

The case for Affirmative Action

A paper presented to

The Morris Inquiry

By

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Introduction

1. This brief paper sets out the Metropolitan Black Police Association's (MBPA) argument for the introduction of Affirmative Action¹ legislation in order to expedite the recruitment of black and minority ethnic (BME) police officers into the Metropolitan Police Service. We would argue that the necessity to adopt such measures must be considered within the context of police reform and the shift towards increased police presence in and engagement with diverse ethnic communities, the considerable growth of BME officers in the 'extended police family' and most importantly the current BME recruitment rate and its inability to prevent BME assimilation into the majority culture.

Police reform

2. The recent Home Office green paper; 'Policing; Building Safer Communities' is potentially a central plank in police reform and provides us with a glimpse into the future where it is predicted that communities will play an increasingly important role in shaping local policing priorities and approaches and perhaps even sharing responsibility for the recruitment of local police. The Met's 'step change' programme, intended to increase the uniform policing strength to 35,000, complements the movement towards 'community governance' by enabling sufficient resources to fulfil a 'ward based' delivery of 'localised' policing services that will ultimately engage communities in a participative approach to setting local priorities. A strategy that will inevitably utilise what has become known as the 'extended police family', in particular the deployment of police community support officers (PCSOs) will become an important feature of neighbourhood policing. The ethnic demography of PCSO's currently exceeds the BME representation in London² and may well ultimately reflect the disproportionately high BME profile witnessed within the lower ranks of the uniformed security industry. It is of real concern to the MBPA that while significant

¹ Roosevelt Thomas (1990) argues that organizations build their multicultural capacities in three ways. Affirmative action creates a diverse staff by recruiting previously excluded individuals into homogeneous organizations. Valuing diversity builds understanding and helps people learn to appreciate this new diversity. Managing diversity attacks institutional racism, reallocates power, and promotes justice in the work place while enhancing the work environment.

² As at 30 September 2003, 35% were from minority ethnic groups. MPA Report: 13, 5 February 2004

numbers of BME PCSOs employed in neighbourhoods may well better engage BME communities, they may also be perceived as a manifestation of institutional racism. With disproportionately high numbers of BME PCSOs deployed on challenged inner city estates, in all weathers, while predominantly white ‘omnicompetent’ and ‘fully sworn’ colleagues are employed in ‘crime fighting’, investigative, supervisory and managerial roles, it is not difficult to foresee community perceptions of a lower status ‘black tier’ of frontline policing.

3. This shift in policing style and emphasis on a ‘community governance’ approach, along with disproportionately high numbers of PCSOs from BME communities, arguably accelerates the sense of urgency to fulfil the seemingly elusive goal where the ethnic composition of London’s policing family represents the diverse mix of communities they serve

Diversity

4. The operational case for a diverse police force, winning the confidence of all communities thereby increasing the flow of intelligence to assist in preventing, detecting and solving crime, is well made and a fundamental tenet at the core of policing modern societies. A diverse workforce engaging with all communities to provide an equitable service is a fundamental approach that ultimately strengthens the legitimacy of policing with the consent of the people. A view echoed by Sir Robert Peel, the father of modern policing.

‘ Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police’

5. In order to achieve this position police forces, with varying degrees of success, have introduced diversity strategies. Some demonstrating innovative cutting edge initiatives tailored to address the disproportional affect of crime impacting on BME communities along with policies designed to promote ‘a representative workforce which has the trust and confidence of the communities it serves’, however the

inability to attract and retain sufficient numbers of BME officers has undoubtedly undermined some not inconsiderable effort in this direction.

Historical

6. The Scarman Inquiry, seen by many as a watershed in terms of the social analysis of the causes of police and ethnic minority community conflict, provided added impetus for the need to recruit police from minority ethnic communities. ‘There is widespread agreement that the composition of our police forces must reflect the make-up of the society they serve. In one important respect at least it does not do so: in the police as in other important areas of society the ethnic minorities are very significantly under-represented’ (Scarman 1981)

