

AN IDENTITY CRISIS FOR THE AFP?

By Dr. Jim L. Munro.*

DYNAMIC and diverse are the two words best describing Australian policing. Dynamic because of the rapid changes taking place in society and in policing; diverse because of the extraordinarily different demands placed on the police due to geography and a multi-cultural population.

It is to the credit of Australian police — and really to the Australian people — that law enforcement and order maintenance have been so successful in such a challenging environment.

As the first Visiting Fellow of the National Police Research Unit, I had the opportunity to drive to every State except Western Australia (some 40,000km in 12 months plus several trips by air to the Eastern States), and to observe and ask questions of the police in a variety of settings. The notes that follow might or might not stand the test of careful research; but they are the honest impressions of a person who has been in and around police organisations for some 20 years, including one prior year in Australia.

Let me start with some of the broad, underlying issues and then I shall mention some operational concerns.

Fundamental to any understanding of Australian policing is the federal character of all governmental relationships. People who have not lived and worked in a federal system fail to understand that the essence of Commonwealth-State relations is co-operation, not the coercion that is the hallmark of relations between the central government and local governments in an unitary system such as in the UK and France.

An important strength of Australian policing is its diversity; the ability of individual forces to respond to local cultural, political and criminological conditions.

Of course, it is important that the various forces co-operate with one another and that parochial interests are not allowed to sabotage multi-State investigations, but in recent years it is obvious that a new and more co-operative mode of behaviour has replaced much of the competitive self-protecting behaviours of the past. And let us not forget, out of a reasonable amount of competitiveness comes the pride in organisation and in self that makes for excellence in operations.

Closely related to federalism is the relationship between police and politician. With only a few exceptions, Australian police, while being accountable to and receiving policy direction from their Police Ministers, enjoy a degree of independence from direct political intervention that US Forces can only dream about.

Although the politician-police relationship in Australia is frequently a fairly tense one (and it should be — that is the nature of the democratic beast!) it seems to me that most Commissioners and their Ministers work out reasonable accommodations that serve the public interest well.



• Professor Munro.

If organised crime makes the impact on Australian government that has been predicted by some observers, it will be interesting to see if the rather ideal police-politician relations currently existing can be maintained.

A third major concern that shapes policing in Australia is the urban-rural split. People from Canada and the US tend to think of Australia as a vast rural landscape punctuated with a handful of rustic small cities with the inhabitants sharing main streets with kangaroos and koalas.

What they never know, and what even some Australians forget, is that this is the most urbanised country in the world.

The practical effect this has on policing is to virtually create two police forces in every State; an urban one and a rural one. While this tendency is resisted by most of the Commissioners, logistics makes it almost inevitable.

This particularly becomes a problem as forces begin to demand improved training and tertiary qualifications of their personnel. The people stationed in the country stations may well be at a substantial career disadvantage when compared to their urban counterparts.

This problem is being addressed in a few forces, but it is likely to become more, not less, of a problem in the future.

The "State-based" nature of Australian police forces is a tremendous asset to the nation; it would be unfortunate if crime pressures in the urban areas and demands for tertiary qualifications for police undermined this system of organisation.

One of the great strengths of Australian policing is the lack of systematic corruption in the forces. Although grapevine sources of information are not necessarily accurate and the degree of trust can be questioned, I certainly never have heard of instances of systematic corruption. Corrupt individuals, even corrupt commands, but never the kind of top to bottom "it's the way the game is played" corruption that one finds in the US. Fortunately, this kind of corruption, such a standard feature of US policing

in the 1920s and 30s, seems to be limited to a handful of smaller departments today.

I have read summaries of citizen complaints and even they seem to be dominated by incivility problems, rather than serious charges of misconduct.

The escalation of the illicit drug problem will put strains on the police record of honesty; fortunately State-based police organisations are better able than small, local forces to resist the kind of community political pressure that causes the systematic corruption of the police.

Another observation is the generally high level of police training that one finds in Australia compared with the US. The basic reason is that the vast majority of the 40,000-plus police jurisdictions in the US are so small that they cannot support a meaningful training function. It should be noted that most US States have tried to remedy this problem by establishing regional training centres for police and State-wide standards which local police must meet.

In particular, entry-level training, operations training and training through the rank of inspector in Australia seems to be well planned and, in so far as I had personal experience, well executed.

The gaps in training begin to show up at the executive levels. There should be a training opportunity, at least once a year, for senior ranks, including the Commissioner and his management team. Of course, if the Australian Police College, currently at Manly, continues its development and receives the support it deserves, this deficiency in executive training will be remedied.

On the debit side of the ledger are several items that deserve mention. The most important of these is the under-investment in police research and development, including management areas.

Obviously the creation of the National Police Research Unit is a very large step in the right direction, but it is a very small agency, charged with researching only issues of prime and immediate national concern. It does not have the staff, nor the mandate, to do research and development work which has specific operational consequences for a specific force.

Good police management needs a locally developed information and ideas base which can be generated only through force-specific research and development. NPRU exists to assist local forces, but it cannot take the place of a local commitment to research and development.

Closely related to this is what I see as an over reliance on the UK and US police experience. A round-the-world air ticket has too often been a substitute for local effort. Certainly it is cheaper!

I think that professional visits to the forces of other countries are excellent, but they should not take the place of local investigation and creative invention.

Australia is most emphatically NOT the UK or the US. To uncritically use techniques from those countries is to court disaster.

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I would suggest that Australians need to develop their own sense of excellence which would allow the forces to use good ideas wherever they may be found, but that Australians have a responsibility to discover Australian solutions to Australian problems.

A note on the AFP: This force presents a more complex managerial challenge than its size alone would indicate.

The reason is fairly apparent; it is a force with an identity crisis. Is the AFP a small city police force? Is it a national investigatory agency? Is it Australia's link to the international police world?

The answer is yes to all of these, plus a number of other substantial functions.

The problem is not one of too many functions, but rather the difficulty of developing a management and career structure that ranges from international duty assignments to traffic enforcement.

This management problem is compounded by the Australian tendency (really a universal political one) towards administrative adhocism; the tendency to create totally new organisations for each additional function, rather than facing up to the task of realigning organisational functions and allocating resources in the most cost-effective manner possible.

A case in point is the National Crimes Authority. While it makes good sense to have organisations that provide essentially staff service functions to the various forces controlled jointly and funded jointly by State and Commonwealth governments (such as the NPRU, BCI and Australian Police College) police operational functions (the NCA) need the supervision and administrative infra-structure that comes with assignment to a specific force.

Since the AFP already has a national and international network of stations it would have made good management sense (I am indulging myself in the luxury of not addressing the political questions) to have realigned the functions of the AFP to have included the NCA mandate.

This might well have meant contracting out the local policing of the ACT to New South Wales or Victoria, since the ACT by itself is too small to support a viable high standards force.

The future of the AFP is bright, but it will be brighter still when politicians use cost-effectiveness along with political considerations in their decision making.

In conclusion, no organisation is perfect and that is certainly true of police organisations which are frequently buffeted about by forces not of their making. However, the Australian public is very well served by its police.

Assuming that adequate levels of resources can be maintained, the Australian forces should be able to respond to the increasingly difficult crime environment of the next decade.

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