

Towards a more equitable relationship between Scottish Police Forces and Ethnic Minorities

Since the BBC broadcasted the documentary “The Secret Policeman” in October 2003, exposing racism in the Greater Manchester Police, political institutions and police forces in Scotland have been trying to tackle diversity issues within the police and in their relationship with the diverse communities living in Scotland.

Despite these efforts, there is still an under-representation of officers from ethnic minority backgrounds in the Scottish police force, with numbers that do not correspond with Scottish society: Only 0.7 per cent of the officers are non-white for a total of 2.01 per cent of the ethnic minorities’ population. Many claim ethnic minorities are not compelled to start a career in the police force as they view the institution as disinterested when reporting any racist incident, or in other cases, they feel they are being over-policed when the incident happens in their community. The effect is that of a vicious circle by which numbers of ethnic minority officers remain static.

A better engagement with communities and prioritising the role of diversity in training are some of the measures that police forces have taken to reinforce public confidence. The results however, vary from force to force, and there remains a substantial gap between policies and implementation.

The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in Scotland, working in partnership with the Scottish Executive, decided to undertake an independent review to analyse both internally and externally, the relationship between policing and ethnic minorities. The context for this review, published on the 15th July 2005, was initiated after race equality issues became top of the agenda in Human Rights acts, European legislation (e.g. Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam) and Sir Calvert Smith’s QC enquiry on race related issues in police forces in England and Wales.

The CRE review expressed concern over the public perception of the prevalence of racism in the Scottish Police Force, and the corresponding alienation of public confidence. Trust in public institutions is clearly an important factor in maintaining a safe and cohesive society.

On an internal level, a concerted effort has been made to recruit more officers from ethnic minorities to make the Police Force more representative of the diverse communities coexisting in Scotland, with the aim of providing a culturally sensitive service. In practical terms, however, it does not seem that this situation is likely to improve in the short term. The CRE review noticed, in some cases, a lack of transparency in recruiting and the failure to extend the inclusive recruitment policy to the full variety of roles in the police forces, concentrating their efforts only on officer recruitment.

The CRE review established a series of recommendations to improve this situation, for example, encouraging police forces to establish a national recruitment strategy. This measure would make the process more open and more able to overcome possible issues that ethnic minority communities and individuals may have with local police forces.

Other recommendations include the necessity of strengthening training on diversity issues and making a national record of statistics for white and non-white staff, so they can be reported annually across Scotland.

In an attempt to address the alleged prevalence of racist attitudes within the police forces, the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS)

announced in May the introduction of psychological tests to try to identify racist applicants joining the police. The measure, which is introduced this autumn, has been developed by the clinical psychology department at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, and will present the candidates with hundreds of policing scenarios involving ethnic minorities. These new tests will replace the current question-and-answer questionnaire and it is hoped it will prove effective in exposing underlying racist attitudes in possible applicants.

On an external level, there is a necessity for a stronger engagement with ethnic minorities' communities in a wider sense, rather than limiting the contact between senior official level officers and community leaders as is often the case. Greater police officer engagement with communities such as participation in local events has been shown to go a long way to improving police and ethnic community relations on the ground.

A recommendation made on this matter made by the CRE review involves the creation of a joint strategy between police forces and the public sector in which support and advice is provided to both ethnic minorities and police forces in efforts to facilitate more productive engagement. It has been proven that in areas where similar initiatives operate, communication and mutual understanding between communities and police forces significantly improves and as such begins to mitigate the effects of disengagement with official institutions.

An emphasis on recruitment of ethnic minorities' officers in order to provide Scottish police with a multicultural force is capable able to understand with a higher grade of sensibility, the racist abuses that ethnic minorities' members suffer on a daily basis. A better communication should be aimed to inform ethnic minorities' communities of the procedures when dealing with a complaint, as they usually tend to result in unrealistic expectations of the police.

When it comes to personal experiences with policing, there is a mix of positive and negative results, which usually occur for a lack of sympathy or language and cultural communication. Ethnic minorities' tend to rely on organisations rather than on the police, tending to believe that racism is still present on the force and feeling more supported by non-authoritarian bodies. More sensitivity, transparency and continuity when dealing with a complaint made by an ethnic minority individual should be achieved to gain trust of the different communities.

Police forces in Scotland are committed to develop a stronger relationship with ethnic minorities, as several reforms on training and diversity awareness have been launched. However, it is vital to put them into practice in an operational level and try to balance national initiatives with the local particularities that characterise the different communities found in Scotland. Trust on police forces must be gained to achieve a better service and reflect the changes that Scottish society is experiencing in terms of immigration. Only time and the aim to achieve these goals will tell if Scottish police forces realise their vision for a more equal Scotland.