

Reflections on Police Services Leadership

In Conversation with Lord Dear



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The late Sir Robin Day described Lord Geoffrey Dear as “one of the best known and most respected police officers of his generation”.

After starting his police service career, Lord Dear served in Cambridgeshire, and was Assistant Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, then Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and Chief Constable of West Midlands. He went on to be an HM Inspector of Constabulary, where he was responsible for twelve Police Forces, and nationally for the police interface with the Criminal Justice System, drugs, crime prevention and detection; crime squads and criminal intelligence. He led and worked on a number of high profile investigations and reviews, including the Brixton Riots; the shooting of Stephen Waldorf; and the Hillsborough Stadium disaster. He was a member of the Glidewell Review of the Crown Prosecution Service (1997-98); advised the Auld Review of the Criminal Courts system (2000), and was a member of the Viridi Enquiry team (2000-01). He was a member of the Strategy group advising the newly formed Security Industry Authority.

Lord Dear holds the Queen’s Commendation for Bravery, and in 1989, was awarded the Queen’s Police Medal for Distinguished Service. He was Knighted in 1997, and created a Peer in 2006. He plays an active part in the work of the House of Lords from the Cross Benches, especially in the fields of home affairs, criminal justice and rural affairs. He is a Fellow of University College, London and an Honorary Bencher of Gray’s Inn.

“What are you most proud of from your career?”

Effecting change...and the belief that I left a variety of authorities in a better state than when I arrived. Change cannot be imposed, and as a leader it is about planting seeds and nurturing their growth. I also found that an important element in this was resourcing the organisation with the right people.

As Chief Constable for the West Midlands Police, I joined a Force which was the largest after the Metropolitan Police, but full of cobwebs, and starved of funds. Sorting that out needed the creation of a good team to tackle the issues, considerable leadership of change, and resilience. But by the time I left, the Force had developed a reputation for innovation and excellence.

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The challenges with HM Inspector of Constabulary were different, since there was not direct line responsibility for the Forces being inspected. Here, there was more reliance on logical persuasion to do the right things.

In all this, I saw that good leadership needs the opportunity to select and work with the right team to win hearts and minds with what we need to change. Even in a Police Force, you cannot simply impose change. Even so, in the public sector, the ability to select and retain the right people is probably more of a challenge than in the private sector.

What makes for a good leader in the police service? And to what extent do those qualities change with more senior rank, especially as the leadership role and proximity to officers changes so much?

Above all, a good leader requires absolute integrity - you need to have this, and you need to demonstrate it in your behaviours and actions.

As a senior leader, you need to win respect more than popularity – but with luck, if you establish the right environment to win respect, the popularity will follow in due course.

Leadership needs a clarity and consistency of message and the understanding that, over time, nothing else will do. To achieve this requires clear communication down the line. Just because a message is written and transmitted...and probably even heard...this does not mean that it is being accepted. Clear communication needs to be repeated, explained, and reinforced.

One way I used to check - particularly as I was in more senior roles - whether key messages were filtering down the line was a technique I learned from a senior colleague when I was a middle ranking officer, called 'ask the cleaner'. This was his metaphor for speaking informally to someone in the organisation – often very junior, and in obscure locations. He did this very regularly and it was an excellent method to show leadership at every level by listening to people. It gave an appreciation of staff and an understanding of their interpretation of the message - the detail, and how far this was being accepted.

I also championed the under-dog when it was appropriate to do so. Indeed, the essence of the role of the Police is to protect the minority from the majority, and vice versa. For example, whilst with HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, an officer was stabbed by a prostitute with a suspected HIV-contaminated syringe. Testing the officer for HIV would take three weeks by conventional arrangements, but he was due to be married before then – I instructed that a blood test be taken directly to London for accelerated blood tests, and he was given the all-clear within days not weeks.

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As a leader, you must have vision about the future and how to achieve that future – you need to be able to communicate and energise the workforce about the future and the incremental steps to get there – it is not

enough to have the vision without clarity in how to get there.

What do you see as the key challenges facing the Police over the next decade?

For the next decade, the key challenge for the Police is to regain the trust and respect of the public and the community.

Even before the public sector cuts, there were too many occasions in which the public became disappointed and distrustful of Police actions. We can argue that the UK Police are fewer in number than those in Europe and the USA – but if the bond of trust between the Police and the public is broken – and I think there is evidence that it has been in many cases – it will take a long time for it to be recovered. And how and why has that bond been damaged? In part, I believe

that over several years, the focus on leadership has been replaced by a focus on management. Furthermore, the Police have failed to attract and retain top quality people and therefore have lost the critical mass of good leaders.

What was your experience of Police Training Following the Scarman Report on the Brixton Riots in 1981?

My job was to refresh Police training in the Metropolitan Police. The Brixton Riots were the final broken straw in the mistakes which had been made in Police training. There had been too much emphasis on a detailed training in the law for Police officers – often too detailed for what they would need in their day to day work. That training had been at the expense of the need to improve inter-personal skills and community relationships in individual officers. So training was totally reorganised, and increased from ten weeks to six months. What we did at the Met was then adopted as a national template for all Police training.

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The benefits of these changes were actually noticed quite quickly – alongside improvements in recruitment procedures and quality of recruits, (including the Edmund Davies Report on fair reward for Police).

