Policing in a time of contraction and constraint: Re-imagining the role and function of contemporary policing

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Introduction
This special issue of *Criminology and Criminal Justice* takes as its starting point the nature and scale of the fiscal challenge facing state-funded police forces in Britain following the financial crisis. Public sector cuts need little introduction and whether fiscal constraint and contraction are the appropriate remedies to the financial crisis is open to debate (e.g. Davidson, 2009; Skidelsky and Wigstrom, 2010; Krugman, 2012). However, the immediate implications are clear enough and for the police service in England and Wales this has meant a 20 percent reduction in funding by 2014/2015 (HM Treasury, 2010). This has led to widespread public and political debate regarding what the police service can realistically deliver at a time of austerity, the implications for ‘front line’ officers and ultimately for crime control (Millie and Bullock, 2012).

Within this context this special issue considers broader questions regarding the nature of the police task, how policing priorities are determined and the mechanisms through which policing is delivered in England and Wales. In so doing, changes in the governance of policing (especially attempts to foster ‘democratic’ control of police practice), the implications of the ‘Big Society’ project and issues of police legitimacy are considered from both historical and contemporary perspectives. This is especially in light of the first election of Police and Crime Commissioners in November 2012 – one of the most significant changes to the police service in modern times, but an election being investigated by the Electoral Commission following an historic low turnout of only 15 percent (Electoral Commission, 2012; Rogers and Burn-Murdoch, 2012).
The special issue draws together papers delivered at a seminar funded and hosted by the British Academy in September 2011 entitled: ‘Policing in a time of contraction and constraint: Re-imagining the role and function of contemporary policing.’ The seminar was attended by policing scholars, as well as representatives from the police, the Home Office, the National Policing Improvement Agency and other interested parties. During the seminar the implications of the contracting state, fiscal constraint and wider shifts within policing were debated. The special issue includes contributions from Karen Bullock (University of Surrey), Simon Holdaway (University of Sheffield), Mike Hough (Birkbeck, University of London), David Leeney (University of Cambridge), Andrew Millie (Edge Hill University) and Robert Reiner (London School of Economics).

**The nature of the police task**

The first theme addressed in this special edition concerns the nature of the contemporary police task. This is directly addressed in articles by Andrew Millie and Robert Reiner. As Reiner reminds us in his article, there is now a significant body of empirical work that demonstrates, contrary to common sense assumptions of the media and political commentators, that the police role is much more complex than seeking merely to control crime. Indeed, according to Waddington (1993: 5), ‘it is a ‘cliché of police research that only a small proportion of public demands on the police are directly and unambiguously concerned with crime.’ In direct contrast to the notion of the police officer as crime fighter, commentators have characterised the police role as ‘peace officer’ (Banton, 1964), ‘secret social service’ (Punch, 1979) and ‘philosopher, guide and friend’ (Cumming et al., 1965). As Punch (1979: 107) notes:

> In effect, policemen have to act as untrained and temporary social workers, vets (with injured animals), mental welfare officers, marriage guidance counsellors, welfare officers, accommodation officers, child care officers, home-help to the infirm, and also as confident and counsellor to people alone and in need of guidance.

Empirical evidence has borne this out over time. In his paper Reiner draws attention to the schism between political (and public) understandings of the police role that tend to focus on crime control, and empirical examinations which reveal their wider remit. He argues that whilst the *raison d’etre* of the New Police was the prevention of crime, demands for police
services have not been mainly crime-related. For Reiner, ‘seeing crime as the essence of the police mission is to pursue a quixotic impossible dream.’ Promoting crime control as the primary task of the police puts at risk their wider order-maintenance role, and poses risks to the police themselves as there are limitations in the potential for reducing crime through policing.

In Millie’s article policing is conceptualised as being on a spectrum from ‘wide’ to ‘narrow’. Millie considers numerical and functional expansion of the state police in the UK and elsewhere, which was witnessed from the 1970s onward in the context of the criminalisation or ‘policification’ of a wide range of aspects of social policy with police officers taking on more of the roles traditionally provided by other social or welfare agencies (Crawford, 1997; Kemshall and Maguire, 2001). He argues that, as a result, policing has become too wide and he considers what functions should be at the heart of the police service and what potentially could be provided by others. In light of contraction and constraint, Millie asks if it is time to rethink the core role of the police service. He acknowledges that whilst the policing task is clearly best categorised as a combination of crime control, social service and order maintenance functions, if the net is cast too widely the police role is stretched to encompass activities that may be better provided by other statutory or non-statutory bodies. Though not to deny that there may be difficulties with other agencies stepping in, such reassessment of the core police role could provide an opportunity to decriminalise social policy and to govern through crime (cf. Simon, 2007) a little less.

