

## *Introduction*

This is a book about change in Australian policing. As it turns out, it is also a book about resistance to change. The conduct of police officers and the performance of police organisations are increasingly under public scrutiny in recent years, following revelations of systemic corruption and malpractice in some police forces (Fitzgerald Report 1989, and the current Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service). Reforming the police has become an urgent item on the political agenda of governments. At a time when the necessity for change seems most pressing, it is important to consider our state of knowledge about change. While political urgency may have created unique opportunities and a favourable climate for wide-ranging reforms, there is considerable danger in pushing change for the sake of change. There is much to learn from experience.

This book examines the dynamics of change and resistance within a police organisation when reforms were introduced to improve relations between police and minorities. It captures the complexity and unpredictability of the change process. For example, radical change, though politically risky and unpopular, can be more successful in transforming organisational directions than incremental change, which requires a long period of sustained organisational and political commitment to produce effects. On the other hand, change introduced from the top of the organisation is often resisted by those at the bottom. Similarly, externally imposed change can be sabotaged by members within the organisation. Overall, the path of change is never straightforward: change can lead to further change in the intended direction, it can bring about unintended consequences, or it can suffer setbacks and reversals. What is intended in this book is not to create a manual for change management, but an awareness of the contingencies and vagaries of reform.

*Police Racism and Police Reform*

The problem of relations between police and minorities in Australia is in many ways no different from that of other Western countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States, where tension and conflict often exist between the police and visible racial minorities (Reiner 1985). Minorities complain of racist stereotyping, unfair targeting and at times harassment and violent treatment by police officers. Many members of minority groups are afraid of the police and do not trust them. Some are reluctant to report crime or cooperate with police investigation. However, the problem is not uniformly serious across all visible minority groups. In Australia, relations are historically poor between police and Aboriginal people, although a few ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese are beginning to voice concerns about abusive police treatment. Relations are also poor between police and young people, with homeless or unemployed youth from visible minority groups being the most vulnerable targets of police harassment.

While racial tension and hostility have led to the eruption of major urban riots in Britain and the United States (Scarman Report 1981; Skolnick and Fyfe 1993), police racism in Australia has largely remained simmering in the background of public consciousness. In fact, police-Aboriginal relations did not emerge as a critical public issue in Australia until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lucas 1995). Since then, allegations of police brutality and heavy-handed tactics against Aboriginal communities have occasionally attracted media attention and government inquiries. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in the 1980s certainly elevated issues of the criminalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal people to national prominence. The National Inquiry into Racist Violence also brought police racism to the front pages of newspapers in 1991. It took, however, a 1992 television documentary for police racism to really 'hit home' in the living-rooms of many Australians and, more significantly, in the boardrooms of Australian police commissioners and executives.

The documentary *Cop It Sweet* was filmed over a six-week period in Redfern, one of the most socially disadvantaged areas of inner Sydney, with a high concentration of Aboriginal population. It portrayed in graphic detail the harsh reality of police race relations in Redfern, and immediately drew powerful public condemnations against police racism. Compared with the weekly diet of action-oriented police dramas on television, *Cop It Sweet* was unexceptional viewing. As a real-life exposé of police deviance, it paled against the brutal beating of Rodney King. What shocked the audience, however, was not so much the crude and uncompromising message. It was true that the New South Wales police

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officers depicted were racist, sexist, ignorant, insensitive and hypocritical, but what was most disturbing of all, in the words of a viewer, was that the police were 'on their best behaviour for the cameras' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Letters, 7 March 1992). This gave the impression that what was presented was 'business as usual'.

For practitioners and analysts of the criminal justice system, the documentary offered nothing new or shocking. Relations between Aborigines and police in Redfern have been a problem for at least twenty years (Cunneen 1990b). Among the problems documented in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the complaints that Aborigines were regularly arrested without cause and were subjected to a police-imposed curfew. Police–Aboriginal relations did not improve in the 1970s and 1980s. Constant complaints were made regarding police harassment and bashing of Aborigines; in addition, there were numerous 'large-scale police incursions' into Redfern involving riot police on several occasions (*ibid.*; Landa Report 1991). Indeed, the treatment of Aborigines by the criminal justice system throughout Australia has been the subject of numerous research studies, all of which have highlighted policing as the most problematic stage of the criminal justice process (e.g. Luke and Cunneen 1995; Cunneen and Robb 1987; Gale *et al.* 1990).

