

The Role of a Rural Policeman

by

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The purpose of this article is to examine the role of a policeman in a rural area.

In the district studied, the police are represented by one man, and thus it is often difficult to dichotomise between the "individual" (i.e., the personality) and the policeman. Perhaps *this* is the salient point of the study—that the presence of the law is seen in a member of the community—he sees himself and he is seen by the people primarily as a part of the community and *secondly* as having a role, i.e., as a policeman. It is often difficult to point to tangible proof of his influence as an officer of the law; rather his presence is felt as being that of a fellow community member.

Needless to say, as this article deals with only one man, it is not a good sample upon which to base generalisations. Nevertheless, discernible patterns do emerge, which I feel in all probability exist in other similar situations.

The article is based on a long interview with a rural policeman, a shorter interview with the Superintendent in charge of the area, comments made by local citizens and the writer's local knowledge. I shall present the information gained in the interviews and then, where needed, provide explanations and highlight those factors which I consider important.

The character of the area is that of a remote, northern North Island district with a harbour aspect. Although not now isolated in terms of communication, it is still regarded as under-developed and a backward region. It is predominantly a hilly, farming district, the

roads are in good condition and the general impression is that, economically, most of the farms are viable concerns. There are several small towns within the district. These appear to be diminishing in size, although at the moment there are several factors that may be reversing this trend.¹

The decline is caused by that commonplace phenomenon, the drift of young people to the cities in search of better jobs, education, social advancement and a faster pace of life. This drift is not matched by the outward movement of young people to the country and so, increasingly, older people are making up a bigger percentage of the community. This, it will be seen, has a marked effect on the character of the area, and thus upon the policeman's job.

There are three well-dispersed hotels and one hospital in the area. These concerns apart, there is no dominant urban "industry", and therefore no marked concentrations of population. The townships are basically "service" centres where the farming sector buys many of its everyday requirements—thus the fortunes of both country and town dwellers are unmistakably intertwined.

The constable has been twenty years in the police force, sixteen of these in country areas. He identifies with the rural situation and consequently on his posting to this area felt no alienation—he merged comfortably into the existing society. This feeling was reciprocated and he was recognised by the community as one of them. He is European, is married, and has three children. The police station is in one of the towns, as is the little-used court house.

In his work he is almost totally autonomous—there is no real pattern to which he must adhere.² Perhaps a routine day would proceed as follows. I say perhaps because, from the outset, the impression was created that really there was very little one *had* to do in order to keep things running smoothly. Of course, this was not so during certain periods, e.g., the Christmas vacation, but as it was mid-May when this research was done, there was probably little need for much necessary activity. A day sheet, however, could read thus:

9 a.m.

Walks from home to courthouse (100 yards). May stop for short conversations, or to see people on various matters on the way.

11–12 a.m.

After bookwork (day diary, entries of court hearings relating to

¹ Both retiring couples seeking cheap, quiet living conditions and young disenfranchised city dwellers are coming in ever-increasing numbers. Some of the latter come in groups to form communes.

² M. Banton, *The Policeman in the Community* (1964), 161 describes this as the working of 'discretionary hours' and regards it as one of the main distinctions to be made between the rural and urban officer.

local people on his files, letter writing of a business nature generally), mailreading, telephoning, checking accounts, etc., he may go about town business such as checking up on complaints, bad debts and personal news (sicknesses, state of relatives, wives, children), generally seeking that information which people relate to others during the course of a normal day.

1.30 p.m.

After lunch may go to outlying districts in response to specific calls (in this particular instance, the call was to investigate an alleged cattle theft).

4.30-5 p.m.

Back home; writes report and may go to the hotel to see some person, or deal with a particular occurrence, or simply to socialise. (The hotel is usually busiest around 5 p.m. and there is an influx of people from nearby areas about this time.)

7-10 p.m.

