



THE LUNAR SOCIETY

SUMMARY OF THE DINNER DISCUSSION WITH CHIEF CONSTABLE, WEST MIDLANDS POLICE 12th OCTOBER 2011

Chris Sims provided a candid talk about three key issues facing the police service: the aftermath of the riots in August; the impact of public sector cuts, and the introduction of an elected police commissioner.

1. The riots

Mr Sims set out a series of events that occurred in Birmingham during the disturbances:

- a. Looting- where people ransacked shops in the City Centre
- b. Disturbances on Soho Road that involved arson and required a more challenging response
- c. Gang activity including shooting at police officers
- d. The tragic death of the three young men on Dudley Road

The disturbances were a testing time for the Police, as resources were significantly stretched. The national policing cooperation resulted in police officers deployed from other forces including 150 Scottish Police Officers. This was one of the biggest operations for the West Midlands Police.

Mr Sims acknowledged that tactically the initial response was slow, but emphasized the significant challenge of policing the disturbance which was largely unplanned. Importantly the Police got on top of the issues very quickly. This was demonstrated by the groundswell support from the public who were outraged and shocked at what they were witnessing. The Police made 200 arrests on the first evening of the disturbances, 600 arrests were made at the end of the disturbances and significant more arrests are being continuing to be made. Mr Sims highlighted that 75% of those arrested had previous criminal records and 80% had been arrested before, therefore those known to the criminal justice system were at the forefront of the disturbances.

Mr Sims once again paid tribute to Mr Jaan whose intervention removed the significant threat of communal violence which could have started after the tragic death of the three young men in the Dudley Road area. He also emphasized the strong community intervention and support to the area that was provided by a number of people from different backgrounds.

2. Policing in Austerity

West Midlands Police is facing a significant challenge of cutting £120m from the budget over the next four years. This is made more significant as the Police rely more on Central Government support than other Police Officers in rural areas. Mr Sims stated that the Police Service is 'ahead of the curve' and has made £80m of savings, with 1800 jobs cut, but 2,300 job cuts will be required to balance the books.

He emphasized his main priority was to ensure the Police Service continues to serve the public and he highlighted the significant activity the police is dealing with in this month; the biggest investigation post riots, policing the Liberal Democrats conference, major counter terrorism arrests and still being able to report the lowest level of crime. He acknowledged that the future will be challenging for the Police but was confident that West Midlands Police will continue to provide an excellent level of service to the public.

3. Constitutional Changes

The Police and Crime Commissioners will be elevated on the 15th November 2012. The legislation was rapid and controversial although Mr Sims felt it was inappropriate for him to comment on the governance arrangements for the police. He did, however highlight three significant risks of an elected PCC. Firstly, the tension between political expediency and reality of policing. It is likely that the manifesto of candidates for the position will emphasize increasing the number of officers on the beat, as the public will demand this, however, this does not take into account the significant resources required to tackle other major areas of policing, for example, serious and organized crime, counter terrorism, public order etc. Secondly, the need for national cooperation when required. At present police forces across the UK have a strong mechanism for inter-force assistance, the issue will be if this will continue with the PCC and the emphasis they will place on providing assistance to other forces. Thirdly, operational independence of the Chief Constable; there may be issues that blur the boundaries and pose significant risks to the fundamental principle of policing in the UK. These issues are being addressed through guidance for the PCC to operate under.

Questions and Discussion

After Mr Sims spoke a lively discussion occurred with a number of questions and comments. This included a discussion on policing by consent and the sense of moral required for people to uphold law and order; the impact of the media and social networking sites on the riots and the challenge that the perception this creates in the mind of the public. During the disturbances the police were monitoring social networking sites, if the events on twitter were to be believed the whole of the West Midlands was in tatters three times over.

Mr Sims spoke in favour of restorative justice and community resolution, which officers in the West Midlands are undertaking. Although there are pressures to be punitive the importance of early intervention and resolution was highlighted as significant in reducing crime.

Other issues raised were; the impact of the economic crisis on crime especially youth unemployment. Mr Sims responded that some crimes have a counter cyclical trend, for example, serious wounding as less people go out to drink, whereas other crimes such as burglary have a positive correlation.

The relationship with the community, after the issues of cameras in predominately Muslim areas. Mr Sims stated that he had publicly apologized for this before and that he felt that the relationship with the community had been strengthened and highlighted his close working relationship with the community during the disturbances.

A question was raised on the dismantling of the Forensic Science Service. Mr Sims as the ACPO lead stated that the forensic science market had matured and there were a number of high quality private providers who could undertake this work, the FSS as a public agency could not compete against the other providers and therefore some consolidating of the market was required.

Neighbourhood policing: Mr Sims stated that neighbourhood policing was an important structure for the West Midlands and will continue under the cuts in the Force.

Waheed Saleem

Vice Chair

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