

# Review

***Cops and Crooks: Hilarious Tales from the Beat* by Tim Priest**  
New Holland Press, 2012, 207 pp (ISBN: 9781742573328)

***Fair Cop* by Christine Nixon (with Jo Chandler)**  
Victory Books, 2011, 400 pp (ISBN 9780522862058)

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The cover of Tim Priest's book tells us that he is a 'widely admired and respected former detective' who is 'regarded as one of the finest detectives of his generation'. Perhaps this estimation comes from too much time spent looking in the mirror. As the subtitle suggests, the book is a collection of war stories and accounts of high- (and low-) jinks. For the student of police culture, the book provides some snapshots of an old-school, male police subculture, which features lots of drinking, swearing, running-in of probationary constables, scorn of academic cops from headquarters, not much police work, and a surprising amount of cross-dressing. Did these 'hilarious tales' make me laugh? I almost cried.

Christine Nixon is the antithesis of Tim Priest: smart, educated, progressive, managerial and, certainly not least, female. Nixon was named as one of those women who, according to Priest's political patron Alan Jones, are 'wrecking the joint'. As I write this review, Australia is confronting evidence of a vicious strain of sexism which expresses itself in crudely disrespectful antagonism towards Julia Gillard. Nixon's book is the story of a brave woman who had to deal with similar opposition throughout her professional life. Yet she became a leader of police organisations which, when she first enlisted, did not even allow women to undertake general duties policing.

The chapters dealing with Nixon's time in NSW Police give a significant, if constrained, account of crucial years in that organisation. They show that, in an important sense, the Wood Royal Commission of 1994–97 signified the end, rather than the beginning, of a period of reform. Nixon tells us how the reform agenda of the Wran Labor Government set the context for Commissioner John Avery's attempts to change NSW Police. She shows how 'community policing' in that period meant 'the police should involve the community in their efforts to prevent and control crime and to solve social problems' (p 67) and how that idea of community relied on real experience of being brought up in a civil society in which 'the notion of community extended beyond the bounds of family. There was a strong sense of an obligation to take care of the downtrodden and the damaged — an acceptance that this was in all our interests' (pp 10–11). The Wood Royal Commission endorsed this broader vision of the police role. However, by the late 1990s, police generally had shifted rapidly towards presenting themselves as crime fighters. In New South Wales, this radical restriction of the Royal Commission's reform agenda was effected by Peter Ryan (Dixon 2001). Given Ryan's poor treatment of Nixon (and of her reforming ally, Jeff Jarrett), she is

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politely limited in her assessment of Ryan, not going far beyond endorsing her husband's assessment of Ryan's debut: 'They've brought themselves problems there' (p 99. For a less polite assessment, see my review of Ryan's biography: Dixon 2003).

Nixon is defensive about the corruption the Wood Royal Commission showed was endemic in the organisation of which she was a leader. Her account shows how segmented police organisations can be. From her early days in the notorious Darlinghurst station, Nixon was excluded from that world. It was a police service in which black knights and white knights co-existed; how little the latter knew (or wanted to know) about the former is surprising. She seems to miss the irony of her response to Victorian detectives who claimed innocence: 'I replied by quoting that old Wood Royal Commission line: "If you didn't know, you should have"' (p 151). Nixon ends this section by re-affirming her rejection of the Royal Commission's finding: 'I am still of the view that there was not systemic corruption, which by definition infects from the top down. That was not the case' (p 96). This is a very limited definition of systemic corruption — the fact that it was widespread in structures and practices is the real issue. She also implicitly defines corruption narrowly: nothing is said about the 'process corruption' that Wood found to be pervasive.

The somewhat pathetic excesses of Chuck Fowler, Trevor Haken et al are made to look rather trivial by what Nixon had to face when she was appointed Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police. Police involved in drug supply and the world of underworld murders set challenges of a new order. So did bitter battles with the Police Association and betrayal by senior colleagues. None of this was really about the usual fare of police corruption — money, sex, drugs, gambling — but, rather, about power: as Nixon says, 'It's all about power' (p 208). This is an aspect of police culture which academics focusing on operational policing have ignored. (Malcolm Young's *An Inside Job: Policing and Policing Culture in Britain* comes closest to tackling it.) There may be little which differentiates this aspect of police culture from that of some other corporate cultures (the media being an obvious example about which Nixon comments), but what *is* different is the power of those involved who have been entrusted with the state's authority and, therefore, the consequences for people who get in their way. The power struggle in Victoria Police had an unmistakably gendered character. It was Nixon the woman who most infuriated the men who had been passed over on her appointment or whose control she challenged. She faced an enormous task and made major advances in reforming the organisation, but, as subsequent events including the fate of her successor Simon Overland have shown, the old culture is far from dead.

Nixon had already announced her retirement when the disaster of Black Saturday struck Victoria. Her brief (entirely appropriate) absence from police headquarters that day provided an opportunity for her enemies to exact revenge. The tenor of the criticism she received over her whereabouts when the Victorian bushfire tragedy began can only be understood in this context. She was scapegoated in a process of character degradation in which the media and a subsequent Royal Commission shamefully took part. When blood was in the water, they seemed unable to restrain themselves. The whole episode is depressing evidence of the shallowness of Australian political life.

There is much for the student of policing in this book. (One quibble is her choice of title, which was used by Janet Chan for one of her major books about the culture of NSW Police.)

Above all, it advocates a vigorous approach to community policing. Far from being a 'soft' option, strong community contacts which let information flow to the police were responsible, according to Nixon, for avoiding a major terrorist attack. However, perhaps the book's greatest contribution is beyond policing. It makes a significant contribution to the

literature on leadership, specifically on the barriers to and the strengths of women as leaders. Nixon never pretends to be 'one of the boys'. She argues for a vigorous, active style of women's leadership; it's no wonder that the dinosaurs whom she challenged found her such a threat. Her aim was to write a book which 'might encourage other people, particularly younger people and women, to consider leadership as a vocation, to be a bit brave about fighting for the kind of society they believed in' (p 292). Despite the personal cost of her stand, Christine Nixon achieves her aim laudably.

## References

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