

Session 5  
Second Tier Policing  
Police Federation for Northern Ireland

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has almost 9,500 officers and X civilian support officers. The police service is made of three separate elements: 1,000 part-time reserve, 800 full-time reserve and 7,500 regular officers. These numbers are well down from the maximum of the force when there was a combined strength of 13,500 officers. At that stage there were 3,500 full-time reserve. We introduce this point about part-time and full-time reserve officers as an example of how a 'back-up' or second -tier cadre of officers can be enormously helpful to a regular force. In the early 1970s the regular RUC as the PSNI was then called was only around 3,500 officers and was in danger of being overwhelmed by the public order confrontations and the growing number of murderous attacks on the police. In 1970, part-time reserve officers were introduced as a supplement and a relief to the regular force. In 1971 a full-time reserve was set up. Initially their duties were largely to provide security at police establishments but inevitably over the years they soon took on many of the duties and responsibilities of regular officers.

Two things contributed to the success of the policing role of the police reserve. First, they were not allowed to have a separate career structure. They were retained as constables and were never a threat to the long term career choice of the regular officer. Secondly, they became gradually integrated operationally especially in the latter years, sharing the burden and the dangers of policing in Northern Ireland. As an example of second tier policing the Northern Ireland police reserve has been a success.

The main threat of second tier policing is coming in the shape of Police Community Support Officers. This form of 'policing' with limited enforcement powers is being extensively trailed in Britain. The Government has indicated that legislation will be introduced to facilitate their recruitment in Northern Ireland.

The PFNI is utterly opposed to the introduction of PCSOs because we do not see them as being a supplement to the regular officer but as a cheaper substitute. We believe they will be gradually tasked with the softer end of policing – community beats etc, any job which requires visibility in a uniform short of serious engagement with the public. Regular police officers should not be left with only the less savoury and more dangerous levels of the job. That is not good for them or the public.

Specifically in Northern Ireland we are distinctly uneasy that PCSOs will provide a route of community control by the recruitment of cheaper or know paramilitaries. The Federation is not convinced yet that PCSOs will not include undesirables who will use the uniform to exert control over their areas.

In a similar vein the Federation is challenging the Government on its proposals to establish Community Restorative Justice systems. The republican movements favours the establishment of CRJs but rejects the involvement of the PSNI either directly or as part of the oversight. The Federation views the position of the Republican movement as consistent with their determination to control their local communities where they would be a parallel police service – nevermind second tier. Discussions continue with Government to safeguard the effectiveness of CRJs (the principle of which the Federation supports) as long as the police are involved.

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