The irony of the public disgrace of the New South Wales police in 1992 is that it came at a time when the force had been undergoing major organisational and cultural reforms for some years. In 1984 a new Police Board was created and John Avery, a dedicated reformer, was appointed Police Commissioner. Avery's mission was to rid the force of institutionalised corruption and open the door to a new police culture in which service to the community is a major motivation for police work. Many sweeping changes were introduced, including a complete reorganisation of the command structure, the implementation of new recruitment criteria and training programs, and the adoption of community-based policing as the principal operational strategy. Some initiatives were specifically aimed at improving police–minority relations; others were simply blanket reforms for building a more professional, accountable and open police force.

The significance of *Cop It Sweet*, then, was not so much that it said anything new about police race relations, but that it raised serious questions about the effectiveness of police reforms. Not only did it question the force's policy direction, the quality of training, and the effectiveness of supervision, but it cast grave doubts on the entire reform program. Even though many New South Wales police officers publicly expressed abhorrence and disgust at the behaviour of their colleagues, and vehemently dissociated themselves from the image conveyed by the documentary, critics of the police saw the film as a scathing indictment of police racism

and a vindication of their long-standing criticisms of police practice in Aboriginal communities. They were quick to point out that ‘nothing’s changed’ after eight years of reform. Some blamed the wider Australian culture as the basis for racist attitudes among police officers. Others were impatient with the lack of progress in police reforms, advocating immediate action and more drastic measures.

#### *Research Question*

The purpose of this book is to examine a crucial question raised by the New South Wales experience: why did years of police reform make so little difference to police racism? This is not a uniquely Australian concern; the same question could well be asked in Los Angeles, where the videotaped beating of Rodney King brought shame to a police department said to be ‘a shining example of the best in reform policing’ (Sparrow *et al.* 1990: 60). To explain the failure of reform, it is useful to examine the original ‘problem’ the reform was meant to address. It is also important to scrutinise the intentions of reform, its implementation and outcomes. The New South Wales experience provides the main empirical foundation of this scrutiny, although relevant materials from other States are also consulted.

The use of the New South Wales Police Service as the basis of the case study was originally dictated more by opportunity than by choice. In 1990 I was awarded the inaugural Sir Maurice Byers Fellowship, which was established by the NSW Police Service to provide opportunities for academic research into policing issues.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the original research was to examine the NSW Police Service’s policy in relation to ethnic minorities, how the policy was implemented, and the extent to which the policy was successful in improving police–minorities relations. The fellowship provided a unique opportunity for research, both in terms of making information accessible and securing formal organisational commitments to the project.

As it turns out, the New South Wales experience provides an ideal case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, New South Wales is a significant police jurisdiction in Australia. The NSW Police Service, with approximately 13,000 police officers and 3000 civilian staff, is the largest of the eight police forces in Australia, responsible for the most populous and ethnically diverse State in Australia. Secondly, police racism is a matter of great concern in New South Wales: relations between the police and the Aboriginal population have historically been strained, while the massive post-war influx of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries has created a rapidly changing environment for policing. Thirdly, New South Wales is considered a leader in police reform in Australia.

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Since 1984, the NSW Police Service has undergone a period of substantial and continual reform, following the appointment of John Avery as the Police Commissioner. The reform initiatives introduced by Avery were seen as radical and innovative by international standards (Sparrow *et al.* 1990: 72–7). New South Wales was one of the first police forces in Australia to adopt ‘community policing’ as its main operational strategy. Its recruit training was rated as having the potential to be the best in the world by a team of overseas researchers (Centre for Applied Research in Education 1990). Finally, in spite of being a leader in police reform, the New South Wales Police Service has had the most visible and damaging public displays of its failures, including a string of government inquiries, the documentary *Cop It Sweet*, and the recent revelations from the Wood Royal Commission on police corruption. The New South Wales experience, then, represents an important social experiment; the reasons for its lack of success are of great interest to those concerned with police reform.