Mike Hough, in his article, draws attention not only to the issue of what the police do but how they do it. His focus is the ever controversial topic of stop and search. The article considers the factors that have drawn police officers towards adversarial styles of policing. Drawing on empirical data he argues that the inherent risk of adversarial styles is that they may create a malign dynamic between the police and the public. An alternative, Hough suggests, can be found within procedural justice theories (e.g. Hough et al., 2010; Tyler, 2007) which stress that compliance and cooperation with the law is best achieved by treating citizens in ways that are recognised to be fair, respectful and legal. Such approaches, the article argues, privilege professional standards and the consolidation of institutional legitimacy over short-term goals of crime control. A sub-theme of Hough’s argument is that procedural justice may have much to gain in times of austerity not least because changing policing style does not necessarily incur significant costs.
Determining police priorities

The second theme pursued in this special edition concerns how policing priorities are determined. If there is a case for reimaging the roles and functions of the police service, then the question becomes who should decide what they are, and how? The notion of democratic policing is central to this volume. A concern within contemporary policing has been to facilitate ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ resolution to local crime (and other) problems (Millie and Bullock, 2012). Most clearly this is evident in the principles of new localism which stress the importance of processes of accountability. This goes beyond choosing elected representatives (as with the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners) to giving residents opportunities to be involved with service provision, to judge performance and engage in exchange with service providers (Stoker, 2004). Ideas of public involvement are hardly new (Kisby 2010; Smith 2010) and in Britain were present within New Labour discourse on Neighbourhood Policing – although perhaps somewhat masked by New Labour’s pursuit of a centralised agenda in other areas of police reform (McLaughlin 2005). However, at the time of writing these ideas are dominant within the coalition’s Big Society discourse which stresses that public servants should be held to account by service users rather than to bureaucrats in Whitehall. In his article Simon Holdaway notes that the Big Society is perhaps best understood as an assemblage of ideas. These ideas remain poorly articulated but link to a fundamental rebalancing of the power relationships between citizens and the state. Reiner, in his article, considers the issue of democratic police governance from a historical perspective. He demonstrates that since the early 1990s crime control, in its narrowest sense, has dominated political discourse. He argues that this is defended (at least in part) by politicians and the police themselves as democratically sanctioned because it is what the public wishes – demonstrated in opinion polls although not in actual calls for police service.

Indirect mechanisms of democracy

The election of Police and Crime Commissioners was part of the Conservative Party 2010 election manifesto (the Conservative Party, 2010) and the Coalition agreement (HM Government, 2010). As noted, the first cohort was elected following an historic low election turnout in November 2012. For the Conservative party – and the coalition – the hope was that these individuals would improve local accountability, transparency and render the service more responsive to local concerns:
Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) will reinvigorate those democratic principles, ensuring that the public have an elected representative with a duty to the citizen and the welfare of the communities they represent (Home Office, 2011).

As Muir and Loader (2011) point out, there has been a great deal of scepticism – from the Labour Party, Liberal Democrat peers, human rights organisations and serving and former senior officers – about the nature of these reforms. Bridges (2011: 35), for example, notes that:

The Coalition government’s police reforms are hardly a recipe for greater police accountability, but rather one for fragmenting accountability and shirking political accountability. It is also a very dangerous scenario for those who are likely to find themselves at the sharp end of policing, with little or no means of seeking redress.

As Bridges (2011) suggests, a principle concern has been that a populist agenda, focused on unpopular or marginalised communities, dominates. Millie and Bullock (2012) draw particular attention to young people who are disproportionately the targets of police attention and, by definition, excluded from democratic election processes. In addition, commentators have noted how elections do not, in and off themselves, equate to democracy. Perhaps the greatest risk, according to Sampson (2012: 11), is that the introduction of elections – ‘a tenuous and token populism ostensibly linking policing to the policed’ – create the illusion of democratic accountability.

