

Observations on Police Reform in Scotland

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Few interested in the policing of the UK will forget the summer of 2011. In England it will largely be remembered for the riots which followed the fatal shooting of a man by police in Tottenham in north London. Violent clashes between police and young people quickly spread to other areas of London and on to other cities, including Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Nottingham¹. Initial descriptions of the riots as occurring in ‘UK’ or ‘British’ cities were quickly re-labelled as ‘English’ cities following the intervention of Scotland’s First Minister, Alex Salmond. He complained about broadcasters headlining the coverage of urban unrest as ‘UK riots’ and claimed ‘Scottish society was different from that in England, and that similar riots were much less likely in Scotland’ (The Guardian, 10 August 2011)². Whatever the credibility of such claims, Salmond’s intervention usefully highlighted that the UK is far from being a ‘united’ Kingdom. This became even more apparent in relation to policing later in the summer of 2011 when the Parliaments at Westminster and Holyrood set out their very different plans for major police reform. In Scotland, the Justice Minister announced a package of radical changes that have replaced the structure of eight regional police forces with a new national police force, Police Scotland. The force which became operational on the 1st April 2013 is accountable to a new national body, the Scottish Police Authority, comprising appointed, rather than elected, members and which has responsibility for maintaining an ‘efficient and effective’ force and for developing a national policing plan. Although these developments appear to herald a move towards greater centralism, local policing has been made a statutory requirement in Scotland with 32 police areas aligned with the boundaries of the 32 local authorities, each with a local police commander required to draw up a local policing plan. Regional police boards made up of elected councillors have been abolished and replaced by local scrutiny committees which, while not having any statutory powers, are included among the groups that a local police commander must consult in drawing up a local policing plan (Fyfe and Henry, 2012).

What lies behind the most radical shake up to policing in Scotland for a generation? The political narrative has focused on the economic rationale for reform. Confronted with cuts in public spending determined in Westminster, the Justice Secretary argued that ‘the status quo’ in policing was ‘unsustainable’ and that the only way ‘To protect and improve local services’ (and to avoid the cuts in officer numbers occurring in England and Wales), was to stop ‘duplication of support services eight times over’ by creating a single police service. The Scottish Government has estimated that this reform will achieve savings of about £100 million a year (or 8% of the annual cost of Scottish policing). There are other potential benefits that the Scottish Government has also been keen to highlight. A national force will, they argue, create more equal access to specialist support and expertise and, through the arrangements for local policing, strengthen the connections between the police service and communities (Fyfe and Scott, 2013; Fyfe, 2014).

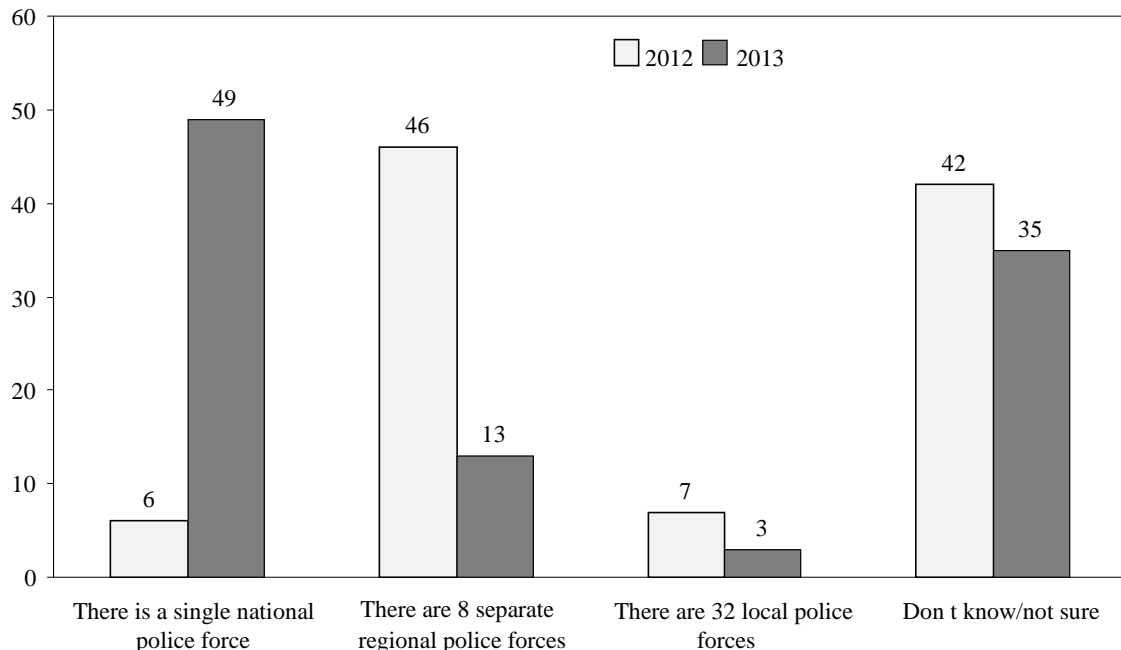
Given that Police Scotland has only been in existence for a little over a year it is still too early to assess whether it has delivered on the Scottish Government objectives of long term financial savings, better service delivery and greater local engagement. However, following the decision to

