

The
BOW
GROUP

POLICY IN THE MAKING



The Frontline Against
Fear:
Taking Neighbourhood
Policing Seriously

by
Oliver Letwin MP

About The Bow Group

The Bow Group has three aims:

- To create new and thought-provoking research for the Conservative party
- To provide a forum for its members to meet each other socially
- To provide opportunities for its members to meet senior Conservative party figures to discuss the issues of the day.

The Group has no corporate view, which allows it to approach each issue on its merits and with an open mind. Accordingly, the views expressed in Bow Group publications are those of the authors, and do not represent a statement of Conservative party policy, or the views of other members of the Group.

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Bow Group research is organised by Jocelyn Ormond, the Research Secretary. He can be contacted through the Group's office or by e-mail: research@bowgroup.org.

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About the Speech

Dr Oliver Letwin MP, the Shadow Home Secretary and Member of Parliament for Dorset West, originally delivered this speech to the "Renewing One Nation" group, before exploring many of the same themes in remarks to The Bow Group (subject to Chatham House rules) in May 2002.

PREFACE

Increasingly, the Conservative party is identifying the 'decentralisation' of power to local people as the key to improving the delivery of public services.

To contribute to this debate, the Group will be publishing *The Ideas Book for London* over the summer, a project to reassess the challenges facing London and offer radical new ideas for addressing them. The book is expected to be launched at the Conservative party conference in October. One of the key chapters of the book will address ways to tackle crime and overhaul policing in the Capital. The team's work in this regard builds on much the same approach as that outlined by Mr Letwin in the "The Frontline Against Fear", drawing lessons from New York and smaller foci of experimentation in policing in the United States; emphasising the importance of people's perceptions about their personal security; and seeking local solutions to common problems. Some of the team's preliminary conclusions, for instance their recommendation for an elected Police Commissioner for London, were outlined by Giles Taylor in a presentation he gave to Mr Letwin and members of the Group last month. This presentation can be accessed at www.bowgroup.org.

What remains so distinctive about Mr Letwin's approach, however, is his thoroughly liberal emphasis on the local social context within which crime must be prevented and tackled. His and Iain Duncan Smith's pronouncements on crime thus constitute the most coherent attempts by the Conservative party to flesh out the so-called "Harrogate agenda" with clear philosophical principles and policy guidelines. The challenge for members of The Bow Group, through *The Ideas Book for London* and other publications over the next year, will be to formulate concrete policies through which the party and Local Authorities can advance this agenda through the London elections in 2004 up to the general election in 2005 or beyond.

Jocelyn Ormond
Research Secretary
London, June 2002

THE FRONTLINE AGAINST FEAR: Taking Neighbourhood Policing Seriously

Introduction

In this speech I intend to set out a vision for the future of policing. But before I describe that vision, I want to say something about our overall philosophy on law and order.

The neighbourly society

Beyond the causes of crime

Back in January I delivered a speech at the Centre for Policy Studies, in which I set out a framework for Conservative thinking on law and order.

The opposite of crime

I called the speech *Beyond the Causes of Crime*, because the central thesis was that – just as in economic policy we need to direct ourselves towards identifying and promoting the causes of wealth-creation rather than the causes of poverty – so, in the field of law and order, we need to direct our efforts towards dealing not with the causes of crime but with the causes of the *opposite* of crime – in other words, all those assumptions, attitudes and actions that make for what I call the neighbourly society.

Overcoming crime

The neighbourly society is the most important defence we have against crime. A neighbourly society is built upon strong and supportive relationships within families, between neighbours and throughout the wider community. A united, concerned and vigilant community not only guards against the depredations of the established criminal, but also prevents the development of criminality in its young people. A neighbourly society is self-sustaining because its responsible, adult members provide their young with a proper start in life and, thereby, a cycle of responsibility which sustains the neighbourly society from generation to generation.