*Research Methods*

The methodology of the research was limited both by the duration of the fellowship and by the available resources,<sup>2</sup> although a substantial amount of additional work was carried out beyond the original project. The case study was based on three sources of data:<sup>3</sup> a survey of police officers by means of a questionnaire; semi-structured interviews with key informants; and a content analysis of a large number of official documents. Although I was a participant-observer in a number of meetings on minority issues at police headquarters, both the time-frame of the research and the policy of the Police Service at the time precluded any systematic observation of operational police work.

The survey was conducted on a random sample of police officers working in areas of relatively high ethnic population. The advantage of a sample survey using self-administered questionnaires is that it is a relatively efficient way of obtaining an overview of the police organisation, given the size of the NSW Police Service and the lack of available systematic data. The main purpose of the survey was to obtain information on the nature and frequency of police contacts with visible minorities,<sup>4</sup> as well as to canvass the views of officers on a number of related issues. A sample of 590 officers was randomly chosen from fifty-six patrol areas which, according to the 1986 Census, had over 15 per cent NESB (non-English-speaking background) population. These patrol areas were targeted for special attention by the Police Service’s Ethnic Affairs Policy Statement in 1988 (see Chapter 7). The sample was stratified by rank. The sampling ratios were: one out of eight officers below the rank

of senior sergeant, and one out of two officers at or above the rank of senior sergeant. The reason for using a larger sampling ratio for the senior ranks was to obtain a reasonable number of senior officers, who comprised only 7 per cent of the population of police officers, so that comparisons can be made between officers at different ranks.

A draft questionnaire was constructed and revised following consultation with a number of people in the Police Service. The revised instrument was then tested on more than forty officers of various ranks who attended classes at the NSW Police Academy. The final questionnaires were posted through the Police Service internal mail to the selected officers on 22 October 1991. Two covering letters, one signed by the State Commander and one signed by the researcher, explained the objectives of the survey and assured officers of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Officers were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it within one week directly to the University of New South Wales, using the addressed, pre-paid envelopes provided. To maximise the response rate, an article was published in the *Police Service Weekly*, an internal publication of the Police Service, shortly after the questionnaires were distributed to announce the research project and to provide additional details of its objectives. Two weeks after the posting of the survey, a small poster was sent to each patrol area with a request for this to be put on the notice board to remind officers to return the questionnaires.

The average response rate of the survey was 56 per cent (332 responses), with the highest response rate among the most senior officers at the rank of inspector and above (69 per cent) and the lowest response rate from sergeants (42 per cent). A number of factors could be responsible for the low response. I was told that officers had been inundated with departmental surveys over the years and were becoming tired of filling out questionnaires. The questionnaire was fifteen pages long, with more than thirty questions, many of which consisted of a dozen or more items. Police officers, especially those in busy patrol areas, were likely to see the completion of questionnaires as additional paperwork they did not need. However, a 23-page survey on 'organisational issues' sponsored by the Police Service and carried out by commercial consultants obtained a response rate of 67.6 per cent in 1990 (Performance Diagnostics 1990). Apathy or lack of interest in multicultural issues could have been another reason for officers not responding. In any case, response rates for mail surveys are notoriously low. A response rate of 50 per cent is often considered adequate for analysis, although researchers must be aware of any sample bias resulting from non-response (Babbie 1992: 267).