¹ See, for example, issue 69 of the *British Society of Criminology Newsletter* featuring contributions from Tim Newburn, Jon Silverman and John Lea

² See www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/10/england-riots-salmond-uk-headlines

create Police Scotland, the Scottish Institute for Policing Research³ has focused on developing a range of research projects aimed at yielding insights into the implementation and impacts of police reform. These projects include a national public attitude survey focusing on awareness of police reform and levels of confidence in local policing. Jointly conducted with ScotCen Social Research as part of the annual Scottish Social Attitudes survey, this project began in 2012 (to establish a baseline) and was repeated in 2013 with a further survey to be conducted in 2014 (Anderson et al., 2014). Among the key findings from the first two sweeps of the survey is the fact that most people do not understand how policing is organised in Scotland, though there are some signs that this is improving with the launch of the single force. At the time the 2012 survey was conducted, slightly fewer than half those interviewed understood the structure of policing in Scotland. This did not seem to be the result of confusion about the forthcoming reforms - in fact, only 6% at that point believed that there was a single force. More striking was the finding that 42% simply did not know how policing was then organised. A year on, the proportion understanding the current arrangements remains at around a half, but there are some grounds for optimism that the new arrangements are easier for people to understand. Only 13% believe there now to be eight regional forces and there is evidence of a slight reduction in the proportion indicating that they simply do not know how policing is organised (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. How survey participants think policing is currently organised in Scotland (%)



Source: 2012 and 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes surveys

That said, when asked specifically about the introduction of a single force, a majority of those interviewed indicated that they had either heard nothing about it (28%) or had heard something but knew nothing about what it involved (26%). Another important finding, however, is that there is little evidence so far that having a single force has made people feel more confident about how their area is policed. In both 2012 and 2013, the largest single group thought that having a single force would make no difference to how their area is policed and, of the remainder, a greater number of people said they felt less than more confident as a result of the reforms (see Table 1).

³ The Scottish Institute for Policing Research was established in 2007 and is a strategic partnership between 12 universities (Abertay, Dundee, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Heriot Watt, Robert Gordon, St Andrews, Stirling Strathclyde and West of Scotland) and Police Scotland.

Table 1. Whether having a single national police force for Scotland makes people more or less confident about local policing

	2012	2013
	%	%
Much more confident	3	3
A little more confident	7	9
Will make no difference	44	52
A little less confident	26	22
Much less confident	16	11
(Don't know)	4	3
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>1,229</i>	<i>1,497</i>

