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# FROM 'IRON FISTS' TO 'BUNCHES OF FIVES': A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON DIALOGUE (OR LIAISON) APPROACHES TO POLICING POLITICAL PROTEST



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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the recent academic assertion that police attempts to engage in dialogue before and during protest events (ostensibly to facilitate the participants' preferred means of political expression) are perhaps more realistically concerned with collecting useful intelligence about demonstrators' likely motives and activities, and preparing advance justification for possible police interventions. A case study is presented of the work carried out by a 15-person South Yorkshire Police 'Police Liaison Team' (PLT) in relation to the 'anti-Lib Dem' political protest occurring in the major English city of Sheffield in March 2011. Using a combination of participant observation and interviews with police and demonstrators, the study highlights compelling similarities between the tactical approach and underlying objectives of the PLT and those subscribed to by public order specialists in the Metropolitan Police Service in the early 1990s. In common with their 'Met' counterparts, the PLT used carefully cultivated exchange relationships with protest organisers as means of gathering intelligence, securing compliance with police preferences for the routes of marches and establishing parameters of 'acceptable' behaviour. However, by using the relatively new tactic of immersing themselves in the crowd, PLT members were also able to maintain 'open' lines of communication with protesters and provide a stream of unerringly accurate 'dynamic risk assessments' to remote senior commanders. This tactic helped to ensure that there were few unsettling 'surprises' on both sides, that there were no unnecessary, indiscriminate or over-punitive police interventions, and that the police operation was ultimately regarded by protest organisers as having been exceptionally tolerant and 'facilitating'.

## INTRODUCTION

A recent article by Baker (2013) considers the extent to which the growing use of 'dialogue policing' (with its accent on liaising and negotiating with demonstrators before and during political protests) represents a bona fide means of promoting the 'right' to protest, or actually constitutes little more than a disingenuous form of 'symbolic theatre' — a 'ritualistic sham'. The latter perspective is alluded to in Baker's article by the co-organiser of an Australian climate camp protest ('Switch off Hazelwood, Switch off Coal, Switch off Renewable') who likens negotiations with the police to a 'smoke and mirrors chess game', involving both sides vying for relevant information, and also establishing a moral position of 'we've spoken to you, you've

spoken to us, we've played friendly. On the day, how much of what you've committed to will you stand by?' (quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 94-95).

While such evidence leads Baker to conclude that 'ritualistic games' of this nature are undoubtedly replete with ulterior motives on all sides, he insists that they tend also to be mutually beneficial, not least by helping to legitimise and facilitate peaceful dissent while allowing the police to 'maintain control by conveying expectations for crowd behaviour and remaining in control of public space' (*ibid.*, p. 100). All of this may well entail 'lingering suspicion on both sides', allied to police contingency planning ('a dual mode of policing') in cases where uncooperative groups of protesters spurn the invitation to negotiate (*ibid.*, p. 100); but even in situations where it fails to become all-encompassing, dialogue remains a



vitaly important mechanism insofar as it 'creates the context for a better understanding, a greater chance of negotiated outcomes and protester compliance, and enhanced predictability for the parties involved' (ibid.).

These views chime with those of UK academics who, like the present author, have generally approved of recent attempts by British police forces to help 'facilitate the right to protest' by adopting communication-based tactics and strategies, based on seminal Swedish Dialogue Policing approaches (Gorringer *et al.*, 2012; Gorringer and Rosie, 2013; Stott *et al.*, 2013; D. Waddington, 2013). Such methods are consistent with official recommendations appearing in the wake of the controversial policing of the 2009 G20 protest in central London (HMCIC, 2009a, 2009b). On that occasion, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) were heavily criticised for using over-zealous tactics which saw hundreds of protesters 'kettled' (contained and detained) for several hours, and an innocent bystander (Ian Tomlinson) die of injuries sustained during an unwarranted assault by a police officer which only reached public attention when a 'citizen journalist' disclosed relevant video footage to The Guardian newspaper (Greer and McGlaughlin, 2010; Rosie and Gorringer, 2009).

This strong commitment to using effective communication and dialogue also underpins the GODIAC project (e.g. GODIAC, 2013), a European Union-funded initiative involving case studies of protest policing in nine separate nations, whose recommendations for a common European approach to policing 'political manifestations' firmly endorse the four key 'principles of conflict reduction' identified by Reicher and his co-workers — namely: education (understanding the various 'social identities', values, beliefs and objectives of the different sections of the crowd); facilitation (striving to help protesters achieve their legitimate goals); communication (employing negotiation, prior to and during the event, with the intention of reaching agreements, and avoiding any misunderstandings or unpleasant surprises); and differentiation (resisting the inclination to treat all members of the crowd in uniform manner, irrespective of whether they are 'guilty' or 'innocent') (Reicher *et al.* 2007).

7What UK commentators in particular have not sufficiently emphasised is the degree to which this 'new' dialogue approach shares compelling

similarities with the negotiation-oriented public order policing methods observed more than two decades ago by PAJ Waddington (1994) in his two-year study of the MPS. Waddington's basic revelation that senior MPS public order commanders were apt to use various forms of 'guile' and 'interactional ploys' in order to induce (or even outfox) protest organisers into staging their marches and demonstrations more in accordance with police interests and objectives than those of the protest participants is certainly of relevance to the issues raised by Baker. The following article seeks to address this important oversight by reopening discussion, first set out in D. Waddington (2013) and D. Waddington and McSeveny (2012), of the recent police operation implemented by South Yorkshire Police (SYP) in response to the anti-Lib Dem protest, staged in Sheffield city centre in March 2011.

