that the police are unusually path dependent in their approach to problems. Of some note however, was the correspondence between punctuations and issues which we classified as 'new'. Out of the 12 identified punctuations 11 related to new issues. The only example of punctuation in strategy in response to a cyclical issue was a strategic action of Blueshire, which supported witnesses through a partnership with the Local Criminal Justice Board. It was felt that this was a new strategic direction to an old problem related to keeping witnesses under some degree of protection from intimidation.

Another similarly striking finding related to the nature of strategic actions. Out of the 56 recorded, at least 22 were dependent on partnerships with other public or private bodies. A further ten were firmly categorised as involving a response that was aligned with community policing practices. Some of these had a degree of implied partnership work involved. When we examined the goals associated with the 56 strategic actions, it was found that only seven were directly related to the core policing roles of patrol/response, criminal investigation and traffic issues discussed above. Two strategic actions could be deemed to boost patrol/response capacities; three were aimed at improving criminal investigation processes and one related to traffic.

Another similarly striking finding related to the nature of strategic actions. Out of the 56 recorded, at least 22 were dependent on partnerships with other public or private bodies. A further ten were firmly categorised as involving a response that was aligned with community

policing practices. Some of these had a degree of implied partnership work involved. The researchers were given access to Blueshires list of partnership based commitments, which currently add up to over 230. The list of senior officers involved in partnership meetings was extensive. Interviews indicated that a significant back office capability had to be employed in servicing partnerships. Partnership responses had been set up in relation to a huge range of problems. For example Blueshire are partners with the UK Border Agency, District Authorities and police services from two neighbouring counties, housing providers and asylum groups. There are also a number of partnerships operating in the Youth Justice Field, where Blueshire will work with the local Council, an education NGO and the Council for Voluntary Services. Following recent incidents of child abuse, a *Safeguarding Children in Faith Setting* partnership has been created. Partnerships were frequently created to pursue such strategic actions, which do not correspond with traditional policing roles in the United Kingdom and often implied a diversionary or crime prevention role.

Conclusions

Our analysis recorded much evidence of path dependency and identifies this a major source of mission creep. The reasons for this circumstance is fairly clear. At a cursory level, it is clear that the police service along with their policing activities, are governed by a complicating array of legislative and policy initiatives which have been imposed by central government. Evidence would suggest that from partnerships through to performance audit, there has been a significant 'widening' of the police mission in terms of what is expected from a central Government perspective. The circumstances of centralised regulation, audit and management may at the operational level have simultaneously 'blinkered' the focus of police command teams, forcing them to concentrate upon specific (often politically nuanced) 'parts' of the police mission at the expense of what works at the local level. Or as stated by one interviewee, the police have had their 'wings clipped' in regard to strategic flexibility and manoeuvrability.

It is also interesting to observe that there would appear to be an element of 'policy leak' with regard to central Government dictats, and their translation into a more narrow definition of police work on the ground (Crawford, 2003). With layers of bureaucracy, oversight and audit, much of police's time and effort is spent on conforming to the apparatus set up around individual policies, rather being allowed to interpret and deliver according to

local context and capacities. Transaction costs seemed excessive when we examined documentary evidence given to us by Blueshire.

Finally, the evidence would suggest that a large measure of path dependency 'mission creep' is derived from partnership/collaborative work with statutory and other agencies. It was observed from the interviews that the expected levels of collaborative police working had gone 'out of control', with the regulation of collaboration causing police to spend much of their time 'servicing' the partnerships without deriving any real value in the first instance.

The police service in the United Kingdom is undoubtedly path dependent and in this new era of spending cuts, it is clear that commanders can no longer continue to juggle three agendas – those of local demands, national priorities *and* the politics of crime control (Hughes, 2007). Thus, if police services are to succeed within an ever more complex policing environment, they must be given more maneuverability and autonomy in order to temper the current strategic constraints. Path dependent responses to problems will be self-reinforcing and in many cases will provide a degree of security to those involved, given the justification that tends to be associated with following historical precedent. Breaking from dependency will require a high level of political therapy and support.

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