The frontline against fear

Crime against community

But there can be no neighbourly society without community, by which I mean the human networks that make a neighbourhood out of a physical network of streets and houses. And there can be no community without security, by which I mean, principally, the safety of the shared spaces of a neighbourhood where community takes root.

The unequal struggle

We need to understand crime and community as two opposing forces, one of which will overwhelm the other. In this struggle, crime has powerful weapons at its disposal: above all, violence and the threat of violence. In the face of such violence and intimidation, the peaceful community can only retreat, ceding more ground to the criminal, exposing young people to values wholly opposed to those of the neighbourly society. If crime wins the struggle and criminals take possession of the streets, the cycle of responsibility is thrown into reverse, with the result that neighbourhoods decay; the young are corrupted; people who can, get out; and people who can't, live blighted lives. All this, because decent people are afraid.

Crime in the real world

The cause of this fear isn't just the headline offences of rape and murder, or even the more common offences of mugging and burglary. It is also all the other crimes and near-crimes that affect the quality of life, conveniently filed away under the term social disorder: graffiti, vandalism, petty theft, fly tipping, drug dealing, intimidation, bullying, racial abuse, the corrupting influence of gangs, and the underlying, but entirely viable, threat of violence against anyone who stands up to the wreckers. Yes, of course, people do fear the headline crimes, but in many neighbourhoods there is another kind of fear, closer to despair, born of the knowledge that we must limit our lives or become victims; that the street is owned by the criminal, not by the citizen; that vandals can do what they will, even if everyone knows who they are; that thugs may torment their neighbours with only retaliation guaranteeing a decisive police response; that the gang is a stronger influence on our children than the school; that in the frontline against fear no one is on our side; that we are right to be afraid.

Taking back the ground

I have spoken of the struggle between crime and community. It is a struggle that the community is losing and the evidence of defeat can be seen most starkly in Britain's poorest neighbourhoods. There is something desperately wrong with our society when the people we put in the front line against fear are those least able to stand up to the thugs – the poor, the very old and the very young. They need some one to fight for them, not just holding the line against fear, but taking back the ground lost to the forces of disorder.

The role of the police

Conventional policing

Who will take on this role? In my view it should be the police. But the conventional view is that the proper role of the police is to confront serious, organised crime through the discipline of criminal intelligence.

The strength of conventional policing is the development of high-tech, intelligence-led methods that seek out connections and pursue them to the criminals at the other end. But its strength is also its weakness – the targets are now so selective that the police can confront crime without engaging with society. Conventional policing in the UK has, I believe, ignored the deeper connections that lead back to the frontline against fear.

The one-legged police force

Do you remember the Peter Cook and Dudley Moore sketch about the one-legged man who auditioned for the lead role in a Tarzan film? The casting director tries with great diplomacy to tell the aspiring actor that he is unsuitable for the part. Accentuating the positive he tells him that he likes his left leg: “it is a great leg, I have nothing against your left leg... the trouble is neither have you”.

I have nothing against conventional policing methods. Indeed, I believe that they are integral to the vision of a neighbourly society. We need a combination of high-level policing, criminal intelligence and tough sentencing to take out the organised criminals whose interests are wholly opposed to the creation of the neighbourly society. But however intelligent the criminal intelligence, however tough the tough sentencing, high-level policing will never be sufficient on its own. And as long as it is on its own, we will only have half a police service.

Community policing

Whether crimes occur singly or in some organised fashion, they do not arise out of nothing – nor do they return to nothing after the recorded event is over. For every crime there is a criminal, and for every criminal there is a personal history of unchallenged anti-social behaviour degenerating into a lifetime of crime. For every crime scene there is a neighbourhood, and every neighbourhood has its story too – one in which social disorder is allowed to multiply and feed upon itself as it feeds upon the community. In terms of both people and places, every crime is the product of a complex web of events, decisions, relationships and conditions – stretching back for years, even generations.