The first section of the article not only outlines the underlying principles and objectives of the Dialogue Policing approach, but also alludes to some of the possible difficulties associated with its practical application. The second section then summarises the main findings from PAJ Waddington's important study of negotiation-based policing in the MPS. These initial sections will provide the context for a case study, spanning four further sections, of the composition, ethos, activities and 'effectiveness' of the Police Liaison Team employed by SYP at the anti-Lib Dem protest, of any problems the team encountered, and of its relations both with protesters and 'more conventional' public order Police Support Units (PSU). This case study will form the basis of a concluding section, focusing on the extent to which the type of methods implemented by SYP represent a novel, safer and more enlightened form of protest policing, and constitute a genuine and sincere attempt by the police to facilitate the 'right to protest'.

## DIALOGUE POLICING: PRINCIPLES AND PROBLEMS

The Swedish Dialogue Policing approach has been comprehensively outlined by Holgersson and Knutsson (2011). According to these authors, it involves an overall commitment to: (i) ensuring the facilitation of the demonstrators' legitimate goals, via self-policing if possible; (ii) using a 'counterpart perspective' to anticipate





the likely reactions of sections of the crowd to possible police interventions; and (iii) employing sufficient tactical differentiation to tailor police activities to the diversity of crowd. Its overriding objective is to 'facilitate expressions of freedom of speech and the right to demonstrate' in the hope of minimising confrontation, injury and destruction of property.

The majority of a dialogue officer's work involves building up trusting relationships with organisers and protest groups, perhaps stretching over a period of several months, which can then serve as the basis for pre-event negotiation. Typically, such negotiation will involve determining agreed routes of marches and whether (and, if so, how close) they will be allowed to come in reach of sensitive buildings or locations. This process will inevitably result in compromise, or even give rise to partially or entirely novel sets of arrangements.

When on duty, dialogue officers operate in pairs. They are usually decked out in civilian clothes, but are distinguishable by yellow vests bearing the inscription 'Dialogue Police'.

During the protest per se, the dialogue officers strive to ensure that prior agreements are upheld, work to sustain two-way communication between the police and demonstrators, attempt to de-escalate potentially conflictual incidents, and transmit regular readings of the changing moods of the crowd:

*'The aim of dialogue police officers is to be near critical places, enabling vital information, assessments, and feedback about problems and the police way of acting to be continuously passed on to the commanders. Police actions and interventions can also be explained to demonstrators. An important function is to try to influence a plan or ongoing activity by the police that may be perceived as provocative by the demonstrators.'* (ibid., p. 204)

Holgerson and Knutsson (2011) concede that this inherent role dichotomy has resulted in dialogue police being looked upon as 'traitors' by their police colleagues and as 'devious intelligence gatherers' by protesters. Pressure exerted on them by commanders to simply gather intelligence and/or convey police directives to the crowd may conflict with their need to exercise discretion and avoid being seen as a police 'message boy'. Commanding officers sometimes accuse dialogue police of having become too sympathetic toward the demonstrators (having

'gone native'), and are apt to dismiss or overrule their observations and advice. Police of all ranks often feel frustrated by exhortations from dialogue officers to exercise more patience, restraint and compromise. Injunctions of this nature rob them of the customary satisfaction that comes from accomplishing things by force. To ask them to 'stand back and do nothing' in the presence of an 'unruly' crowd constitutes an insulting waste of their time and expertise, and involves a perceived dereliction of duty.

Wahlströhm (2007) points to similar attitudes among Swedish trainee public order commanders who resented the prospect of using communication as part of a process of give and take, rather than a means of insisting on outright public compliance. Certainly, Wahlströhm is far more explicit than Holgerson and Knutsson in acknowledging the obvious tension existing between the Swedish police's commitment to dialogue with protesters and the 'purely instrumental dimension embedded in such interaction' (Wahlströhm 2007, p. 400). He is clearly agnostic in asserting that

*'In sum, what is distinctive about the contemporary Swedish case is the (temporarily) high level of critical reflection among police regarding their interaction with protesters. Whether this will open up possibilities for genuinely more democratic forms of protest policing, or merely lead to nothing but more subtle forms of coercion, is still too early to say.'* (ibid.)

## NEGOTIATING PROTEST IN THE EARLY 1990S

Wahlströhm's agnosticism echoes scepticism expressed by British academics in relation to more the 'negotiated' style of public order management introduced in the wake of high-profile confrontations of the 1980s and early 1990s around such issues as pit closures, the introduction of new technology and the inception of the poll tax. These commentators identified the new police methods as constituting arguably more subtle ways ('the iron fist in the velvet glove') of containing or repressing political dissent and of restoring some much-needed legitimacy to the police (King and Brearley, 1996; D. Waddington, 1996, 1998). Ironically, evidence in favour of this view was contained in





empirical work undertaken by PAJ Waddington (1994, 1998), someone not customarily critical of the police. Waddington's two-year participant observation study of public order policing in the MPS demonstrated the means by which senior officers were able successfully to achieve their objectives by using pre-event negotiation to ensure that protesters march peacefully along the police's preferred route while causing a minimum of disruption and inconvenience to ongoing city life. In short, 'Negotiation was less a process of "give and take" and more that of the organiser giving and the police taking. The police were enormously successful at ensuring that protest took place on their terms' (Waddington, 1994, p. 101).