Source: 2012 and 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes surveys

While these subtle changes in public perceptions of policing in Scotland are intriguing, it will require further surveys to establish whether police reform has brought about any significant shifts in attitudes toward the police. What is clear, however, is the way in which reform in Scotland has established a very different trajectory for policing north of the border compared with that to the south. Indeed, although it is commonplace to refer to ‘British’ policing as though it were a monolithic entity, there have always been important differences within Britain between the policing of England and Wales and Scotland and police reform has made those differences even starker. Three differences in particular are worth highlighting here. The first concerns the distribution of power over policing. The programme of reform in England and Wales has explicitly focused on transferring power away from central government, removing central targets and giving locally elected Police and Crime Commissioners responsibility for local policing. In Scotland, power appears to be increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Chief Constable, Government ministers and the Scottish Police Authority. The Chief Constable has responsibility for the ‘direction and control’ of the police service, the ‘allocation and deployment of resources’, and involvement in the preparation of the strategic plan. Government ministers set the strategic priorities for the police service while the Scottish Police Authority appoints the Chief Constable and produces a national policing plan. At a local level, by contrast, the abolition of police authorities means that locally elected councillors have been stripped of their former powers. This raises some intriguing questions about the future relationship between the ‘national’ and ‘local’ within Scotland. For example, the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 makes clear the requirement on a local commander to submit a local policing plan to the relevant local authority for approval. Given that such a plan must have regard to the national strategic police plan as well as priorities identified by local community planning there are areas of potential tension around the balance between a ‘bottom up’ and a ‘top down’ approach to setting local priorities and objectives.

A second important difference is in terms of international policy influences on police reform programmes with England and Wales and Scotland now facing in very different directions. Indicative of the way England and Wales are seen as looking to the US, the Chair of the Association of Police Authorities (APA) declared in a comment about the introduction of PCCs that ‘the APA fundamentally opposes the import of US-style solo sheriffs to run policing in the UK’ (Sampson, 2012). By contrast, Scotland has explicitly looked to northern and western Europe for evidence of the operation and effectiveness of national police organisations. In the run up to its decision to establish a national police

force it convened an International Policing Summit at which representatives of police forces in Norway, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands spoke about the development of their national police structures to an audience that included police chiefs, local authority representatives and government officials. Indeed, there are now some striking similarities between the reform programmes in the Netherlands and Scotland. Both countries created national police forces in 2013 in order to replace regional forces (in the Netherlands there were 25 and in Scotland 8 regional forces) and in both countries the reform was based on similar arguments: the regionalized structure of the police was viewed as fragmented and lacking in coordination, resulting in duplication of effort and an ineffective approach to major challenges such as organized crime and terrorism (see Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014).

A third important difference relates to the political narrative around what the police are for. In England and Wales, the Home Secretary has made it clear that their focus must be crime reduction: 'The mission of the police which was established by Sir Robert Peel as preventing crime and disorder has not fundamentally changed' (May, 2010: 2). In Scotland, the reform programme has been used as an opportunity to articulate a set of new 'Policing Principles' within the police reform legislation in which the emphasis on crime and disorder is subsumed within a broader statement of the policing mission: 'the main purpose of policing is to improve safety and well-being of persons, localities and communities' and that this is to be achieved in a way that engages with communities and promotes measures to prevent crime, harm and disorder. There is, however, a certain irony that this focus on prevention in the policing principles has been overshadowed in the first year of Police Scotland by a strong focus on enforcement. This has been linked to the introduction of a national performance management system focused around a range of quantitative indicators and key performance targets which the Chief Constable of Police Scotland used to deliver policing in his previous role as Chief Constable of Strathclyde Police. The application of this approach to the rest of Scotland (dubbed Strathclydification or Strathclydisation by the national media) is already proving controversial. This is most clearly evident in the increasing use of stop and search as a key tactic in tackling violent crime and youth disorder. Since the 1 April 2013 over two thirds of local authority areas have had substantial increases in stop and search activity, in some areas by as much as 400%. Concerns about the long term consequences of this large increase in the use of stop and search prompted the Scottish Police Authority to focus its first ever scrutiny review on Police Scotland's policy and practice in this area and has recommended that more attention is focused on balancing police use of their stop and search powers with the rights of individuals.

The first year of Police Scotland has not therefore been without controversy and already there are competing narratives emerging which offer very different perspectives on what has been achieved. While Scottish Government and Police Scotland point to major advances in areas like the rationalisation of support functions and sharing of national expertise and assets, critics highlight tensions between the Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland over responsibility for the police budget and to public concerns over shifts in the style of policing towards a stronger focus on enforcement. As the new arrangements begin to bed down, attention will increasingly focus on assessing whether the reforms have achieved the Scottish Government's objectives of creating a national police force that offers improved local services, greater equity of access to specialist support, and enhanced connections with local communities with significantly less resources compared with the situation before reform.

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