7. Scarman’s assertion, based on ‘independent research undertaken by the Home Office’ that ‘the failure of suitable people of West Indian origin to come forward as candidates for appointment’ could be explained by ‘a strong undercurrent of hostility towards the police’, whilst not wholly inaccurate, failed to provide a balanced perspective. Whilst recognising the interrelationship between the police, ethnic minority community relations and ethnic minority police recruitment, Scarman appeared at a loss to understand just why this relationship has developed in the manner in which it arguably has. This is all the more bewildering given that Police and ethnic minority relations are the subject of numerous authoritative papers and inquiries. Indeed research into this field is most succinctly summed up by Reiner’s comment that, “The now vast literature on Police/Black relations in Britain is a depressing chorus of unheeded prophecies of doom” (Reiner, 1985:149)

8. Scarman also observed that when black officers do join the force they are treated with open hostility and contempt by at least some members of their own community. However, his subsequent failure to adequately represent a balanced historical understanding of BME resentment of the police and how in turn that impacted on BME recruitment or indeed the precarious position of BME officers inside the police service suggests that crucial elements of history were being selectively ignored.

9. The subsequent Scarman report and recommendations inevitably provoked interest and comparisons with the inquiries into the civil unrest in the United States during the 1960's, particularly the turbulent relationship between the police and the African American community. Indeed, the Scarman report into the Brixton disorders was preceded in the United States by the monumental Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. (Kerner, 1968).

10. In common with Scarman's recommendations, the Kerner Inquiry urged police departments with minority populations to vigorously recruit minority officers (Shelley 1999). Similarly, recent recommendations for changes in the policing of Northern Ireland have placed considerable importance on the need for the police service to represent the whole community. This will be achieved by the implementation of proposals to ensure that new recruits into the Police Service for Northern Ireland are drawn equally from both the catholic and protestant communities, thereby addressing the overwhelmingly dominant protestant workforce. (Patten 1999) Similar 'affirmative action' recruitment into the police service exists in the United States where, for example Boston Police department has operated a recruitment policy ensuring that numbers of African American and Hispanic officers 'reflect the communities they serve' (Evans 2002). A somewhat similar policy of reserving an annual quota of places in the police for 'coloured minorities' was advocated by the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall (Scarman 1981:76) This however was rejected on the basis that it would mean the 'lowering of entrance standards' (Scarman 1981:77)

11. However, arguments of 'reverse discrimination' and a 'divided' police force were insufficiently relevant to detract from the aim of the British government when considering the recommendations of the 'Patten Inquiry'. The view advanced by the Equal Opportunity Commission that; 'it is not enough to have a few recruits from another gender (or religious background) entering the service; as long as they are less than 15 per cent they will never be able to have a substantial influence on the culture' (Patten 1999) was unequivocally accepted by the Government.

12. Similar views on the necessity for 'affirmative action' have prevailed in the Netherlands where the assumption that an improved delivery of the police service to minorities is only possible if both women and members of the minority ethnic community are recruited led to a groundbreaking recruitment programme. The practical result of this programme for the city of Amsterdam where, in 1988 the population was 50% female and 21% minority ethnic, whereas the police force was 4% minority ethnic, and the female percentage unpublished - was that a target was set for 1992. The goal was set that the force should be 25% female and 10% minority ethnic. This could only be achieved by the decision not to recruit any white males before 1992. (Tupman 2000)

Assimilation

13. Another undoubtedly persuasive argument for the adoption of such 'affirmative action' measures is the relatively rapid recruitment of ethnic minorities gets into the range of "critical mass" estimates (between 15% and 30%) that experts suggest as the level needed to ensure that a minority does not find itself submerged within a majority organisational culture (Patten 1999)

14. Such belief suggests that the position of the BME police officer within a majority organisational culture is recognised as an issue that can undermine the desired outcome of a 'more representative workforce'. Jan Wiarda, Commissioner of Police, The Hague, (For a Change, 1999) highlights the difficulty for someone from a minority group to give leadership in a police force that has traditionally had a white, male culture. 'It is easier to hold one's own when you fit in with the existing culture.' In his opinion, people who have assimilated completely are usually successful but they are not fully part of the minority ethnic group. It could take generations to build a truly multicultural police force, he warns.

15. The aforementioned discussions suggest that the relationship between the BME police officer and BME communities is not in the ordinary sense of the word straightforward. It is in fact intricate and complicated by a number of factors. Included amongst these

is the fact that BME communities are more likely than the rest of the population to live in poor areas, be unemployed, have low incomes, live in poor housing, report poor health and be victims of crime. (SEU 2000) Therefore, relationships between BME officers (already struggling with dominant white occupational culture) and BME communities may be affected by the relative economic affluence of the BME officer.