Outcomes of this type were invariably secured via the police usage of a range of communicative 'ploys' in the build-up to the protest, such as displays of spurious friendship towards organisers, donating helpful guidance and advice, or extending apparently unconditional favours.

*'Thus, negotiations are conducted with the amicability and good humor [sic] that would seem more appropriate to arranging a loan from a bank...Such amicability is not the product of genuine liking for or agreement with the organisers, the campaigns they represent, or their cause. It is a studied performance designed to dispel any tension, hostility or antagonism that the organiser might harbor [sic]. Once negotiation begins, the police stance is one of proffering help and advice — "How can we help you?" — "help you," that is, to "do it our way." Many organisers are inexperienced and so the police "organise it for them." They recommend routes along which to march, provide the telephone numbers of officials in other organisations that need to be contacted, and suggest how difficulties might be resolved'.* (Waddington, 1998: 120-1)

The police know that contact and benevolence of this nature implicitly commits the organisers both to upholding an exchange relationship and assuming a position of mutual responsibility for potential problems that might occur (Waddington, 1994, p. 84). Police and organisers thus have a shared interest in the outcome of the demonstration — hence, the greater propensity for relevant information and intelligence to be reciprocated, especially in relation to groups or individuals deemed likely to be 'troublemakers' (ibid.). This arguably cynical side to the police involvement is underlined by Waddington's further disclosure that,

*'(A)lthough the police might have genuine affection for some organisers, the appearance of friendliness was often a studied performance. Almost unfailingly, organisers' veracity and competence were subjected to withering scrutiny the moment they left the negotiating meeting. On some occasions, police officers, who a few minutes earlier were friendly to the point of being unctuous, denigrated the organisers' personal qualities... Indeed, all organisers tended to be regarded with suspicion'.* (Waddington, 1994, p. 87)

Other pre-event measures are undertaken to offset the risk of any individual or teams of officers engaging in 'ill-considered' actions likely to spark off unwanted confrontation. This is typically achieved by: (a) determining that only the most capable and trusted public order commanders get assigned to the event; (b) engaging in pre-event 'strategy meetings' in which all tactical contingencies are discussed; and (c) ensuring that all junior ranks are thoroughly briefed in terms of the operational goals and ethos. Police interaction with organisers and other protesters on the day of the event will also exude ostentatious bonhomie; riot police (though heavily tooled up and at-the-ready if needed) will be kept well out of sight of the demonstrators and senior officers will jump at any opportunity to brief civilian stewards and their marshals in terms of the collaborative relationship the police are hoping will prevail.

It is by exercising such means that the MPS routinely accomplished 'nonconfrontational control' over protest demonstrations, based on the compliance of the organisers (Waddington, 1998, p. 123). PAJ Waddington is adamant that police public order commanders pride themselves on their professional commitment to 'recognising the unquestioned right' of all citizens to protest (ibid., p. 129). Waddington further contends that

*'Police officers recoil from the suggestion that they are sometimes deceitful, but deception is a routine feature of social exchange. Their friendliness towards organisers was often 'spurious' but no more so than that displayed by a salesman to a customer'.* (Waddington, 1994, p. 102)

He nonetheless acknowledges that, somewhere amidst this process of ensuring that demonstrations are conducted largely on police terms, the interests of the protesters are correspondingly compromised: 'Protest is [thus] emasculated





and induced to conform to the avoidance of trouble. In police argot, protest organisers are 'had over' [in other words, intentionally duped]' (ibid., p. 198).

## RESEARCH METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The remainder of this article is now devoted to evaluating the extent to which SYP's decision to employ a police liaison approach (based on principles of dialogue policing) actually reflects a sincere and significant shift towards a more enlightened and facilitating contemporary style of public order policing, or may be more justifiably regarded as a merely a modern, more subtle manifestation of the type of cynical police methods being exercised some twenty years ago.

The relevant data on which the following discussion is based derive from an ethnographic study in which the author and ten volunteer academic colleagues acted as participant observers, while a full-time research assistant engaged in retrospective and contemporaneous tracking of police Twitter messages and other social media channels of relevance to the protest (e.g. Facebook, Indymedia and the local Sheffield Forum). Eleven in-depth interviews were also carried out with police personnel (the Gold, Assistant Gold and Silver Commanders; a Silver negotiator/coordinator; two Public Order Bronze Commanders; the Bronze, two sub-Bronzes and a police constable forming part of the 'Police Liaison Team'; and a Social Media Officer) and three protest organisers — the Chair of the Sheffield Anti-Cuts Alliance (SACA, see below), a SACA Steering Committee member, and the President of Sheffield Hallam University's Students' Union (SU).

