



## A peek over the parapet (or the second envelope cometh)

It appears that there is serious Government consideration being given to the possibility that the 43 police constabularies be merged into 12 'super forces'. No doubt there will be a long round of argument about the merits of both schemes, and a lot of merit in both sides of the argument. No doubt, there will be many chief officers opposed to the idea, and some who will support it. The proposition that follows is that neither regionalised forces nor county based constabularies are a perfect solution, but that specifically the whole idea of a restructuring of the service is both poorly timed and an utter irrelevance to the needs of the service, if providing excellent policing services to the community is to be the objective of the exercise.

Moreover, if the restructuring proposal is subject to the same objectively measurable contributions and standards, in both output and outcomes, that are being quite rightly pursued by the service, the chances are that nobody will be willing to put their name to a forecast of the real achievements to be delivered. What is on the table is not a defence of the existing set up - it is the whole idea of reorganisation in itself that is misguided - in whatever direction. Expressed another way, the argument is not for 'no change'. On the contrary, as is indicated below, the need is very much for change as a way of life, targeting performance improvements, throughout the service. This is quite different from structural change, which has a very poor record of success, if success is to be measured by performance improvements.

First, let's see what is over the parapet. One of the abiding mysteries in this world is the failure of organisations to learn, both from their own experiences and from others. In this particular case, one place to go is the commercial world and the track record of mergers and acquisitions. The fact is that the vast majority fail - at the last recorded count, something in excess of 70% result in divestments within 2 years of the acquisition or merger. The generally accepted cause is the sheer difficulty of managing the new, enlarged business, with its conflicting cultures, processes and structures. Anyone like to suggest that the service has a track record in organisational management that is going to beat the commercial world at its own game? Consider the implications of this week's news that Siemens, a world renowned business, is shedding £6 billion worth of businesses it has acquired over the years, just to enable survival.

Closer to home, remember the various reorganisations of local services? County Councils, District Councils, Unitary Authorities, Regional Health Authorities and so on. Anyone care to suggest exactly how much benefit has accrued to the local taxpayer, in terms of improved services, outputs and outcomes? Which leads us to the next question - what exactly is the proposed restructuring supposed to achieve?

If it is about economies of scale and cost savings, the private sector has lessons for the public sector here as well. There is no case on record of any business achieving long term profitable growth through cost saving as the lone strategy. The reality is that, with the possible exception of manufacturing industries, economies of scale almost never actually appear. There are various reasons, some of which are reviewed below, but underlying them all is the phenomenon of drift. This is the tendency of large organisations to experience a gradual drift of resources from operational, service delivery functions to support functions - from earners to spenders. Let us assume that drift has already occurred in police forces, and that there is an excess resource consumption by back room functions, at the expense of delivery of operational services. Is there any evidence to suggest that large forces are better at controlling drift than smaller ones? Probably not.

Possibly the objective of the exercise is not cost saving alone. Perhaps the objective is to improve the cost effectiveness of the delivery of policing services. This produces an equation with two halves. The second is about the results being achieved by the resources that are being consumed, as well as reducing the cost of those resources. There are two different problems here. The first concerns the lack of evidence that any such transformation will occur. If cost per output performance indicators are to be used, what is the present position? Are we to believe, for example, that large forces cost less per primary detection than small ones? Or that costs per crime reduction point are lower? Who has the information, and who is willing to bet their career that large, 'super forces' will produce both improved levels of crime reduction and at a lower unit cost than hitherto?

It would certainly be unfair to use existing, large metropolitan forces as a yardstick in this case. They have their own special policing problems, particularly in London, but given the recently well publicised internal problems of all three, it would be a brave person indeed who would say that these are the model for the future.

Before returning to the performance issue - the output part of the equation - the cost element is worth revisiting. The probability is that much vaunted economies of scale will never materialise, in practice. Few commentators, it is to be hoped, would suggest that regionalisation would produce a need for fewer officers on the ground, in response teams, beat managers and crime investigation functions. So where to go for the savings - in the support functions, of course. Like personnel.

