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# Policing: back where it belongs?

Police officers should be free to do their jobs in direct response to the needs of the communities they serve and with minimal interference from government, policing minister Vernon Coaker tells Lynda King Taylor

“Let’s be clear – it is not for a politician to tell a police officer how best to police an area. You can try influence, set concepts together and work with them, but at the end of the day operational decisions rest with chief constables, officers and the individual bobby on the beat.”

An emphatic statement from Vernon Coaker, minister for policing, security and crime, and one which underlines his commitment to ensuring that communities get the policing they need without unnecessary interference from politicians.

A former deputy headmaster and the son of a police officer, Coaker believes in a “firm but fair” approach and is applying that to the huge task of implementing the green paper on police reform, with its focus on modernising policing, boycotting bureaucracy and encouraging community engagement. It also introduces the Policing Pledge – a national standard on what the public can expect from the police, underpinned in each area by a set of local priorities agreed by people in each neighbourhood.

The task is complicated by the need for new skills and ways of working as officers grapple with sweeping changes in global threats and the pace of technology; an in-tray bulging with everything from knife crime to lurking terror alerts; complaints from some senior black officers about career prospects, and grumbles from the Conservative Party over the

search of MP Damian Green’s home and office.

On politicisation Coaker is vociferous: “It’s extremely important the police have operational independence. There is a difference between politicisation where politicians control and direct the police – which is disastrous – and accountability.”

But he is conscious of an increasingly sceptical public and a financially constrained, mission-stretched police service with officers of all ranks saying morale is at a low. Can he sort it?

“Yes, I will,” he says. “I hear people say the police service in this country is the last unreformed public service. What is happening is exposing that, but changes are now taking place that can only happen with the dynamism and enthusiasm of the police forces themselves and I pay credit to that.”

“

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This, says Coaker, is not simply change for change’s sake but more a case of “police understanding they need to demonstrate how they can be more accountable to the public, and with government recognising that officers should determine how to police their areas which, in turn, will generate more confidence in the fight against crime.

“Yes it’s a new era for policing,” he says. “It’s a transformation. It’s an opportunity to bring about significant change and reform. Sometimes we may disagree, but the debate will bring this about.”

He plans a national walkabout with the aim of meeting police and their partners first-hand in every force area by the end of the summer. “This is not a cosmetic, box-ticking exercise to say that

I’ve been out there,” he says. “It’s about listening to all ranks and staff, demonstrating a connection between their concerns, views and aspirations and central policy direction. Police officers are the operational level and I will give them a strategic framework that allows them to do the job.

“It’s about empowering frontline officers and how we do that better. Look at the measures we have in place trying to bring that about, and

for command control and management to support that. A single top-down target on local confidence is a very important part of what we are trying to do, giving the officer on the beat more discretion to do the job he needs to do.”

This confidence measure, he insists, is not, as has been suggested, a motherhood and apple pie policy, but rather “a hard-edged, tough measure focusing on local people’s views about whether the police and other local agencies are tackling the crime and antisocial behaviour issues that matter to them”.

Coaker believes bureaucracy is too often an obstacle to catching criminals, but acknowledges that the reforms he wants to see bring challenges with them – including the need for officers to acquire new skills.

And he is aware that despite efforts to dispense with targets, there are those who demand statistics and similar proof of the effectiveness of that approach.

As Ken Jones, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, comments: “We are concerned other partners are still ‘on the bench’ and that unrealistic expectations are being loaded on to police neighbourhood teams. Policing in the UK sprang out of local neighbourhoods, based upon a living contract of consent between public and police that must be renewed on a daily basis.

“This is where we belong – delivering policing which is responsive, citizen-focused and meeting the needs of local neighbourhoods. However, genuinely letting go of familiar and comforting levers of power may prove easier said than done. There are many people in government and various regulatory bodies whose livelihoods depend on centralising policies, and there are many who scrutinise us and who will want to see the Policing Pledge endlessly measured and compared.”

Coaker is proud of the dedication of officers, and he insists: “The senior management I have met want the same as the rank and file on the street – they all want more empowerment for frontline officers, a reduction in targets, accountability, and a genuine interface between police and public. There is debate on how to achieve this, but our objectives are the same.”

He adds: “This does not mean the reform programme is over. It doesn’t mean there aren’t issues around accountability. We cannot deliver the Policing Pledge, crime-mapping, and the neighbourhood policing agenda without the police forces of this country. We are here to support and lead – but all the time working with police.”

As part of his new approach to policing, Coaker makes it clear there will be no return to the abortive merger proposals of 2005/06. He says: “We are not going to go back to mergers, but we will take forward collaboration. We’re going to change some of the rules around command and control so it recognises some of the joint working between forces. There will be new measures on sharing IT and there will be a measure where the Home Secretary will be able to mandate collaboration where it is deemed to be in the public interest. It’s collaboration that is important, not merger.”

**COAKER: “it’s a transformation. It’s an opportunity to bring about significant change and reform”**