This is a view of crime that defies conventional attempts to record, but any one of us would recognise the phenomenon in a neighbourhood that just isn't safe anymore. The corollary is a view of policing which regards social engagement as necessary and inevitable.

To distinguish this role from conventional policing, the catch-all term of community policing is often used. But this term is woefully insufficient, and the activities it represents are nothing like the serious engagement which I have in mind. At its best, community policing can involve worthwhile activities like harm avoidance education in schools. At its worst, community policing can amount to little more than putting PR consultants in epaulettes. But both forms of what we have come to call, in the UK, community policing suffer from an overwhelming deficiency. Just as conventional policing in the UK confronts crime without engaging with society, community policing engages with society, but without confronting crime.

Neighbourhood policing

What I want to talk about is distinct from conventional policing. It is also much more than what is commonly understood by community policing.

I want to talk about something that is currently being practised only in small areas or for brief periods in the UK – something that, if practised universally, would constitute a virtual revolution in British policing. This is a type of policy that relates to real lives, led in real homes, in real neighbourhoods. I am going to call it neighbourhood policing.

Neighbourhood policing is distinct because it both engages with society *and* confronts crime – and can do so because it operates within a tangible geographical area. Neighbourhood policing is integral to the Conservative vision of a neighbourly society.

Fundamental reform

The extent of change

We must view conventional and neighbourhood policing as two halves of a whole. Of course, this is a simplification; the conventional and neighbourhood methods of policing are not mutually exclusive and there are many overlaps. Nevertheless, the emphases are very different: One deals with specific crimes, the other with general disorder; one targets major offences, the other minor offences; one is reactive and remedial, the other proactive and preventative.

I don't think that anyone could reasonably claim that these respective emphases form two halves of a whole in today's police service. Neighbourhood policing can only be restored to its rightful position through fundamental reforms that transform the police service from top to bottom. What I am proposing is the biggest change to policing since the foundation of the police service by Robert Peel.

Returning to the root

Appropriately it was Robert Peel who enshrined the ideal of neighbourhood policing in his nine principles of policing. For instance, the first principle is about prevention:

“The basic mission for which the police exist is to prevent crime and disorder.”

And the ninth principle sets out the ultimate objective of neighbourhood policing:

“The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder.”

Whatever happened to neighbourhood policing?

These are not just the words of a long dead politician, but the basis of a system of policing that endured into living memory. So whatever happened to neighbourhood policing? The simplistic answer is that policing has moved on, because crime has moved on: There is more crime than ever before; it is more sophisticated than ever before; it is more brutal than ever before. But some things never change – it is still the case that failure to deal with minor crimes will create the conditions from which major crimes arise. We must continue to advance those conventional policing methods that deal most effectively with the major crimes, but unless we return to the roots of the police service we will never effectively deal with the roots of crime.

Moving Forward to neighbourhood policing

How are we to achieve this effect?

I do not believe it can be done by re-visiting our own past. Circumstances, when we last took neighbourhood policing seriously in Britain, were too different from those we face today. We cannot go back to Peel.

Instead, I think we need to invoke Peel’s near-contemporary, Canning. We need to call “the New Worldto redress the balance of the old.” It is American cities that have shown, over the past decade, how a true combination of conventional policing and neighbourhood policing can be used to crack crime.

The achievement of the NYPD

Two weeks ago, I was in New York as the guest of the NYPD.

What did I see there?

I saw police officers walking the streets.

I saw patrol cars, which patrol small areas on a continuous, 24-hour basis.

I saw the teams available to move in behind the beat-cops and the patrols to tackle crime on the street.

I saw how the compstat system provides transparent diagnosis of street crime and forces police officers at all levels to produce strategies for dealing with it.

I saw how the Police Department and other agencies tackle quality of life issues as well as crime.

I saw a criminal justice system that is based on a sense of urgency.