Whatever level of personnel work is needed now, in the forces which might be merged, will still be needed in the larger force. So no savings there. In the management structures, perhaps. Possibly, but larger departments will need larger management structures to manage them. A more likely scenario is about the merger process itself. Just think how busy personnel functions will be through the merger. All those officers to be reallocated, offices moved, procedures to be rationalised. All the policies that need merging and re-codifying. Sounds like there might actually be a demand for MORE personnel people to help the organisation through the merger process, not less. Once out the other side, drift takes over, and, hey presto, resource consumption has gone up not down.

Still, that can not be a universal truth, can it? Let's try I.T. Instead. Again, the level of I.T. work needed is unlikely to go down. Then think about all those incompatible systems running on different operating environments. Think about radio systems and command and control systems, with different equipment, frequencies, protocols and procedures. Sounds like another demand for more resources to cope with the

merger process, and all at a time when the same people are still handling the aftermath of the Euro and the Y2K problem. And then there is drift again, to solidify the temporary resources into permanent. With I.T. there is a special problem as well. There is already a shortage of trained people out there, witness the Government's own track record in training programmers to deal with the Y2K problem. Where will all the additional staff be found to handle the change over? At what premium salaries? And when did I.T. Functions ever deliver anything on time, within budget? Not a comment on police organisations, but reported fact is that only 15% of I.T. projects anywhere complete on time, and only 5% complete on time and on budget.

Try the same process of logic with finance and CJ functions, and much the same answer will result. In passing, please note that there is another inconsistency in the argument for larger, merged forces, and there is another flaw in the suggestion of economies of scale. The whole point of the Crime & Disorder Bill is to move towards a genuine problem solving orientation, through collective action by police forces and local authorities. The concept is simple enough. Don't offer an aspirin to a person with a headache, as they normally come back four hours later with a new bout of the same headache. The pill attacks the symptom and not the cause. Problem solving is about identifying causes of problems and removing or minimising the cause, hence to eliminate or minimise the symptom. In other words, don't throw a squad at a spike of burglary dwelling offences, knowing that, when the squad moves on, the spike will return, since the cause of the original problem is untouched. (And ignoring the effect of displacement in the meantime).

The move to problem solving represents a very welcome shift in the focus of policing and one which holds out a real promise of a better life for members of communities, and for which there is already supporting evidence of success. Moreover, results from investing in the community do not come quickly, and, having started the movement, the last thing the service needs now is an externally imposed structural change that will take everyone's eye off community problem solving and shift it to useless shuffling of the organisational house of cards. The caveat, of course, is that it requires chief officers and chief executives to work together, with their staffs, hand in hand identifying causes of problems and agreeing joint actions. As one good example, we have the Metropolitan Police going down the road of borough based policing, to ensure that police and local authority boundaries match, to enable improved communications and joint problem solving. So it is entirely sensible to move in exactly the opposite direction with county forces - or is it? There are, of course, two possible solutions to the issue when suddenly local authorities find that they are dealing with only part of a police force, and not its chief constable. First, establish a 'county commander' for local policing. This officer would, of course, need a staff, so, whoops, there goes the cost saving again. Alternatively, we could always reorganise the local authorities to match new police boundaries, and solve the problem that way - but hold on, did we not just start to get over the effects of the last reorganisation of local authorities?

Which leads us to three last observations. The first concerns the issue of performance, and the role of the manager. Managing is about making things happen through other people. The question is what things? The answer is all about making sure that the organisation is delivering appropriate results - that is what the customer or community really needs - in a highly cost effective way. For senior officers, the focus will be on strategic issues; for middle managers and supervisors the focus will

be on operational issues. The aim is, however, the same. More appropriate output for less input. Success comes through making better use of resources, through highly skilled and motivated people, operating effective process, all propelled by appropriate ethics and values.