## THE SHEFFIELD 'ANTI-LIB DEM' RALLY

The Sheffield anti-Lib Dem protest of March 2011 was called and organised by a coalition of local trade union groups and political activists calling itself the Sheffield Anti-Cuts Alliance (SACA). Following the formation one year earlier of a Coalition Government between the

Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties, Nick Clegg (the newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister, but also Lib Dem leader and MP for Sheffield Hallam) had nominated Sheffield City Hall as the venue for his party's Annual Spring Conference in what was regarded, at the time, as a benevolent gesture to his 'home town'. Since then, however, the Lib Dems and their leader had become locally unpopular, having co-sanctioned with the Conservatives a raft of controversial policies (e.g. sweeping public sector spending cuts and the raising of university tuition fees) which appeared to contradict their pre-election promises. This apparent 'betrayal' of the electorate went down especially badly in Sheffield, which is the home of two major universities (Sheffield Hallam and the University of Sheffield) and is disproportionately reliant on public sector employment in comparison to most other major cities (D. Waddington, 2013).

The prospect of Mr Clegg and his party receiving a rowdy local reception had a major bearing on the strategies and tactics underlying SYP's Operation Obelisk, though other factors were undoubtedly also influential. According to the Gold Commander, the recent 'Adapting to Protest' reports (HMCIC, 2009a, 2009b) had underlined the legal imperatives under the European Convention on Human Rights to uphold (and, indeed, facilitate) the right to protest, as well as ensure the safety of the Lib Dem delegates and the security of the venue. Due consideration also had to be given to making sure that city centre shops, cafes, hotels and restaurants were sufficiently unaffected by the protest to benefit from the influx of conference attendees, and that the city's image as a 'safe' and 'friendly' tourist or conference centre would hopefully be enhanced.

To SYP's great relief and satisfaction, the two days of protest were virtually trouble-free. A relatively small crowd of 800 protesters gathering on the afternoon of Friday, 11 March, in anticipation of the arrival of Lib Dem delegates, posed no real problems for the police. Then, on the following morning, a larger crowd of 2 000 - 3000 people (which subsequently grew in size to around 5 000) set off on a two-mile march through the city before finally assembling on Barker's Pool, a pedestrian concourse directly in front of the City Hall. The only noteworthy incidents occurred when 30 members of UK Uncut (a grass-roots movement employing direct action to highlight alternatives to the British government's policy



of reducing public spending) were ejected from a handful of stores and the branch of a well-known High Street bank, and when a 24-year-old man ignited a firework flare and scaled a police protective barrier in what resulted in the only arrest of the entire event.

It is indisputable that the presence of this barrier, which was integral to a part-metal, part-concrete 'fence', encircling the City Hall venue, was fundamental to the success of the police operation, insofar as it helped limit direct contact between police and protesters, while still enabling the latter to remain within sight and sound of the arriving Lib Dem delegates. Arguably of even more significance, however, were the activities of the 15-person Police Liaison Team (PLT), which engaged in pre-event discussion and negotiation with protest organisers, and then mingled with the crowds on the two days of the event with the intentions of facilitating protest and promoting a 'no surprises approach' to the policing of the demonstration.

## THE POLICE LIAISON TEAM: ETHOS AND OBJECTIVES

Previous publications (e.g. D. Waddington, 2011, 2013) have emphasised that SYP's decision to adopt a deliberately 'facilitating' police liaison approach to their handling of the anti-Lib Dem protest reflected an enduring force commitment to restoring public trust and confidence in the wake of their controversial roles in the 1984-5 miners' strike and the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster (see esp. D. Waddington [2011] for a fuller discussion of these cases). Interviewees also referred to the progressive and liberal-minded attitudes of their more senior colleagues as another determinant of this novel strategic direction. Particular emphasis was placed on the fact that SYP's Chief Constable currently occupied the position of ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) Lead on public order, and had recently signed off a document committing all British forces to a more communication-oriented approach (ACPO/ACPO/NPIA, 2010).

'I can't speak about other areas, but I do think that, in this force we are very alive to and receptive to these types of ideas and relatively forward-thinking...and I do think that we're extremely keen to embrace all of this stuff. I also

think that [The Silver Commander's] openness to looking at new ideas was also really encouraging from an operational and planning point of view'. (Interview, Public Order Bronze)

One main objective of the police operation was to provide the Silver Commander with what he termed an 'information picture' of the likely size and composition of the crowd, of which constituent sections or individuals were liable to prove cooperative or not, and of what policing measures were therefore necessary to balance the right to protest with the corresponding need to maintain public order. A second important goal was to cultivate a 'no surprises' approach whereby the intentions and activities of all parties were as well communicated, predictable and mutually endorsed as possible. The final, arguably overriding, police objective was to enhance their capacity to make sensible, well-informed tactical interventions:

'The third bit for me was that I wanted the capability to build a dynamic risk assessment to assist actual decision-making — about the potential impact of police tactics, really, so we could have that discussion around 'What's the best approach, here, to deal with that element of the crowd, *in your view* from the vantage point of being down amongst the crowd?' (Interview, Silver Commander)

To accomplish these objectives, the Silver Commander set up a 15-person Police Liaison Team (PLT), to be centrally coordinated on the day of the event by a remote 'Silver Command' team consisting of himself and an assistant Negotiator Co-ordinator, a female colleague of equal rank. This pair worked in close conjunction with a five-person Social Media Team (SMT), led by a female inspector, whose function was to monitor and respond to relevant messages appearing on Twitter, Facebook and the Sheffield Forum blog, and to transmit informative and reassuring messages to protesters and members of the wider general public.