The lessons of New York

It is difficult to convey the full extent of the difference between what I saw and heard in New York and what one sees and hears in Britain. Let me try to illustrate some of the differences.

Let me start with what we would call “the bobbies on the beat”. Every policeman in New York starts by walking the streets. A policeman typically has about four blocks to walk. There are no set hours. The beat-cop is regarded, from the first day, as a professional, entrusted with a task – the task of accumulating low-level intelligence that will enable the NYPD in his Precinct (and, if necessary, on a wider scale) to trace disorder and crime. If that beat-cop needs to deal with specific circumstances that require unorthodox hours, that is his or her decision.

I also rode along with a patrol car. We moved, very slowly, up and down the narrow area, patrolled day after day by the two cops in the car, in one of three shifts, providing 24-hour surveillance of a small area. Drivers showed no surprise at seeing the slow-moving police car – it was evidently a sight with which they were fully familiar. Passers-by joked with the officers at traffic lights (perhaps it is significant that some of these passers-by were black and the cops, in this case, white; perhaps it is also significant that many of the police officers I saw in the Precinct Headquarters in North Harlem were black). As we went along, the patrolmen pointed out to me individuals with specific criminal histories: they knew them by sight. When I asked how long it would take to reach the scene of a reported crime if one came through on their radio, they said “a couple of minutes.” I assumed this was hyperbole. I was wrong. A call came through; a couple of minutes later, without even the need for a siren, we were at the scene.

Back in the Precinct – and in other precincts – there were groups of police officers, some specialist, some generalist, ready to move in, or taking proactive steps to prevent crime and disorder identified by the beat-cops and the patrolmen, or through wider intelligence. Nowhere did I see evidence of a divide between conventional, high-level intelligence-led policing and neighbourhood policing. The two were interdependent. Neighbourhood policing was understood to be an intelligence-accumulating activity as much as any other – the focus of crime and disorder was specific and local – but the specific and local was tied into the fabric of general intelligence.

At Borough Headquarters, I sat through a Borough compstat meeting. This was exactly as described in the literature. A Precinct Commander, whose precinct showed increases in particular

types of crime over the previous week, was being subjected, in front of the other Precinct Commanders in the Borough and in the presence of representatives of other agencies, to a cross-examination by the Borough Commander and other senior officers, on the basis of statistics and maps showing the particular crimes committed on particular streets in that precinct over the previous week. The Precinct Commander and his two senior assistants were having to give (and were giving) a detailed account of the specific measures they were taking to apprehend the villains in question and to prevent recurrences of these types of crime in these and other nearby streets. To appreciate the full force of this experience, one needs to understand that the Borough Commander – who had spent a good part of the previous week, he told me, as in every other week, studying for this session – was in charge of 2,300 police officers and was therefore equivalent to a Chief Constable of a mid-sized UK Police Force: he ranked as a “2-star Chief” broadly equivalent to an Assistant Commissioner at the Met. He himself feared that, at little or no notice, he might be subjected to a similar demand for explanations from the Chief of the Department (broadly equivalent to the Deputy Commissioner at the Met). The transforming effect of a few simple statistics available and published on a weekly basis, transformed into maps showing exactly the hot-spots, and allied to a system of open and accountability was evident. Right from the top to the bottom of the NYPD attention is focused on crime, where it is occurring, when it is occurring – and on what is being done to stop it.

I saw this same phenomenon played out at the lowest level when I met officers in the North Harlem Precinct, who had donned plain clothes in order to mount an immediate operation to deal with a specific form of crime that was occurring in a small area within the precinct. When I asked if this was because that form of crime had shown an increase in the compstat statistics, they explained to me that it had not because it had only occurred in the last couple of days. Their intention, they explained, was to stop this becoming the cause of an increase which would embarrass their Precinct Commander the next week in the compstat meeting.

Neighbourhood policing – in the sense of directly addressing crime on the streets of New York and other American cities – is not an idea or a theory: it is a reality which has focused the attention of police officers at every level of the force on crime and on stopping crime, in real time.