If there are performance and cost effectiveness issues within the existing 43 constabularies, why not apply a little of the problem solving approach internally. If it is good enough for the community, it must be good enough for the organisation. This implies the need for an ongoing, unending and unrelenting search for the causes of poor use of resources, including drift and including external demands which suck resources away from delivery of operational services. It implies a searching scrutiny of the causes of ineffectiveness in training and other forms of skills development, witness the remarks of Fred Broughton on this very topic. It positively screams out for a total rethink of key processes, such as the CJ process, which, when flow charted often resembles a representation of the meanderings of a bunch of demented spiders which have wandered through a large puddle of alcoholic ink on their way to the flow chart. Finally, it demands a serious rethink about the symbolic content of the acts and words of all senior officers, to ensure that there are no conflicts in the values being espoused and portrayed.

All of which navel contemplation is useless, unless it is translated into action. Having identified the causes of internal problems, some developmental action would appear to be appropriate. Which is the next observation. Every review of the internal workings of police forces suggests that the actual level of management energy devoted to internal problem solving is quite low. As a large part of policing is reactive, so is that of police management. The problem solving concept, a la Crime and Disorder Bill, simply has not penetrated as far internally as it needs to. Any senior officers who do not believe this just need to check their diaries over the last three months and take a peek at what is already booked for the next three. Just how much time is committed to identifying the causes of resource problems, skills and knowledge issues, process design difficulties and the whole gamut of promoting appropriate ethics and values? And then initiating action to resolve identified problems? If the answer is not very much, consider this. It is recognised that there are demands on senior officers time which are about external relationships - the Crime and Disorder Bill positively requires it - but if the problem solving / action planning element is too small, and output and outcome results are not good enough, watch out, you might get reorganised!

The final thought concerns commercial experience again. The fact is that any significant reorganisation takes at least two years to produce any benefit at all. Given that the reorganisation itself consumes precious resources, in many cases the net effect of the reorganisation is negative rather than positive. If the next reorganisation follows quickly, the effect is always negative. The questions on the table are twofold. The first set concerns how long will it take to plan the proposed reorganisation of policing in this country? What will the cost be, of the reorganisation itself, including its planning? How long will it take the new structures to settle down and start producing the promised results? What are those results and who will commit to them being produced? If the answers include 10 years and 10 years, the community simply can not wait that long. Its problems are here and now and, in many cases, getting worse. To inject a 20 year hiatus into the planned programme of performance improvement is unthinkable. But that is what might just be on the table. The second question, given that there is no researched connection between

organisation structure and performance - it is all about resources, skills and knowledge, processes and values - is why bother? While managers play musical chairs with the organisation chart, for operational people, life just goes on as if nothing has changed. Business has the answer again.

In case the reader has forgotten the reference to the second envelope above, here is a short version of a story popular throughout the business world. It concerns a newly appointed young director, for the first time with that magic word in the job title. Being somewhat nervous about the step, the advice of an experienced director was sought - in fact the person being replaced, who was moving on to some distant and murky part of the hierarchy. "Don't worry" was the reply. "In your desk drawer are three envelopes, marked 1,2 and 3. You will have three crises in results, and when they happen, just open the appropriate envelope, and you will find the answer to your problems".

At the end of the first year, results were poor, and the new director was severely hassled by the CEO. Opening the first envelope revealed the message 'blame the last incumbent'. The resulting report relieved the pressure, until the end of year results, which were again poor. To head off the inevitable pressure, a new report was produced in line with the contents of the second envelope - 'reorganise'. Another year's respite followed. Opening the third envelope a year later completed the cycle - 'prepare three envelopes'.

A silly story with an important message. There are only two real groups who benefit from the reorganisation process - the managers who have the perfect cop out for not delivering anything for at least the duration of the reorganisation process, and the period beyond. The other group is the consulting firms who charge mega bucks for assignments where, nine times out of ten, there are no deliverables by which their contribution can be judged. So, instead of throwing the service into turmoil for 5, 10, 15 or 20 years, and creating a complete dwell in the business of improving performance, why not concentrate on the business in hand, which is all about making better uses of the resources already there. Unless, that is, anyone is already heading for that third envelope.