While immediate overall authority over the PLT was assigned to a Bronze commander at Chief Inspector level (the 'PLT Bronze'), during the protest proper the team was divided up into equal sub-groups of five. The first of these consisted of four lower-ranking officers (sergeants or police constables) under the direct supervision of the PLT Bronze, and the remaining two of similar groups of junior officers which each reported to



a 'sub-Bronze' commander of Inspector level. In addition to each having experience of public order leadership, the PLT Bronze, two sub-Bronzes and Negotiator Co-ordinator were all highly trained 'crisis negotiators'.

The lower ranks of the PLT were made up of hand-picked individuals who were already highly regarded (e.g. due to their work on Safer Neighbourhood Teams) for their communication skills and capacity to engage with the general public: 'The type of individuals who, they already knew, were not quick on the draw, and who could handle people with some patience while keeping up a pleasant smile' (Interview, PLT Sub-bronze). Steps were taken to ensure that the public was able to see the PLT as visibly and qualitatively 'different' from the other police present:

*'In the old days of public order, the police were the forbidding black line, but now people see fluorescent jackets and it's 'Look out, here come the police!' So, we deliberately went for something very different. We went for blue tabards with 'Liaison Officer' on them, which deliberately kept us very separate from the other officers'.* (Interview, PLT Sub-bronze)

This general commitment to a softer, communications-based approach to protest policing was exemplified by the attitudes of two strategically important commanding officers, the PLT Bronze and the Public Order Bronze commander with overall responsibility for deploying PSUs at the actual protest venue. The former had followed Silver's recommendation by attending a one-day professional development course at Liverpool University, where participants were addressed by a specialist in Swedish Dialogue Policing methods and a principal legal adviser to the HMCIC 'Adapting to Protest' inquiry:

*'To be honest, one of the things that stick in my mind is that there was a Chief Superintendent from somewhere or other who asked a question along the lines of: "Aren't we bending over backwards for the protest groups?" And [the legal adviser] gave him a great answer that will always stick in my mind. She said to him, "Your job is to uphold the law, and the Human Rights Act is the law. That's your job and you can't pick and choose which bits of the law you like." And I must say that I came away and built our briefings and tactics around that statement'.* (Interview, PLT Bronze)

His Bronze public order counterpart explained in interview how it was the political conviction resulting from a family background of trade union support and the insight provided by subsequent university education which enabled him also to 'buy into' this softer policing style. Previously, he reckoned, the 'British model of policing' had been unfairly designed to serve the rich, and he therefore welcomed the progression to a more universal appreciation of people's rights: *'These rights are there for all of us to enjoy and, in the past, I don't think we've been sufficiently conscious of that. So, yes, I do buy into it'.*

## PRE-EVENT LIAISON

During pre-event planning for Operation Obelisk, the Silver Commander stated a preference for the march to follow a clearly prescribed route, which (for safety reasons) would involve protesters departing from tradition by not bearing down on the City Hall via Devonshire Street, and taking a more circuitous route via the lower end of town. Pre-event liaison with organisers was therefore geared to using standard sets of negotiating skills à la the Metropolitan police commanders observed by PAJ Waddington twenty years earlier. Such repertoires would be used, not only to gain the demonstrators' compliance with the preferred route, but also to optimise police intelligence and thereby ensure that there would be 'no surprises' from any party's perspective on the day.

*'We have these things called "bunches of fives" in negotiator terms, which are basically reasons to do something. If you're negotiating with someone over the phone or face-to-face, it's always good practice to have these bunches of fives: five reasons not to kill yourself; five reasons to go this way down the street; five reasons to let hostages go, and so on. We also have something else called PPAs — "Positive Police Actions" — where it's a kind of reciprocity thing, really: "This is what we've done for you. What can you do for us?" So, we were looking round in terms of, 'What can we bring from negotiating, from crisis and hostage intervention, into dealing with people who aren't overtly hostile, but who are not anticipating police in their midst. It was a case of: "How can we sell what we want to happen on that day, rather than enforcing it?" So, we'd got rehearsed bunches of fives as to why they should take that route'.* (Interview, PLT Sub-bronze)







The police modus operandi involved contacting key organisers, such as SACA personnel and the presidents of the Sheffield Hallam University and University of Sheffield student unions. The SACA representative was personally escorted round the proposed route of the march, and the perceived merits similarly explained (in bunches of five) to student union officers during visits by the trained negotiators:

*'But that's undoubtedly where the skill and the craft of the liaison team came to the fore, because it was about them saying: "Well, actually, if we take you down Fitzwilliam Street, you go along Charter Row, down onto Pinstone Street, you're going past the seat of democracy in Sheffield, the Town Hall; you've got a longer march route, so you're going to get more people seeing and hearing what you're protesting about and guarantee prime locations for the media to be able to pick up and monitor what you're doing"'. (Interview, Negotiator Co-ordinator)*

The 'guided tour' accorded to the SACA representative also provided an opportunity for police intelligence-gathering and for the two parties to learn of each other's intentions: 'All through the route, we were just chatting about the policing, what they expected of us, what we expected of them, and basically he was picking my brain for how many numbers we expected, and quite reasonable things such as what we expected might happen' (Interview, SACA Representative). The police also used existing communication channels between Safer Neighbourhood officers and the students' union to accumulate similar intelligence and insight:

*'We agreed to this, and he came and asked us: one, what we had planned for the event; and two, whether we had any idea what other groups might be planning for it. I'm signed up to a lot of databases with various cuts movements and things, so we made a point of relaying to the police any information arising from emails, and that sort of thing, that we thought might be relevant. We have an open line with the police all year round and we always feel that we can talk to them in confidence, and vice-versa, so it was all about keeping that dialogue open with them'. (Interview, Sheffield Hallam University SU President)*

Equivalent questions were asked of the University of Sheffield SU President, who was able to provide some helpful observations, based on the appearance of graffiti, leaflets and online communication, of the intentions of participating

groups which had chosen not to liaise with the police. The content and tone of such discussions helped reassure the police that the students unions were out to avoid and, indeed, distance themselves from the type of violent protest that had been witnessed during the London demonstration:

*'We certainly had groups who weren't that open in their communication and were quite covert in their ambitions, so there was always that element of the unknown. But overall, we felt pretty secure from meeting their representatives that we knew just how 80 per cent of the people wanted the protest to turn out.... The brief was to come up with a way to communicate more effectively with the protest groups... to show that, as a police service, we'd made a measured approach and been sort of proportionate. If people then chose not to listen to what we were asking them to do to work together with us in what we were trying to achieve, then we'd at least have some legitimacy for any more robust police action that might eventually prove necessary'. (Interview, Negotiator Co-ordinator)*

As part of their 'no surprises' approach, PLT officers asked organisers whether any of the proposed police tactics made them feel uncomfortable or might risk worrying or aggravating their constituents. The police emphasised how they wanted to avoid kettling at all costs, but maintained that, should the need ever arise, liaison officers would immediately appear to set the innocent free. The PLT Bronze presented each organiser with his card and maintained regular contact in the days leading up to the protest. A further example of this strong 'personal touch' was his assurance to the Hallam union president that, 'If I ever found myself in a kettle, I could give him a ring and he'd personally come and let me out' (Interview, Sheffield Hallam University SU President).

The Hallam SU branch had recently received a statement by a group which threatened to smash up the union building because they had been refused permission to stage a conference there on the day of the protest. The moment the police became aware of this they assigned officers to guard the building. This underlying commitment to building rapport and establishing the basis of an exchange relationship was further evident in the PLT's undertaking to set up a sound system for one group of protesters which would otherwise have been banned from the protest.



*'I've no doubt that, had they gone to the police line, the bobbies' response would have been: "My briefing is you can't bring that down here, so therefore the answer is no." Because they'd heard this approach, the Police Liaison Team, who was already identifiable as the resolvers of these sorts of issues, said, "Yes, we can do that for you. Some of the [PLT] will go down and we'll get that set up for you, no problem". So straight away you're starting to build up a relationship, and it starts to provide a principle for trading'. (Interview, Silver Commander)*

On the day of the march, the PLT exchanged first names and phone numbers with any organisers and stewards they had previously had no contact with. Thereafter, both parties maintained an amicable working relationship whereby, according to the Chair of SACA, the police 'worked with us on the march and joked with us constantly'.

## THE PLT IN PRACTICE

Police respondents maintain that this kind of preparatory work yielded extremely important dividends. One such benefit occurred on the first day of the protest when a Lib Dem delegate who was due to stand in the forthcoming election for Lord Mayor of London suddenly, and without warning, entered the growing crowd of protesters as they awaited the arrival of conference participants. Once there, he rather heatedly explained to the encircling crowd members why their political views were so misguided. According to the Silver Commander, the 'highly volatile situation' created by this unanticipated manoeuvre was rendered potentially more combustible by the unhelpful activities of one particular member of the crowd who was a 'known troublemaker':

*'I can't name this guy, but we had a student leader, for example, who we know was desperate to get people motivated, but we neutered him: he was completely ineffective because of the PLT's intervention and the way they went to work. He just didn't get the support he needed'. (Interview, Silver Commander)*

Silver conceded that, had he been forced to respond to this incident on the evidence of CCTV footage alone, he would not have hesitated from sending in a Police Support Unit (of up to 22 officers with specialist training in public order).

However, the feedback he received from the PLT Bronze, who was positioned a mere two metres away from the actual incident, provided an altogether more accurate dynamic risk assessment on which to gauge his response:

*'All of the time, I was sending messages on my radio to [The Negotiator Co-ordinator], saying "Tell Silver not to do anything. Tell Silver not to react and send any resources in because, in actual fact, this crowd is self-policing". As he was saying, "Can I be allowed the floor?" there were other protesters trying to shout him down, but there were others still who were insisting: "No, quiet! He's come into speak, so let him have his say". And I found it fascinating to watch, and it was the first time it struck me that we had ended up directly influencing police tactics'. (Interview, PLT Bronze)*

Several similar instances arose on the second day of the protest. For example, a series of timely observations by the PLT team ensured that Silver Command rightly regarded such activities as youths repeatedly beating the perimeter fence with wooden placard handles or daubing graffiti on a statue (with chalk, rather than paint, as it had initially been assumed) as considerably more innocuous than they had seemed on first appearances. When the only arrest of the entire event was made, and PLT officers insisted that a pair of firework flares also be extinguished, Silver Command resisted the urge to deploy a PSU in favour of allowing his officers' relationship with the protesters to peacefully prevail:

*'If you remember, they lit up the flare and that lad jumped over the barrier. It was the only arrest and, ironically, he brought it on himself by jumping over. If he'd just stayed where he were, flare or no flare, he'd have been fine. But then they lit the second one and [the PLT Bronze] went in, and there was a small minority that started chanting to 'kettle' us. In fact, they were some of the people who'd been telling me: "You stand for everything that I'm against". Even then, although I put my flame-proof gloves on, because I was thinking "I might have to grab that flare", there wasn't one moment when I felt threatened or really afraid for Scott, because I thought "We've got most of these people on our side"'. (Interview, Police Constable/PLT Member)*

This heavy application of police patience and discretion was perhaps most starkly emphasised by their decision not to restrict the movements of members of UKUncut—a strategy that apparently backfired in light of the damage inflicted on shops



and High Street banks. The Silver Commander regarded this as a small and ultimately necessary price to pay: 'I mean, it's regrettable that Top Shop was done but the trouble we've got now in terms of facilitating protest is that you can't have a system that's so restrictive from the off that it guarantees the protection of every single property in town'. Among the resulting plaudits was a tribute paid by the SACA representative, a very seasoned demonstrator who maintained that the policing of this event was 'completely different from' anything he had previously experienced, and represented, for example, 'an astonishing contrast with what happened at Bolton [in Lancashire]' where, he alleged, the police had been far too rough and over-zealous in their handling of anti-English Defence League protesters who had gathered to show their disapproval of an ongoing EDL rally.

It is equally indisputable, however, that the speed with which the police responded to the activities of UK Uncut protesters was a testament to the strength of the back-up they had ready and waiting to deal with this and, should the need have arisen, even more serious developments. As the Public Order Bronze explained, SYP had set up a 'forward holding point' on nearby Trippett Lane, enabling him, to 'get three PSUs at the drop of a hat'. Moreover, notwithstanding its undoubtedly sincere underlying commitment to facilitating protest, the work of the PLTs was seen, by senior commanders at least, as a tool for establishing and ensuring strict adherence to a set of ground rules ultimately determined by the police:

*'Part of the whole idea about protest liaison is that it's actually at the heart of a "no surprises" policing approach, so that people were able to understand where those parameters were. In truth, if you'd have climbed over that second set of barriers, you'd have not gone any further! There was this phased approach from a very light initial contact, to quite a hard sort of policing tactic if that was required'. (Interview, Silver Commander)*

## EXPLORING TACTICAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Police respondents were unanimous in considering it necessary to preserve a clear distinction between the operational functions of the PLT and 'conventional' public order units. The latter officers were perfectly content to let their PLT counterparts do any 'engaging' with the public:

*'Traditionally, there's always been that wariness that, if you start talking to protesters, they might take it as an invitation to get on your back with, "Don't you feel guilty standing there and suppressing our right to protest?"...Invariably, somebody would get pulled into a conversation and get quoted and have their photo put up on Indymedia...I think that, whilst most police officers are happy with the introduction of liaison teams, I think they're also content to leave the talking to them while they just stand back and say nothing'. (Interview, Public Order Bronze)*

Another perceived benefit of the liaison process was that it greatly reduced the potential both for direct confrontation and any ensuing political controversy:

*'The whole purpose of it for me is that, if I don't have to ask one of my officers to get their baton out and hit somebody with it, I'll sleep a lot better at night. Alright, we all have these off adrenaline rushes from time to time — we're only human — but you really don't want to be scrapping with anybody: (a) because one or both of you might get hurt, and (b) do a 'Tomlinson' where, one push, and the man goes down and doesn't get up. It doesn't bear thinking about, really'. (Interview, Public Order Bronze)*

Respondents of all ranks were satisfied that the use of PLTs was destined to become a permanent part of what Silver Command termed the 'public order toolkit':

*'It's the question of how far that toolkit extends that's really the challenge for me. Having seen both sides as a public order commander as well, there is a limit to how quickly you can get involved and there will always be groups who don't liaise, however much you try, so there will be times when that conventional policing will — probably rightly — come to the fore. For this to work, it's almost as if there's got to be a segregation in the minds of the protesters between the 'good' cops and the potentially 'bad''. (Interview, Negotiator Co-ordinator)*





These senior officers unanimously maintained that, in situations where there is no Silver to direct them, overall decision-making responsibility should rest with the Public Order Bronze Commander, rather than his PLT counterpart:

*'It's got to be his or her decision whether to let the Police Liaison Team go in or not, because he's the one with the ultimate responsibility for getting them out. It should always be his call. The other important point is that, whilst we managed this mainly with unprotected staff and the primary tactic of negotiation did work, the ability to move quickly from state of engagement to another with a higher level of force and wider capability is essential for the balancing of rights to be achieved'.* (Interview, Public Order Bronze)

PLT members were acutely aware that rank-and-file colleagues in conventional public order PSUs had developed slightly cynical and resentful attitudes towards them as a result of their liaison work. One PLT Sub-bronze recalled how he 'actually got deadpanned' by junior colleagues who would have been more friendly and deferential on any other day. This reflected a common rank-and-file perception that the PLT had ceded far too much authority to the protesters and appeared to have forgotten their true allegiance in the process. The PLT conceded that there was an element of truth in this latter accusation:

*'You almost get sucked in: it isn't true Stockholm Syndrome, but you do start to get pulled into another way of thinking. There comes a point when you look across the lines of fluorescents and do start thinking, "Well actually, these guys do look quite oppressive. Why are we doing that?"'* (Interview, PLT Sub-bronze)

In the immediate wake of the protest, an ostensibly playful but pointedly meaningful form of 'ribbing' occurred whereby the PLT were variously derided by PSU colleagues as 'pink fluffies' or 'PCSOs' [part-time civilian Police Community Support Officers]. Similar forms of teasing were used to remind PLT members that the PSUs had been stood around all day doing 'real police work' while liaison officers were hob-nobbing with protesters and reaping all the glory. Such sentiments could not erase the sense of pride and satisfaction PLT members derived from having made such a singular and telling contribution:

*'I thought it was something new and challenging, and refreshingly experimental. I thought we were*

*doing something that was really worthwhile and had already received that endorsement from our senior ranks...Afterwards, the camaraderie among the team and desire to take it further was paramount, just as the desire to be re-utilised in that role was very, very strong'.* (Interview, PLT Sub-bronze)

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that SYP's deployment of police liaison officers as part of Operation Obelisk was extremely redolent of the strategic approach being used by the MPS to manage demonstrations occurring in London over twenty years ago. The modern, European emphasis on using various negotiating skills and communicative devices in order to develop rapport with protest organisers and set up an 'exchange relationship' therefore represents a continuation of methods employed in a bygone era. Moreover, the objectives of this approach remain essentially familiar, in that they are primarily designed to maximise intelligence (relating to the likely size, composition, intentions and willingness to cooperate of the crowd), set police parameters regarding what sort of behaviours will and will not be tolerated, establish the legitimacy of the police operation, and therefore provide advance justification for any potentially contentious police interventions.

What is undoubtedly novel about the introduction of PLTs is the way in which they are being used during demonstrations, both to ensure that police and protesters alike experience no unsettling or provocative 'surprises', and to provide remotely based command teams with accurate 'dynamic risk assessments' from which to avoid unnecessarily over-reactive or indiscriminating police interventions. The Sheffield case study is therefore consistent with related research on the MPS and Sussex Constabulary (Stott *et al.*, 2013) which shows how similar police liaison initiatives have contributed to more effective police decision-making and made it much easier for the police to defuse potential conflict.

Thus, on the one hand, there was a universal recognition among interview respondents of the immense instrumental value of liaison-based policing. The present case study further suggests that, certainly at the levels of Gold and Silver command, and among the various ranks of PLT officers, there was a correspondingly unified acceptance of and commitment to facilitating the



rights and goals of law-abiding protesters. Like these officers, the Public Order Bronze embraced the view that a communication-based ‘dialogue’ approach was best suited to this purpose. This was a view less wholeheartedly subscribed to by members of more ‘conventional’ public order police support units, who strongly criticised the ‘over-appeasing’ attitudes seemingly being extended to protesters, accused their PLT colleagues of implicit disloyalty, and objected to being asked to stand around while sections of the public were allowed to behave in what was perceived as an unlawful and/or unacceptable manner. The extent to which frustrations of this nature might have well been vented had the PSUs been called on to intervene was a possibility not tested in the present example.

There is no evidence that liaison policing has now become regarded as utopian — a panacea in itself. Even those respondents counting themselves among the foremost advocates of liaison policing would see such methods as merely complementary (‘another part of the toolkit’), and by no means a substitute for, more conventional forms of public order policing. None of our respondents would object to the presence of adequately equipped riot-trained colleagues, available on stand-by. Nor would they contest the right of conventional public order commanders to assume ultimate authority in the context of political protests. Indeed, PLT officers accept that a large part of their function is to initially help determine, and subsequently keep reminding protesters of, the existence of ‘lines in the sand’ which may be used to legitimise and politically justify uncompromising police interventions.

There is some resonance here with PAJ Waddington’s important observation that

*‘...styles of public order policing are contingent on the institutional context in which they take place. In liberal democracies, there is a preference for nonconfrontational methods and a trend towards institutionalisation because this is relatively trouble-free. The police are also competent in achieving their goals by nonconfrontational means. On the other hand, when the established social, political, and economic institutions are perceived to be under threat, institutional pressures will encourage more confrontational methods of public order policing, as happened in Britain during the miners’ strike of 1984-85’. (1998, p. 139)*

It has been argued both here and elsewhere (D. Waddington, 2011, 2013) that SYP’s contemporary policing mission is underpinned by a commitment to purging lingering animosities originating from the miners’ strike and Hillsborough stadium tragedy. The force’s keen determination to facilitate the ‘right’ to protest has been reinforced in light of recent political influence associated with the ‘Adapting to Protest’ reports and enhanced accountability stemming from the growth of social media and citizen journalism. Such tolerance may even run, as in the present example, to allowing potentially recalcitrant groups like UK Uncut the temporary freedom to roam the streets ‘unsupervised’. However, without wishing to doubt the earnestness of the officers involved, it appears likely that SYP’s publicly-stated determination to facilitate the right to protest would be hard pressed to survive the occurrence of conflict as politically contentious and threatening to the state as ‘another miners’ strike’.





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