But the neighbourhood policing I saw in New York goes beyond attention to episodes of crime. New Yorkers have their equivalent of our 999 number – 911. But they have something we don’t have: they have a 311 number, for citizens to make complaints about quality of life issues. These are not regarded as unimportant, insoluble or low priority. The broken windows theory which governs policing in New York and many other American cities today – and which has very often been misrepresented as aggressive “zero tolerance” – stems from the progressive and liberating idea that citizens do not need to tolerate low-level disorder and that in order to reclaim the streets for the honest citizen from the criminal or low-level disorder needs to be tackled with the same energy that is applied to dealing with episodes of crime. Once again, I did not find any of the NYPD regarding low-level disorder as something separate from crime. I met police officers at all levels who saw these phenomena as intrinsically intertwined with one another, and who understood very well that low-level intelligence, derived from street-cops and continuous patrolling was intrinsically related to an understanding of the location and causes of low-level disorder.

Finally, I saw something that would have warmed the cockles of the heart of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. I spent time in the District Attorney's office, and I talked to police officers responsible on a daily basis for arrests and for taking people to court. The sense of co-operative effort and of urgency was unmistakable – and very different from the pattern obtaining in the UK. The aim of the system as a whole, from the moment of arrest, was to achieve speedy justice. I stress both elements of that proposition. There is a deep and fine tradition of civil liberties in the United States and perhaps the strongest concept of due process in the world. The aim of the system is to deliver *justice*, not arbitrary punishment. But the aim is to deliver *speedy* justice. And that is just what happens. In timescales that would seem impossible in Britain, arrests are turned into arraignments, summary justice, or indictments and plea bargaining, or trials. The police have not given up on the courts, and the prosecutors and the courts have not given up on the citizen. There is a sense of common purpose to identify, comprehend and convict the guilty.

Does all this mean that, in New York and other cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, San Diego as well as other municipalities on a much smaller scale, such as Lowell in Massachusetts, the result is unpleasant, aggressive, intolerant policing? The mythology on this side of the Atlantic would often have it so. But that was not my experience in New York. You will recall the black officers of whom I spoke: the NYPD has a record of employing black officers of which we would be proud in the UK and which we have yet to achieve. I spent instructive time in the Community Affairs Department – I was told of activities mirroring the best practice in the UK used to establish and maintain appropriate relations built between the police and the communities they serve. New York, unlike some English cities, has not seen riots in recent years. The cities I have mentioned where the model first initiated by William Bratton has been implemented are cities in which policing is conducted very largely by common consent. You have only to walk the streets of North Harlem, or drive with the cops at night, to see, as I saw, a city in which the police benefit from far higher public esteem than our own.

Does it work? The figures speak for themselves. Over 9 years, murder in New York has reduced by 80%; robbery, burglary and car theft by over 70%; theft by just under 50% and rape by just under 40%. Across these crimes as a whole, the reduction is 60% since the new methods were introduced. New York is now noticeably a safer and more pleasant city to live in than London. The city is cleaner; there is less low-level disorder. The morale of the ordinary policeman is far higher. Ordinary New Yorkers report vast improvements. The crime surveys show a trend that matches those of the official figures.

Are we dealing with cause and effect? New York and other American cities have seen the reinvention of neighbourhood policing and, with it, the prevalence of transparency and accountability throughout the force – together with the provision of low-level, continuous, timely intelligence allied to the 311 reports. Has all this been responsible for the significant decrease in violent street crime? No doubt this will be debated for many years to come. But in a groundbreaking study produced last December by the Manhattan Institute, Kelling and Sousa subjected the disaggregated New York statistics to rigorous analysis – using the fact that the various precincts have significantly differing social compositions – to eliminate non-predictive variables.

