

by Michael Meadowcroft

Some thirty years ago I was a Liberal member of the police committee of the West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council. In retrospect it was a halcyon period in the democratic accountability of the police service, being the last time policing in England, outside London, was included within the wider powers of a local authority. As such there was an elected Councillor to answer in full Council for policing and the police budget was considered within the priorities of all the Council's services.

It was a difficult time in policing, particularly with the Yorkshire Ripper case at its height, but we also had a Chief Constable, Ron Gregory, who, to say the least, was an interesting man. Gregory tried to set up a plain clothes branch of the Special Constabulary and also tried to make the Chief Prosecutor's Department subordinate to him. Both these adventures were duly rejected by the police committee, fully supported by the full county council. I doubt that it would have been as straightforward with a directly elected Police and Crime Commissioner.

My concerns with the government's proposals in its Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill are entirely principled. Any financial arguments in this case are, I believe, secondary to the potential dangers ahead.

The proposals further undermine local government as the essential basis for local democracy and disturb the delicate, but essential, tripartite responsibility for the police service. It would be nice to believe that there could be one direct management line for policing but it is dangerously naïve to abandon the checks and balances which have preserved the neutrality of the service and balanced operational command with accountability. The definition of the roles of the local police authority and the Home Office, and the personal responsibility of the Chief Constable for operational decisions, never have the utmost clarity in detail, but they are well recognised and have contributed a great deal to the high reputation of the British police service.

It is worth recalling that single purpose elected authorities ended in 1902 with the abolition of the School Boards. The main reason for this change was to abandon the unbalanced isolation of the single issue, and to ensure that education was considered within its broader social and political frame. Similarly policing should not be considered separately from the many areas of public policy, such as planning, education, social services and housing, that have considerable influence on community security and on law and order. Nor should the financing of any single service be determined away from discussion of all the pressures for cash and the necessity of determining priorities, rather than an outside body simply precepting on the local authority.

The fact of being elected as an individual, and, in effect, being a one-person police authority, will inevitably provoke serious tensions between the Commissioner and the Chief Constable, without there being the crucial recourse to a broader democratic forum. The struggle between Boris Johnson and Ian Blair will be as nothing by comparison.

One principle we know from every example around the world, whether for good in mature democracies or for ill in semi-dictatorships, is that a constitution with an elected chief executive has also to establish the checks and balances of an elected legislature. The fatal weakness of the idea of grafting elected mayors on to the existing local government structure, is that, outside of London, there is no counterbalancing local legislature designed to cope with an elected chief executive. Doncaster is a classic example of the problem. Elected Police and Crime Commissioner would be much more dangerous in having no legislature at all.

The electoral process itself is an alarming prospect. Can one imagine trying to contest an election for the post which is said to determine how one's locality is to be policed? I doubt that any candidate putting forward a platform based on Liberal Democrat values - or even Ken Clarke's policies - for sensitive policing, respect for dissident youths, tough on the causes of crime, concern for the deleterious effects of many ASBOs, the dangers of CCTV and the need to develop more community orders, will draw forth an electoral welcome with open arms.

The electoral process is instead likely to bring out the far right kneejerk response associated with the BNP. The widespread disappearance of the BNP in last May's elections does not mean that the views it espouses have also disappeared. Far from it, and I would hate to find that the election of Police and Crime Commissioners is the catalyst for reviving the BNP and similar candidates.

Of course, the case for liberal values in law and order and in the enhancement of local security has to be deployed in elections, but it can only be done within the context of all the services that necessarily contribute to strong, healthy and secure communities. Liberal values are unlikely to succeed in a contest that isolates in the electoral arena the one aspect that is the most inflammable of all.

I'm afraid the proposal for Police and Crime Commissioners is populism not localism. Rather than more atomisation of democracy, we need to return to proper local government as the means of developing safe communities.