This is a theme addressed by Reiner in his article which takes the election of Police and Crime Commissioners as a central concern. For Reiner the election of Police and Crime Commissioners represents a ‘populist’ model, but whether it represents a democratic one is open to debate. He draws attention to how the presumed focus of Police and Crime Commissioners is built into their official title – ‘Crime’. This, he suggests, raises questions given what we know about the actual focus of much police practice. He further problematizes the role of Police and Crime Commissioners not least on the basis that the construction of order is frequently contested – something that is ignored where the notion of democracy is pegged squarely to voting. Reiner draws attention to how the governance of policing, shaping the police role and function, is acutely problematic but that this is brushed over by the new
politics of law and order. He argues that the current reorganisation of the governance of policing is ‘misguided root and branch’ but that, as a fait accompli, we must now turn attention to how the reforms might shape effective and democratic policing.

The inherent risks of the populist agenda are taken up by Holdaway in his article. Holdaway draws attention to how the election of Police and Crime Commissioners – who now set budgets and priorities for local police forces – might have specific implications for race relations. He notes that in the drive to instil local democracy, central targets have been abandoned. This includes the targets for the recruitment of minority ethnic officers and the monitoring of stop and search. He suggests that it is quite possible that Police and Crime Commissioners will be mindful of such issues but it cannot be guaranteed and was certainly unlikely to be at the forefront of election campaigns.

Direct mechanisms of democracy

Contemporary governments have also sought to instil mechanisms of democracy through which citizens can hold officers directly to account. It is hoped that, through forging close relationships between the police service and communities and through consultation, police officers will come to ‘see like a citizen’ (Innes, 2010). The model of community policing – Neighbourhood Policing – introduced by New Labour and currently adopted across England and Wales is especially pertinent here. Neighbourhood Policing was premised on the ideal that accountability is delivered most effectively through responsive policing teams operating at the local level (Jones, 2008). This may occur organically through spending time in communities and coming to understand residents’ preferences, or inorganically through more formal mechanisms of consultation such as public meetings. Either way, the aim is that residents hold officers to account for dealing with problems that matter to them. New Labour hoped that the approach would force the police service to become, ‘more accountable to local democratic structures and to their local community’ rather than to bureaucrats in Whitehall (Home Office 2004: 11). The involvement of residents in policing decisions through public meetings and other consultation events fits neatly with the Big Society agenda and the continuation of the approach is proposed under coalition plans (Home Office, 2010). This kind of reform is not without precedent in police practice. Indeed there is a relatively long history of police-public consultation. However, developing mechanisms of police-community consultation is not without problems. It is difficult to persuade a cross section of the community to engage with the police service both in terms of setting the agenda for policing
and providing services, a point also dramatically realised with the low turnout for the November 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner elections. Further it has been argued that democratic structures may be dominated by the middle classes thus further embedding rather alleviating social inequality (Loader 2006).

The theme of direct democracy and its associated challenges is taken up in a number of articles within this special issue. Holdaway draws attention to, and problematizes, the ways that the police service has sought to establish the views of citizens over the years – these include the application of surveys, consultation, focus groups and so on. He suggests that the notion that the police can seek to ‘see like a citizen’ presents complex epistemological problems for social science. He also draws attention to the problems inherent in public consultation arrangements – especially low participation. He considers the issue from the point of view of race relations by drawing attention to how the attendance of minority ethnic groups at consultation events will be shaped by lower satisfaction and confidence in policing, areas of specific concern such as stop and search, and the wider issue of allegations of racism.

In their article Karen Bullock and David Leeney consider the issue of participation in Neighbourhood Policing consultation in detail. This article draws attention to some familiar themes: low and patchy public participation; conflict between resident and police priorities; and unenthusiastic ‘partnership’ involvement. They demonstrate that officers have sympathy with the aims of community policing but perhaps not with the formal arrangements through which Neighbourhood Policing is supposed to operate. Bullock and Leeney’s article considers how officers manage and manipulate aspects of the formal processes to make neighbourhood policing function in a context of limited agreement regarding priorities and limited resources. Ultimately, Bullock and Leeney argue for caution against unrealistic expectations of the role community policing can play in facilitating new forms of democratic practice. After all, as Manning (2010) points out, there is no evidence that the police can create and sustain a democratic state – it is a democratic state that produces sustains democratic policing.

**The mechanisms through which policing is delivered**
The third theme considers what or who fills any void left by the retrenchment of the state police. Whilst citizens have, for many years, played volunteer roles in policing, the notion has been ‘newly discovered’ (Ren et al., 2006: 465). From joining the ranks of the Special
Constabulary, to assisting at front counters, to providing support for Neighbourhood Watch, opportunities for volunteers are diffused throughout the modern police service. Through the notion of the ‘active citizen’ the Big Society puts strong emphasis on forms of volunteering and civic engagement. As Glasman (2010: 61) has put it: ‘In asserting the importance of active citizenship, and linking that to the achievement of local power and control, there is a genuine promise of democratic renewal and of some kind of active civic life’. That said, as Holdaway points out in his article, Big Society ideals have obviously been mooted within a context of significant reductions in public sector expenditure and the very idea of the active citizen has been seen by some to mask the state’s reduction of or withdrawal from central areas of public policy.