When the sample of responses was analysed in terms of key

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demographic and organisational variables, it was found to be reasonably representative of the population of police officers in New South Wales.<sup>5</sup> For example, 87 per cent of the sample were male officers, compared with 89 per cent in the population. Fifty-nine per cent of the sample were in general-duty policing, compared with 58 per cent in the population. While the median age group was the same (25 to 29 years) for both the sample and the population, the under-25 group was over-represented in the sample, while the 30-to-39 group was under-represented. This over-representation of young officers was similarly reflected in the distribution of respondents by rank and number of years of service. Officers with one to five years' service in the Police Service were over-represented, while those with eleven to twenty years' service were under-represented. Officers with more than twenty years of service and those at the rank of senior sergeant and above were over-represented as a result of the decision to over-sample senior officers.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author with selected members of the police organisation and a small number of non-police sources. Access to top management was made possible through the cooperation of the Police Board and top-level management in the Police Service. Before fieldwork began, the researcher presented a brief outline of the project to the State Executive Group, the highest-ranking officers of the Police Service, who showed enthusiastic support for the project. Many of the police personnel interviewed were chosen because they had played some part in the restructuring and transformation of the organisation in recent years. Others were chosen because they had direct contact with, or responsibility for the servicing of, visible minorities. The few non-police sources were selected because of their interest or involvement in police-minorities issues. Informal interviews also took place as part of the researcher's participation at various meetings. The objectives of the interviews were to collect information on the philosophical and historical basis of the NSW Police Service's ethnic and Aboriginal affairs policy, to canvass the issues relevant for the evaluation of the policy initiatives, and to provide contextual details to complement the survey results. A number of interviews were directed at general and specific policy issues and managerial strategies. Other interviews focused on detailed aspects of day-to-day operations. In total forty-one individuals and a group of about ten young people of Asian origin were interviewed. Most interviews were conducted between mid-1991 and early 1992. Each interview was about one hour in duration. Most were tape-recorded and transcripts of the interviews were prepared.

The research results are informed and complemented by a large number of official documents collected by the researcher during the course of the study. These include official reports, publications, internal

documents, newspaper clippings and research reports. In addition, a survey of all Australian police forces (except New South Wales) was carried out in 1993. This provided additional documentary material for comparison. The documentary sources provide valuable background information as well as additional evidence to round out the data from the questionnaire and the interviews.

While the use of multiple sources of data can help to strengthen the findings of the case study, very often they yield contradictory results which must be explained (see Yin 1984; Patton 1980). For example, the majority of police personnel that I interviewed were fairly optimistic about the change initiatives, but non-police sources were scathing in their criticisms of police practice. Such contradictory results often reveal interesting aspects of the police organisation and its relationship with the environment. Though it may not be possible to resolve all contradictory findings satisfactorily, the search for explanation can often generate richer and better theories, which is precisely the purpose of any case study.

#### *Ethical and Political Issues*

Any discussion of the research project is incomplete without some reflection on the ethical and political issues in doing so-called 'race relations' research. Although the main concern of this study is the police, its findings have potential implications for members of visible minorities, whether or not they have come into contact with the police. Several aspects of the research raise important questions about the role of the researcher.

The first issue concerns the funding of the research. Since the major portion of funding for at least the main phase of data collection came from the NSW Police Service, doubts are inevitably raised about the capacity of the research to be independent. It is worth noting, however, that under the terms of the fellowship, the researcher has copyright over, and freedom to publish, all research findings. Unlike the antipathy towards academic research that Young (1991) encountered among British police forces, I was met during my fieldwork by a high degree of cooperation and even enthusiasm for social research within the NSW Police Service. Although a few of the questionnaire respondents criticised the research project as being a waste of time, the reception I got was overwhelmingly positive. This is not to imply that the research project was a public-relations exercise on the part of the Police Service. Certainly many critical comments were related to me during interviews and many of these comments were quoted in the final report (Chan 1992a). One academic colleague referred to the granting of the

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fellowship as a great source of legitimation for the Police Service. Indeed, the funding of the study was repeatedly cited by the Police Board and the Police Service as evidence that minority issues were being taken seriously. In reality, however, the findings of the study were not what the organisation would have been eager to put out in press releases. The final report contained many criticisms, but there was not a single attempt by anyone to ask me to change any part of the report. In fact, the report was widely circulated, both formally and informally, within the organisation. The Police Board wrote to congratulate me on the report, while the Inspector-General of the Police Service initiated a meeting to discuss the findings with me. Certainly, events surrounding the documentary *Cop It Sweet*—a sobering reminder of the police racism still untouched by reforms—brought a major change to the political climate. The Police Service was eager to fix up its tattered public image and be seen as doing something.