Usually at home where he can be contacted. However, he could be catching up on bookwork at the courthouse, or possibly out making enquiries which he had not been able to complete during the afternoon.

10 p.m.

May wander down to the hotel to have a few ales with the locals and catch up on events. After hotel closes, he may spot-check a few premises to see they are secure.

It must be emphasised that this is a very schematic outline and often the constable's duties will be quite different from those listed. It is quite possible that he may be called out at 3 a.m. to a bad accident or a serious offence—or, as has happened, be away for three days while pursuing some line of enquiry.

He sees his job as being fundamentally one of public relations. "I know the value of a smile" may be a trite statement, but it does indicate the general attitude he possesses. "Showing the flag" as he puts it, is as important a part of the job as any other. This is carried out in a number of ways. He periodically attempts to meet, in the countryside, those farmers who he can rely on for accurate information as to occurrences in their vicinity. These events need not necessarily be strictly related to police work but may include details on the finances of other farms, personal relations, attitudes and, in general, any information which might enable him, as a policeman, to control or avert a situation which, if left alone, could develop into a serious problem. Such things as stock and boundary disputes,

domestic upheavals and court litigation over non-payment of bills are often handled in this manner—the constable is told by his informant of the situation, he approaches it with prior knowledge of what is involved and can assess what may be the best course before confrontation with the upset party.³

In the public relations field, it becomes hardest to separate the man from his work. He belongs to the local volunteer fire brigade and the water ski club. He is always regarded as a policeman, even when involved in these other activities; nobody doubts that he would act as one, even though he may be out duckshooting or fishing. His involvement with the community is total in this respect—he, like them, is simply a member of it, with a particular job. There is no suggestion that he is superimposed upon them, or that he stands to the side as a guardian or watchdog. He is there because he wants to be and not because his job calls for it. The fact that while engaged in these other activities he may accumulate useful information which he later needs in his job is in no way likely to jeopardise his acceptance by the community. There is no feeling by the public that he would try “fishing” for information in any subtle or underhand manner; rather, he would ask directly those whom he felt could assist him. He is always a member of the community—at certain times he is, in addition, a member of the police force.⁴

As he is on his own the majority of the time, this is perhaps the only way he can accumulate information on the attitudes and personal feelings of the people. This role is altered somewhat over the busy period, the month centring around Christmas. He receives either one or two constables from the nearby town and their roles are altered. As there is such an influx of newcomers to the district, the majority of them city dwellers—often with different attitudes to the police—the police presence is exhibited more forcefully. A drunk is more likely to be charged, a fighter or shoplifter is more likely to be prosecuted than at any other stage in the year. Why? Several points arise here. First, it is seen to be necessary to impress upon all that,

³ This point illustrates another of the principal advantages which the rural policeman enjoys over his urban counterpart. The city policeman often has no information of the surrounding circumstances of a particular incident and it is therefore more likely that some inappropriate action will be taken by him.

⁴ Banton, *op. cit.*, 2-3 says that policing within such a stable community as this is a reflection of the moral consensus within that group. The policeman's authority is accepted because he represents what the society regards as proper—he conceives his task as maintaining the established order by persuasion and manipulation. “Small communities have the highest level of control through the informal sanctions of public opinion: there is little resort to formal measures. In these circumstances, the job of the policeman is to oil the machinery of society, and not to provide the motive power of law enforcement.”

though it may be Christmas time, there is still a need to maintain law and order. Second, a question of pride arises. "We may be the country, but we're just as competent as anywhere else in New Zealand". There could quite possibly be an underlying wish to impress both the public and police superiors with the fact that "nothing is too much for us". Third, with so many more people than normal in the area, the chances are that the number of undetected offences is higher than usual and there is usually an example made of someone who is apprehended. A distinction is made between the outsiders and the members of the community in that the former are more likely to be treated in a strictly formal manner (and therefore more severely) than the latter who will probably be dealt with informally, unless the constable feels that this would be inappropriate. There appears to be a simple two-class structure of "them" (the outsiders) and "us" (the local inhabitants) rather more than any structuring based on economic or social factors.⁵ These alterations to normal behaviour in no way represent a drastic about-face on the part of the constable; they are merely a response to altered circumstances and once numbers are back to normal, so there is a reversion to the old manner.