Several articles contained in this special issue consider whether volunteers and communities might fill the void left by the contraction of the state and the implication of these strategies of responsibilisation for both the police and the communities they service. At the macro level, Millie argues that whilst there might in certain circumstances be much to gain from a leaner and fitter police service, it may be too much to expect the voluntary sector and local communities to fill the gap completely when they face challenges of their own at a time of austerity. At the micro level, Bullock and Leeney explore the operationalization of policies to increase resident involvement in community-based crime control via arrangements for Neighbourhood Policing. They found that officers struggled to generate interest from residents and when they did that interest tended to be confined to the activities of established community groups. This, they argue, raises questions not only about whether residents are able or willing to step into any void but also about the distribution of resources where established voluntary activity is not present. Holdaway considers the issue of who volunteers – again through the lens of race relations. Our knowledge of the relationship between volunteering and ethnicity has increased in recent years (e.g. Rochester et al, 2010). Holdaway suggests that it might, for a number of reasons, be difficult to draw Black and other minority ethnic groups into volunteer work in the police context. However, his primary concern is more the implications of fiscal constraint for recruitment into constabularies, the associated ethnic mix of the police service and implications for race relations both within the police service and between the service and wider communities.

**Conclusion**
Within the context of populist politics that have persistently called for ‘more bobbies on the beat’ Chief Constables have, in recent years, had considerable success in gaining funding for ever more police officers (Millie and Bullock, 2012). However, the state police in Britain is facing a period of unprecedented cuts. In the context of calls to protect the ‘front line’ (officers who are visible on the street) decisions regarding where the axe will fall are difficult ones for chief officers and a major concern inherited by the Police and Crime Commissioners. The issue has also resulted in much political, media and public comment. However, we suggest that rather than seeing the cuts solely as a problem, they also provide the opportunity to (re)consider what policing should be about. Drawing on the themes present in this special edition we see the following as pertinent.

1. Whilst the tensions between ‘crime control’ and ‘due process’ models of policing have been long understood (Packer, 1968) we think that there are further risks within the context of austerity. Most clearly there would seem to be a risk that police services come under pressure to adopt a very narrow idea of policing, with the current Home Secretary Theresa May suggesting that officers focus on being ‘tough, no-nonsense crime-fighters’ (May, 2011).

2. We think that the retrenchment of funding of the state police might offer an opportunity to orient the focus of social policy away from crime control. As Millie argues (this volume), it may offer a welcome movement away from the processes of ‘policification’ that we have witnessed over recent years. That said, whether the ‘active citizen’, so present in the discourse of the Big Society, is able or willing to take up any slack remains to be seen.

3. There is a movement towards citizens playing a greater role in determining the nature of policing services, either directly or indirectly. As Reiner (this volume) argues, there can be little doubt that in a democracy policing functions and priorities should ultimately be determined by democratic processes rather than by expert, professional, or government sanction. It is certainly the case that mechanisms for involving citizens in police decision making have been evolving for some years and are today most evident in the Neighbourhood Policing project and election of Police and Crime Commissioners. Whilst these developments may offer opportunities to facilitate a greater degree of democratic control over police practice they are not without risks. One danger is people’s non-engagement in ‘democratic’ structures which only attract the ‘usual suspects’, those who already enjoy high levels of political capital (Bogdanor, 2009). Whilst accepting that
cultural, pragmatic and other reasons mean that the police may not always take public preferences on board, these processes must, at the very least, be inclusive of the views and experiences of all publics.

4. An important consideration for post-austerity policing will be ensuring fairness and respect for all. This includes not only incorporating wide ranging views and perspectives on police priorities but also considering the processes through which policing is conducted. As suggested by Hough (this volume), an emphasis on ‘procedural justice’ – ensuring that those who encounter the police feel their concerns are treated seriously and with respect and that all are treated equally – may offer a way forward. According to Hough, if officers can be persuaded of the value that compliance with the law may be facilitated through fair and respectful treatment, then procedural justice may well offer a possibility of achieving ‘more with less’ (Hough this volume). Whether doing so will be a priority for politicians, Chief Constables and the new Police and Crime Commissioners remains to be seen.

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**References**


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