

Good reasons to axe PCC elections – Steve Morphew May 2012

Even as I throw myself into the selection to stand as Labour candidate for election to the Police Commissioner my plea to Norfolk MP's is to ask the government to scrap or indefinitely delay the elections . Three good reasons why the Police and Crime Commissioner elections planned for November should be ditched

1. Forcing an election nobody wants for a role few think is worthwhile onto an electorate already worryingly alienated from the political process will just make it harder to win back public trust in politics
2. The cost of the election in November and setting up the new structure for PCC's comes with no suggestion of value for money or likely return to justify the outlay.
3. Closer working between forces and the (albeit mostly ill conceived) proposals to change police pay and conditions means it is time for a considered rethink - not a kneejerk to a preconceived solution that makes change and efficiency harder to achieve.

Three reasons for scrapping these elections, but there are deeper concerns. It is time for the future of our policing to get the proper consideration it really needs. That does mean changes, but there is no evidence a Police Commissioner is the answer to anything.

Police authorities are past their sell by date. Most people don't know who sits on them. They are not electorally accountable, yet look at your council tax bill and you'll find they levy a significant chunk in tax to fund police services. Any structure so lacking in transparency needs an overhaul. That's not to criticise those on the police authority, it's the structure that's wrong. Replacing that structure with one where a single Commissioner with a very unclear set of checks and balances makes decisions about tax doesn't feel any better than the old system.

Modern policing is not just bobby's on the beat. As well as PCSO's and closer working in partnership with agencies and local authorities (where there is massive untapped scope) crime detection and prevention is a high tech world. It's time we properly reassessed how we are policed. That needs a long period of public discussion with party politics contributing but not the driver. Police Commissioners will bring party politics into policing for the first time. Who knows what the consequences will be. Stumbling into politicising the police has got to be a bad idea.

Operational efficiencies have led to much closer working between Norfolk and Suffolk forces. No consideration of the impact of PCC's on that closer working has been made. It may be we should have an even closer or combined force - let's not prejudge, but it is far harder to take an objective view once two PCC's and their respective staff have fought elections, won a mandate and got stuck in. Not quite voting for Christmas, but it is a tough call expecting anybody to be objective in those circumstances.

There are questions about the accountability of the police. These are genuine and if the police are to enjoy the trust they have historically had we need to decide how they should be held accountable into the future. If trust is to endure the public need to feel their voice has been heard. Foisting a Police Commissioner onto them is no substitute.

The government has inexplicably decided to introduce PCC's at the time they are reviewing police pay, conditions and pensions. The highly controversial 'Winsor' report had 20,000 off duty police demonstrating on the streets recently. Alienating the police at a time the consequences will need to be managed when a new relationship being built between the Chief Constable and Police Commissioner is an unnecessary nightmare.

Any one of these elements is enough to justify stepping back for a long hard look. Ignoring them all risks the consensus that allows the police to operate in this country. By and large we are a country policed by consent, not coercion. We know the standards we expect, and we have been pretty good at telling the difference between right and wrong. If policing is too intrusive, overbearing, ineffective, or biased it may take time but it gets reforged within the furnace of public opinion.

It takes time to look properly across the whole range of policing - organisation, accountability, pay and conditions, transparency, where the consensus lies for future policing and how we maintain trust. That is best done away from the party political front line. I agree with the Police Federation on this one. A Royal Commission - a full scale independent enquiry taking evidence from every quarter and reporting back to parliament - feels like the right way to achieve a new consensus. This mechanism used to be a much more regular feature of our government but the need for swift decisions and the expense of big enquiries pushed them out of fashion. The cost of getting this wrong by being too hasty and wasting trust and money is too high. A Royal Commission with measured timescale would be a good investment.

Even as I stand for selection as Labour a candidate for election to the Police Commissioner my plea to Norfolk MP's is to ask the government to scrap or indefinitely delay the elections until the job of deciding how we want to be policed in future has been done properly. Speak to coalition MP's in private and many have reservations. I don't ask them to be disloyal to their government, I don't want them to protect the status quo, but more importantly I don't want them to risk the public trust at the core of successful policing in our county and country.

Scrap the police commissioner elections now - save the cash and let's spend it on planning a proper future for our police.