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"Iain is a Principal Lecturer in University of Cumbria's School of Justice, bringing over 30 years of operational policing experience to this academic position. From originating one of the first Police - Academic collaborations in 2010, to designing, delivering and managing a series of Policing oriented higher education programmes. Iain prides himself on combining practitioners' views with an academic approach to his team's learning material. This content originates from a wealth of personal and professional experiences and conversations. Always enthusiastic to speak about policing matters Iain can be contacted at: iain.stainton@cumbria.ac.uk"

POLICING COVID

I was looking forward to Thursday 19th March 2020. A Civil Contingencies exercise had been planned for my students providing an opportunity to bring real world emphasis to their studies. Testing real time decision making and introducing dynamic demands to these professionals of the future. The materials had been created and everything put in place, final checks were interrupted by a colleague who recommended I check my messages. Thus Covid 19 arrived in my professional world.

Three decades as a police officer prepared me to dynamically respond to most occurrences, drawing on policy, guidance tried and trusted plans, referring to experiences, accessing and analysing my own internal databases to react professionally to most matters. A move to higher education introduced decision making drawing on theory and analysis of past events and responses to provide solutions for future actions.

The unique challenges of Policing Covid 19 in turn challenged all these tried and trusted techniques officers rely on to support their practice.

The 1829 'Peelian' foundations of Policing, summarised as the public being the Police and Police being the public establishes the situation where the police are the guardians of our society's security. Effectively being the section of society charged with the full-time role of preserving the peace to be found in the aged social contract establishing the foundations of this arrangement across both society and its guardians. Consider then the challenges and uncertainty that officers and Police staff faced in addressing the situation professionally when at the same time they were replicating the actions of many of us, drawing their families and loved ones into a protective cocoon whilst embracing their duty to protect all of society in a duality of protector and protected. Giving rise to a set of considerations it would be difficult to explain to those who have never experienced such contrasts.

Fielding (2005) explains that Policing often operates at the heart of social conflict, addressing an eclectic range of behaviours ergo at first sight policing was well prepared for the forthcoming challenges. Much comment and opinion is currently ventured as to trust in Police. The transparency and fairness of many policing actions is built upon a realisation that laws represent matters society does not approve of and a realisation that policing is charged with addressing transgressions on our behalf, thus providing an acceptability of actions that would not otherwise be tolerated. Such was the speed of developments during lockdown with little foundation in matters we are familiar with, which coupled with the evolving safety messages the result of which seemed to be to instil fear, that the unjustness of restrictions and associated police actions became prevalent, amplified by the ability of all citizens to be journalists in our digital age.

Those who work with risk are rarely described to be risk seekers. Risk professionals mitigate risky environments to achieve an acceptable threshold. Considering this alongside the Peelian principles helps to recognise that during the constantly developing risk scenarios of Covid 19, when guidance to isolate, socially distance and remain in tightly controlled groups were being reinforced by constantly evolving warnings as to the dangers of not doing so; the position of police officers and staff who were balancing these restrictions on their own personal and family life against the duty to police as closely to normal as the far from normal circumstances permitted; a situation which would verge on the untenable to the non-policing public.

Police officers are leaders in many demanding situations, it is recognised that police arrival at a scene is often accompanied by a transition of control that has more to do with a uniform than any perceived seniority. This situation has become part of our society's norms over lengthy periods when police officers were recognised as experts in their field. Issuing and receiving direction, and guidance in the early stages of any challenging environment has more to do with the perceived legitimacy of those issuing the direction than specific expertise a matter police training as long recognised. When combined with the realisation that initial responders are apt to be the least experienced, the importance of society's trust in the legitimacy of policing is paramount.

As an emergency service it is expected that policing is at the forefront of any crisis situation, such as with Covid 19 when officers were charged with policing the wider determinants of public health such as travel, residence, social distancing and public gatherings all of which in less demanding times would be regarded as overly intrusive. The legitimacy of intrusive practice is commonly legislated for providing a necessity balance between benefit and detriment. The evolutionary manner in which law mirrors social norms is reflected in the emergency powers provisions of Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA) which provided foundations for emergency planning such becoming law. The chosen path of Coronavirus Act 2020 (CA) as legislation introducing legal obligations introduced a challenge to the perceptions of Police as informed arbiters of law and the powers it bestows. Emergency situations allow no preparation opportunities, whilst general planning under the terms of CCA was invaluable, CA provisions detail was being provided to the public in the same time frame and detail as to the Police further eroding the expert status.

The College of Policing 4 E guidance to Engage, Explain, Encourage before considering Enforcement may be interpreted as defining a policing approach which has been found to work since the adoption of the modern police in 1829. The role of policing societal restrictions during lockdown tends to introduce a barrier between police and public. Personally, I experienced a nervousness on noticing a police vehicle, mentally preparing a reason for being at a place at a time whereas in more normal times I would barely register a policing presence. Anecdotally I learned of a plethora of calls to police accusing neighbours of lockdown transgression each requiring attention, the result of which had a tendency to introduce a **Panopticism** based siege mentality within communities

Whilst the Covid 19 Policing role is comparable to that of National Health Service workers, the public perception seems different. One of the tenets of Policing is protecting the balance of freedoms alongside preserving the peace and protecting society from harm or injury. In customary periods the use of law and associated powers granted to the office of constable are acceptable to the majority, and restrictions provided in law and ramifications for breaching them accepted as a 'price worth paying'. Public support has the ability to lessen the demands of the most trying situations. However, the visibility of support for health workers did not seem to be mirrored to policing. It is not possible to calculate if this affected officers' perceptions of how the public related to their actions but if there was an effect it must have been negative.

The majority of us are not legal scholars but do understand we should not assault fellow citizens, steal, speed or insult amongst a myriad of other laws. We understand the reason for and value of societal rules. The chosen regulatory path of Coronavirus Act 2020 and Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) Regulations introduced hitherto unknown laws to govern society's actions and was given to the Police to enforce. Policing an era of uncertainty through uncertain powers and laws created a cocktail of insecurity which feeds suspicion and disdain. Communications strategies employed during lockdown were accompanied by commentary and opinion, the traditional era of expert guidance being replaced by the speed and coverage of the digital era bringing a previously unencountered opportunities for expert and pseudo expert contributions, impinging on a public's understanding of a barely understood, rapidly developing phenomenon. The unconscious understanding of not necessarily agreeing but accepting how and why restrictions and laws are enforced with the United Kingdom could not necessarily be applied to this era.

It seems that the lasting impact of nationwide events such as 1980's miners strike on police and public relations has not occurred, although this may be disguised by a number of other influences for instance the conviction of Wayne Couzins. Covid 19 represented the ultimate global influence on local events, the realisation that trust in our police has a multiplicity of influential factors both within and outside the ability of policing to affect reflects an increased importance in each officer's realisation that their actions always have the potential for far reaching implications, positive as well as negative.

References:

Fielding, N. (2005 2nd Ed) *The Police and Social Conflict*, London: Glasshouse Press.