The question of the Maori attitude to the rural policeman emerged early. It was pointed out that the Maoris are a part of the community in the fullest sense—they occupy no particular section as they tend to do in cities, but are simply there as community members. The Maoris are generally rurally based and tend to live around maraes. This factor has special significance for the policeman. It means that they are readily identifiable as a group: if he wishes to find a particular person or discuss a certain matter, then this presents no problem. With the usual structure of maraes as it is, he need only go to the elders present in order to elicit information or issue documents. If he has their fullest co-operation, then his job is so much easier. But this existence of a cohesive group does have its disadvantages—if there is a lack of co-operation with, and disrespect for, the law, then such a grouping, as with any grouping of similarly-minded people, will be a constant source of trouble.⁶ This is a situation which has been averted in this district so far, but it was indicated that such a problem did exist in other parts of the country. The respect of the Maoris for the law appears to boil down to a personal judgment of the men in the police force. This particular man has a manner appealing to most Maoris—forthright, simply spoken and with the

⁵ M. E. Cain, *Society and the Policeman's Role* (1973), 82 regards this situation as also existing in England.

⁶ The constable must avoid the appearance of taking on the marae and losing. Such a mistake would destroy the co-operation he has enjoyed.

ability to listen. Also, and this may be his biggest asset, the ability to “second-guess” or foresee the way they will react to a situation. He related to me the following story.

The opening of a new marae was, as usual, to be heralded by a great round of feasting; there were Maori people being invited from all over the country and many would be strangers to the ways of Pakehas and Maoris in the countryside. The elders of the new marae were concerned that if they did not do something about controlling the visitors, especially the younger ones, there could be a great deal of ill-feeling and trouble occasioned to the non-Maoris in the community. But, at the same time, the presence of police on the marae would not be wanted while such an important and totally Maori event was going on. Moreover, if extra police were employed, in all probability they would be Europeans and strangers to the district.

The constable suggested the following to the elders: co-opt four young trustworthy men, give them the job of going to hotels to check for under-age drinking or misbehaviour and keeping an eye on proceedings at the marae. The scheme worked perfectly for three days, the four did not drink, made the rounds of the hotels and did an excellent job. There was absolutely no trouble. The elders of the marae were highly satisfied, the young men were proud to have been an integral part of such an important event and for the constable it meant that he was not in any way involved in something which could have been unmanageable.

This, I feel, well illustrates the “public relations” aspect of the country policeman’s role—the ability to come to terms with a situation, make the best of it, and handle it successfully. Also, in this manner is respect won for the police in general, and for the man in particular; this makes his job just that much more pleasant. He experiences satisfaction, both in a personal form (respect and friendliness above that which would normally be accorded to a policeman) and, in more general terms, a readiness to accede to his influence and suggestions on future occasions such as this.

Another example of alleviating what could develop into an unpleasant situation is the following. A huge wedding was planned in the area with hundreds invited from many far-away districts. The constable spoke personally to them all, stating that which was obvious: he wanted no trouble, particularly no underage drinking. In spite of this, he walked into a bar at one hotel and found it very nearly full of what appeared to be underage drinkers. Obviously, there were far too many for a single man to handle. He then went around, told all those underage to leave and warned that if any one

of them was caught in any hotel, then they would have the "book thrown at them". In silence the bar was almost completely emptied and there was no further evidence of trouble.

Again, this illustrates a great capability to deal with a difficult situation. No doubt he could have charged three or four of the drinkers as an example, but really to what advantage? This may well have upset the others or caused them to be resentful and possibly triggered off a lot more trouble and might have ruined the occasion for the just-married couple and their families.