One incident was particularly revealing. After the completion of the original project, I delivered a paper at a national conference on immigration in 1992. The paper contained some negative findings from the research project and attracted some press coverage. There was an immediate suggestion by a civilian staff member within the Police Service that I should be required to submit all future papers based on the research study to the organisation for approval. I was rather offended by the suggestion and rang the senior police executive who was supposed to be approving my papers. I was told by the executive to ignore the suggestion. While I was relieved by the openness of this executive, the incident was telling in terms of the variation in attitudes to openness within the organisation (see Chapter 8).

Even though the research contract did not contain any censorship clauses, there is always the possibility that researchers might consciously or unconsciously censor themselves, not wanting to bite the hand that feeds them. It is therefore important to clarify my own values and preconceptions prior to the research project. I have for many years been interested in understanding why reforms so often fail to achieve their objectives. My work on penal reform (Chan 1992b) was clearly critical of the rhetoric of reform but nevertheless recognised the political and ideological power of this rhetoric. My interest in police research dates back to my work at the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto in the 1970s and early 1980s. I was much influenced by the critical traditions of police researchers such as Richard Ericson, Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning. In 1978 I was co-investigator with Tony Doob in a Canadian project on decision-making by youth bureau police in 1978 (see Doob and Chan 1982), during which I spent over 300 hours with police officers. One observation that stuck in my mind for many

years was the racist attitudes of many of the police officers I came across. While they were always polite to me, there was a widely accepted practice of denigrating minorities and telling racist jokes within the station, even in front of an 'ethnic' like me. Some ten years later when I was teaching at the University of Sydney, a female student walked out of my class in anger when I made a comment that police could not help being racist because of the occupational culture. I found out afterwards that the student's brother was a police officer, and she resented my generalisation. It was a lesson on the hazards of cross-cultural generalisations.

It took a few more years, however, before I conducted any research on an Australian police force. I must admit that I was genuinely surprised by many of the people within the NSW Police Service that I met in the course of this research. Even though it was presumptuous of me to compare the police of the 1990s in New South Wales with what I saw in the late 1970s in Canada, I was nevertheless impressed with the 'change'. I was shocked to find that not only was university education not denigrated by police officers, but a substantial proportion of officers in New South Wales either held a university degree or were in the process of pursuing one. I was amazed at the intelligence and openness of many of the senior officers that I interviewed. The thoughtfulness and sincerity of many of the Avery reforms also surprised me. The question, therefore, is not whether I had censored myself consciously or unconsciously, but how I could pull away sufficiently from the 'razzle-dazzle' of the organisational changes to assess in a relatively detached way the nature and quality of these changes. So it was, in the end, a matter of judgment, as I weighed up the research evidence as carefully and as responsibly as I could. My final report spoke volumes about the gap between what was intended and what was achieved, but the findings were not totally negative, because I did see more than a glimmer of hope among the police personnel that I met. It was noteworthy that the NSW Ombudsman's inquiry on police race relations quoted my report at great length (NSW Ombudsman 1994), while the conclusions of its final report (Landa Report 1995) substantially agreed with mine.

A final point concerns the politics of police-minorities research. Solomos (1988) has discussed the politicisation of 'race' in the British context and the problematic separation of research from political and policy consequences. Researchers in 'race relations' topics are often confronted with the question 'Whose side are you on?' It is therefore important for me to declare my position. Many in Australia would argue that it is impossible to de-politicise social research, especially research on oppressed minorities. I agree with this view in the sense that all research work is carried out in a particular political and institutional context, and all research workers carry with them particular personal and political