16. The BME officer's status inside the police organisation can perhaps be defined as a 'subjective status'. Hyman defines 'subjective status' as 'a person's conception of his own position relative to other individuals' (Hyman & Singer, 1968: 147). He was the first researcher to formally use the term 'reference group'. Other reference group theorists including Robert Merton (Merton 1950) argued that anticipatory socialisation occurred when individuals chose as a reference group, a non-membership group, and began to socialise themselves to what they perceived to be the group's norms. Reference group theorists including Merton have pointed out that socially mobile blacks do in fact tend to assume the value orientations and aspirations of white middle class groups. French & Raven (1959) maintained that individuals' identification with the group can only be established or maintained if individuals behave, believe, and perceive as the group does. As a result, the group has the ability to influence individuals, even though individuals may not be aware of it. The tendency of BME officer's to be influenced by the reference group was alluded to in the Black Police Association's (BPA) oral presentation to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry;

‘...there is no marked difference between black and white in the force essentially. We are all consumed by this occupational culture. Some of us may think we rise above it on some occasions, but, generally speaking, we tend to conform to the norms of this occupational culture, which we say is powerful in shaping our views and perceptions of a particular community, (MacPherson, 1999:25)

17. It is recognised that such internal ‘conflict and contradictions’ may promote ‘bicultural stress’, ‘a psychological barrier for minority ethnic people that manifests when they feel compelled to suppress and diminish one part of their identity (personal values, political ideology, interpersonal style, self presentation) in order to exist or advance in one or both of the cultural contexts in which they work and live’ (Bell 1986) It can be argued that BME officers exist in a bicultural world where the requirement is often to pursue and develop careers in the white world and maintain a personal life within the BME community. Individuals are inevitably forced to make choices both by the BME community and by the police organisations about how they live culturally. For example, the police by the nature of its occupational culture requires individuals to be integrated or assimilated into that dominant white, male culture and in doing so, BME officers are sometimes forced to suppress racial and ethnic identity so that their positions are very often on the margins. And it is on the margins that officers can experience isolation, feelings of invisibility and some undoubtedly feel the need to deny or abandon their racial identity. The BME community on the other hand asks the BME officer to stay rooted to its norms, traditions and values and to stay committed to the ethnic culture. This can inevitably result in BME officers having to remain emotionally committed to different components of their lives which are sometimes incompatible, with having to manage tensions and possible identity conflicts between these two worlds - which can be very stressful (Baumeister 1986).

18. The MBPA contends that current effort to recruit a ‘representative’ BME workforce in London, although a laudable altruistic aim in its own right is nevertheless doomed to failure for the following reasons. The current ‘trickle’³ of BME recruits into the MPS ensures that BME officers are indeed submerged into the majority culture where it is accepted that they will fail to impact on the organisational culture and inevitably assimilate into the majority culture (Patten 1999). Therefore, the presumption and

³ ‘At the present BME recruitment rate it will be 2035 before the MPS achieves a truly representative mix’
Lee Jasper – Communities and Cultural Resources Unit launch, New Scotland Yard -10.2.04

expectation that BME officers will reflect the values, ideology and experiences of the communities from whence they came, thereby ensuring improved relations with and enhanced engagement of minority ethnic communities, will inevitably be undermined when assimilation into the majority organisational culture takes place.

19. A recent MORI poll⁴ commissioned by London's Mayor indicates that a considerable majority of Londoners think that the ethnic composition of London's police service should broadly reflect London's demographic mix. Whether this desire would translate into support for a change in employment legislation to enable similar affirmative action initiatives to those experienced in Northern Ireland, The Netherlands and the United States is questionable. However, any such question must be qualified with the acceptance that current rates of recruitment and retention of BME police officers will not only fail to achieve the outcome favoured by the majority of Londoners but continues to ensure that 'representativeness' in its true sense is constantly undermined by the gradual assimilation of low numbers of BME recruits into a majority white workforce.

Recommendation

20. It is therefore a recommendation of the MBPA that the Home Office, within the context of police reform, introduce legislative change consistent with that introduced in Northern Ireland, thereby ensuring that BME and 'white' police candidates are recruited into the Metropolitan Police Service at a (50:50) rate.

⁴ The Londoner newspaper, p.2, January 2004

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