Their work deserves intense study from anybody interested in such analysis. Its results can, however, be summarised in one sentence: “the average NYPD precinct during the 10-year period studied, could expect to suffer one less violent crime for approximately every 28 additional misdemeanour arrests made.” If anyone needed to put a nail in the coffin of scepticism about the effectiveness of the broken window thesis and of properly organised neighbourhood policing, that does it.

How do we apply the lessons in England?

Let us, then, turn our attention from the United States to our own little island.

What do we need, here in the UK? We need that same virtual revolution in policing which American cities began to undergo a decade ago.

What does it take to foster such a revolution?

Let me start with what it does not require. It does not require – and, indeed, it cannot be achieved by – Clauses 5 and 7 of the Police Reform Bill, which give the Home Secretary the power to intervene at every level of the police force and, in effect, seek to run the police forces of this country from a desk in Whitehall. I know of no reason to suppose that an effective revolution in policing methods can be delivered by the Home Office, which has given us an Immigration and Nationality Department that cannot process applications in a timely fashion, an asylum system that is, by the Home Secretary’s own admission, in a state of chaos, a prison system whose recidivism rates, particularly for young people, are the envy of criminals everywhere.

I do not believe that a revolution can occur in any way except through enthusiastic sponsorship and initiative by the Chief Constables and their senior officers, supported and enthused by Police Authorities. Such enthusiasm will not occur if efforts are made to achieve this virtual revolution through bureaucratic imposition.

Nor will this virtual revolution be brought about by trying to achieve neighbourhood policing on the cheap through community support officers with limited training, limited powers and limited duties. I see no reason to suppose that such people can properly do the job of the policeman on the beat. But, beyond that question, lies the far deeper question: How can our police forces be expected to take neighbourhood policing seriously if it is plastic police officers who are to carry it out? On the contrary, if neighbourhood policing is to be taken seriously in the UK, as it is in American cities, the very best people entering our police forces will need to see the accumulation of low-level intelligence, the provision of rapid response and the taking of effective action against localised crime as part of the essence of good policing, and will need to see training in such activities as

fundamental to the achievement of the glittering prize of the policeman's profession. To be taken seriously by police officers, neighbourhood policing needs to be policing by police officers.

What the virtual revolution for which I am calling *does* require is a fundamental cultural change in our police forces, led from the top, achieved by consent and pursued with enthusiasm. I have no doubt that the Home Office will need to play its part in increasing transparency and accountability – perhaps through its own version, on a national scale, of real-time compstat. I have no doubt that the Home Office will need to provide better means of opening up to public and professional view examples of good and bad practice. I have no doubt that the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department will need to look at serious changes in the methods employed by our criminal justice system. Very possibly, we may need to look again at the internal structure of our Police Authorities to see how they can be provided with the means to hold Chief Constables to account.

All of these questions – and many more beside – will need to be addressed if we are to create and then to sustain the virtual revolution that I have described. But I am sure that, so far from moving towards the establishment of a single national police force in the way prefigured by the Police Reform Bill, we should expect to see, and we should welcome, the blooming of many different flowers. In the United States, there are about 20,000 police forces. We have less than 50. There is every reason to suppose that we shall see 50 different models emerging – and every reason to suppose that the virtual revolution will be best achieved in 50 different ways, each responsive to the differing configuration of the area and population served by the police forces in question.

I argue for common aims: a level of attention to neighbourhood policing not seen in this country for many years; a level of attention to the timely identification, analysis and effective resolution of street crime and disorder not witnessed in our police forces today, and a sense of urgency to address crime and disorder through the criminal justice system which we do not have today. But I do not argue for uniformity of method.

There is one enemy. But against that enemy many battles must be fought on many different turfs under many different generals. Victory will be achieved only by the implementation of tactics suitable to each turf.

Unless we begin to achieve that victory, we will never reclaim our streets for the honest citizen. We will never recreate a neighbourly society for Britain. We will fail this generation and the next. We cannot let that happen. This is a war we have to win.