Policing of Public Order

Editorial by P. A. J. Waddington*

Most of this issue focuses upon the policing of public order, a police function performed universally, and yet strangely set apart from ‘normal’ policing. In some jurisdictions, it is the special role of dedicated anti-riot squads, but whether or not it is performed by specialists or generalist officers, public order feels like a different type of policing.

The obvious reasons for this is that most policing is a more or less solitary activity, in which officers encounter members of the public as individuals, whereas public order policing involves the deployment of officers in squad formations who deal with people in large gatherings. Also, police patrol is curiously invisible: police officers may accost a person acting suspiciously in a public place, but few of those who witness the encounter will know what it is about and wait for it to arrive at its conclusion before going about their business. Public order policing, on the contrary, is often conducted in the full glare of media publicity. Scenes of angry confrontations, baton-wielding police, tear-gas, ‘messy’ arrests and bloodied combatants litter the television screens and adorn newspaper front pages.

This dichotomy, however, distorts the reality that it claims to represent. Most gatherings are not at all accompanied by mayhem. Thousands gather to welcome celebrities, celebrate sporting triumphs, pay their respects to deceased national figures, and much more besides. These often huge gatherings, whether joyous or sombre, rarely present problems other than those that would occur when large numbers of people are present. There is always the likelihood that some people will fall ill, suffer accidental injury or even die, and the mere fact that large numbers are gathered at a particular time and place brings with it the prospect that such untoward events will also be concentrated. By the same token, because such eventualities are predictable, means that they can be planned for and any prudent public order commander would ensure a sufficient medical presence. Crime too can be anticipated, but often crimes committed where people gather in huge numbers seem less frequent than when people are dispersed. But the mundane reality of most

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Advance Access Publication: 22 November 2007
Policing, Volume 1, Number 4, pp. 375–379
doi:10.1093/police/pam057
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Public order policing is not the one that captures the headlines.

Public order policing is more equated with riot and violence (like those which afflicted the Paris suburbs during the summer of 2005, described and analysed by Sophie Gendrot in this issue). Yet to imagine that such occasions are the norm would be to paint a false picture. Researchers in several jurisdictions discovered a decade ago (Della Porta, 1997) that most public order gatherings, including protest demonstrations, are policed through what McPhail et al. described as ‘negotiated management’ (McPhail et al., 1998 and see Baker in this issue). I treasure the memory of observing negotiations between representatives of a far left anarchist group and Metropolitan Police officers during the early 1990s. The declared aspiration of the protesters was to ‘tear down the fabric of capitalism’, to which the Superintendent conducting the meeting replied, ‘And how can we help you?’ The look on the anarchist’s face will remain with me forever!

Of course, even back then it was not all peace and harmony. There were occasions when fists and missiles flew, and batons drawn. It was, after all, the era of the Poll Tax riot and the first Gulf War. Since then, we have witnessed the ‘Battle of Seattle’ and eruptions of violence in cities hosting meetings of international organisations that find little favour amongst anti-globalisation protesters (see Baker in this issue). We should not minimise the importance of these occasions and David Waddington and Steve Reicher have spent their academic careers seeking to understand why some situations erupt in violence and disorder, whilst others do not (which they usefully outline in this issue). The events pose serious implications for intelligence gathering and analysis (see Sir David Philips in this issue), and how such critical incidents are best commanded (see part two of Punch and Markham in this issue) and much more, besides.

I believe the greatest challenge that arises from violent public order is that it challenges the impartiality of the police. In routine encounters with members of the public, police officers face few genuine obstacles to their impartiality. They may be afflicted by prejudice or corruption, but neither of these transgressions are built into the role of the police officer. Policing violent disorder is different from routine policing because the police are duty-bound to be partisan. For, as Dahrendorf (1985) noted perceptively, disorder and violence (whatever its cause) challenges the capacity and will of the state to secure its own homeland. It is not alone in this as terrorism poses a far greater challenge, but it is a prominent challenge precisely because it is so visible, especially in an age of mass communication. Policing such events places officers of all ranks unequivocally in the position of defending the state that it is ultimately their duty to serve. It strips away the pretension that the police are mere servants of the public, for in quelling disorder they may use force against a substantial proportion of that public. It is, therefore, opportune that in this issue Sara Thornton turns her attention to the issue of accountability, albeit not specifically in connection with public order, for this is ultimately the issue to which all policing issues finally return.

References
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Editorial by Peter Neyroud*

This fourth issue provides both a follow on from the debates started in our first three editions and a specific theme, the policing of public disorder. Alongside terrorism, neighbourhood policing and the use of force, we judged as we were planning the first editions of this new journal that we should tackle four of the big issues in policing. Unsurprisingly, given that they are such big issues, there are some common themes that run across all of them. The most substantial of these is accountability and oversight, which are covered in several of the articles in this edition.

In each of the previous editorials I have drawn on my own professional career to provide comment and this editorial will be no exception. In the last quarter of century I have, in roles ranging from a Police Constable through to Chief Constable, participated in many of the major public order events in the UK. As Police Constable, I was first trained to deal with public disorder when the Brixton riots propelled an ill-prepared service into new tactics with new equipment. Our mindset was primarily defensive, crouched behind long shields that were exhausting to use for long periods, we practiced moving forwards against petrol bombs and bricks. As Sophie Gendrot’s article about the more recent ‘riots’ in France illustrates, the language of disorder and the mindset of the police can have a huge impact on the way the disorder is both policed and presented in the media. The debate within the British police at the time of Brixton was one torn between a rank and file who wanted to go forward, take ground and arrest rioters, and a leadership who were nervous about the police being seen to ‘win’, a stance reflected in Robert Mark’s autobiography. There was also a difficult debate between the Chief Constables and a number of police authorities who were reluctant to support the police deploying new equipment.

The debate about the policing of public disorder has, frequently during my service, highlighted the question ‘who are the police serving?’ Policing the wire at Greenham Common, escorting the cruise missile convoys out of the base and then through most of 1984, policing the Miners’ Strike in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire, were little to do with policing my home force, Hampshire, and much more to do with national policing. Indeed, it was these disputes, the miners’ strike above all, which both drove the development of mutual aide—and thus the creation of a virtual national policing system—and fundamentally shifted the majority of the public in the UK off the Dixon doi:10.1093/police/pam064

Advance Access Publication: 22 November 2007

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