In November, Police Crime and Commissioner Authority elections will be held. Are the Police ready for this? And is the public?

As we consider the future role of Police and Crime Commissioners, it is worthwhile to note how UK Police have been monitored by the community. Since 1856, Police organisations across the country have always had a watch committee or standing committee. This was reviewed by the 1960 Royal Commission on the Police under the chairmanship of Henry Willink to "review the constitutional position of the Police throughout Great Britain".

So following the subsequent 1964 Police Act, Police Authorities were introduced: their role has been similar to that of a Board of Governors – setting strategy, but without operational responsibility for the Police, which has been the role of the Chief Constable.

When the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) are appointed they will have a similar role – to prepare a strategy in consultation with the Chief Constable, but for the Chief Constable then to implement it. At present, the Chief Constable has the last word on policy; in the future the last word will be with the PCC.

Will reliance on an elected Police Crime and Commissioner be more effective than a rather amorphous Police Authority? It is too early to judge and too early to criticise. Certainly, personality will be important, and the working relationship will depend on 'creative tension' between the Commissioner and the Chief Constable. Both the public and the Police will need to work together to make it work.

But is not one of the concerns – reflected in the cases of chief constables' resignation and termination of employment – that there will be too much power in the Commissioner over the Chief Constable?

That fear needs to be put into context. At present, the Home Secretary has to endorse the Police Authority decision to dismiss a Chief Constable. In the future, the Home Secretary will play no part, but the PCC decision will need to be endorsed by a two-thirds majority of the Police and Crime Panel.

Is there an economic case to merge more police forces?

Loyalty – ‘cap badge loyalty’ – is still very important in the Police, just as it is with army regiments. There have already been a number of Police authority mergers, and if there is a genuine wish to merge, this should be allowed to continue. However, forced mergers – especially the takeover of small forces by much bigger forces – should be avoided if we are not to lose the leadership and community benefits of cap badge loyalty. However, where forces do remain independent, they should be required to bear the costs of their own HQ functions, that otherwise would have been absorbed in a new joint HQ.

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It is a different matter with non-uniformed services for the Police. Here, I believe there is a much stronger case for common services across Police forces in areas such as IT, training, procurement, cross border crime squads, and a stronger culture of service collaboration.

During your career, you were responsible for international police liaison. Are there particular lessons we may learn from overseas police forces?

Yes, there are certainly differences in policing internationally with some shared experience of UK and Commonwealth policing, and differences with our European neighbours, especially in Napoleonic Code Countries.

For example, in France the Gendarmerie effectively are there to enforce the will of the state, whereas the tradition in the UK is for the Police to be there for and with the community – and that ethos goes back to the origins of policing under Robert Peel.

Internationally, there are certainly differences in the numbers of uniformed Police, with the UK having much lower numbers per thousand populations than the USA and in Western Europe.

There are also differences in how resources are used – especially the use of IT to support policing in countries such as Australia.

In Germany, I have also been impressed by how the careers of community Police are managed. There, once an officer is established in a community, the career structure allows for career and grade progression within the current role – so an officer does not need to disrupt community relations by leaving for promotion elsewhere. As a result, there is an opportunity for deeper Police/Community relationships.

How difficult is it to change culture in the Police, especially if/when things go wrong

If the Leadership team is right, then I believe that it is possible to change cultures quite quickly. But changing officers’ habits can be much more challenging. The post-Scarman training I mentioned illustrates this: our aim was to change the way officers interacted with members of the public. The first 30 seconds of a Police interaction with a member of the community are so important. This is not just about Scarman, but again goes back to the underlying ethos of British policing as envisioned by Robert Peel.

Lincolnshire Police are reported to be looking to outsource custodial services...how far can privatisation of police services really go, before losing the essential quality of British Policing?

Further privatisation is inevitable. However, it is crucially important that Police/Community interface remains with uniformed officers. Behind that, the case for privatisation of services – for

example forensic sciences, and back office support functions - can be developed, with benefits for both the Police and Community.

Was the Winsor enquiry over-due or over-cooked?

There have been two Winsor Reports – the first on Police pay and conditions; the second on more skilled and effective workforce for the next 30 years. Both reports were long over-due. But they were certainly not over-cooked. Indeed, my view is that Winsor provided a deeper understanding and appreciation of the issues than would have been possible for many Chief Constables to achieve – so I very much welcome the Winsor Reports and recommendations. We need to break what is almost a siege mentality within the Police, and Winsor raises important considerations and recommendations for the future.

Tom Winsor has also now been appointed as Chief Inspector of Constabulary – the first non Police officer in that role in 156 years, and I welcome that appointment. But I do not believe that we would always want, nor feel we should need to have, an appointee to that role from outside the Police.

To what extent do the recommendations of the Winsor enquiry – which some may see as changing the social contract with the police - justify looking again at key public services' rights to take industrial action? Are there sufficient safeguards in place to protect their interests in the meantime?

In my view, law and law enforcement are at the heart of a civil society. Therefore, Police industrial action would be a complete anathema to that fundamental principle. I have already discussed the damage to the social contract between the Police and the public. Similarly, if the Police are not to have the right of industrial action – because of their fundamental contribution to civil society – there must be a social contract for the Police and fair terms and conditions of employment. This is a two way balance which must be maintained for fairness and justice for the Police, and also for the benefit of wider society. ”