Good public relations were maintained in what could have been an explosive situation and such conduct may well have engendered respect for the police where none existed before. It is this type of approach which, I feel, sets the rural policeman apart from his urban counterpart. Of course, their situations are different in so many respects. In this district, the constable works in a very friendly environment, whereas the city policeman may well have to patrol an area which is strongly anti-police. The country policeman always has this latent backing—he knows that should a situation develop where his personal safety is threatened, the local folk would come to his aid. This help he personally has never had to call upon, but a predecessor did about fifteen years ago. Help was forthcoming immediately. Knowledge that he has such support must have an effect upon morale when the policeman is faced with a potentially difficult or dangerous situation.

He has the confidence of the Maori population and he in turn respects their ideals and aspirations. Being able to speak and understand a little Maori, he has an immediate point of contact. In this area he says there is a feeling of a difference existing between Maori and Pakeha, though just what it is is hard to describe. Perhaps it is a feeling of slight superiority over the Maoris which some Europeans exhibit in terms of address like "Hey, boy"; this *is* demeaning to many to whom it is addressed, as is the pidgin-English which many Europeans use when addressing Maoris. He is always careful to avoid this, yet at the same time endeavours to be spontaneous. The main problem of the Maori people he sees as being the loss of the old life style, an inevitable development coming from the drift of young people from the country towards the cities. This, as well as creating problems for the city dwellers, both European and Maori, also means that, increasingly, only the older, less active folk are left to farm the land. This has a variety of effects upon the police in the area, especially as this trend (the drift of young people to an urban environment) is also occurring amongst the non-Maori group.

Overall there is less likely to be juvenile delinquency and there are fewer assaults; drunkenness is more likely as are domestic disputes

and what can generally be termed financial problems. With regard to these last three categories, the policeman acts as mediator. There is no pressure from fellow police officers or the community in general for him to exercise his discretionary power (whether or not to prosecute) one way or another against a harmless drunk, a man in debt through no fault of his own save bad management, or a mild spate of ill-feeling within a domestic situation. Consequently other action is adopted—the constable is likely to arrange to have a drunk taken home or he places him in the cells overnight, with no prosecution being undertaken subsequently. He may follow up this action in a variety of ways, such as finding out why the man is drunk and, if his drinking appears habitual, he might suggest that he should seek medical aid. If bad behaviour has resulted he may ban the person from the hotels for a period. The flexibility of his situation permits allowances for what Cain describes as “special occasions”.⁷ Thus, for example, drunkenness after some extraordinary occurrence is likely to be viewed with some degree of compassion, this being another example of the policeman’s response to the consensus of the community on such matters.

The constable runs a budgetary scheme for those people who have come under the notice of the court for indebtedness of one sort or another. One example was cited. A man had bad debts of \$800 and was not able to live within his income because of bad management; he was constantly owing money on hire purchase contracts. After eighteen months of budgetary control, in which the constable took the man’s wage packet and allotted expenses from it, the man was no longer in debt, his wife had just bought a new set of china and cutlery, and they had a new electric stove and \$400 in the bank.

It is this sort of activity which stands the constable in good stead with his fellows. The position he occupies is not so much that of law enforcement officer, but more a counsellor, a benevolent guide. There are a variety of similar duties which he undertakes as well, e.g., marriage guidance, child guidance and even legal advice on some simple matters. His whole attitude seems to be one of preventing crime rather than catching it—he feels he genuinely does his best for those caught. If he thinks it is the best thing, then a strong admonition will be all that the offender suffers. If a charge is laid, then he tries, while maintaining law and order, to give the other every chance; this extends to telling defence counsel (if there is one) whether the accused has any chance of acquittal, or even what all the evidence is against him. He feels that a court appearance has a dubious effect, especially for a juvenile. He reiterated exactly the sentiment of his

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 110.

superior by stating that "a court works as a deterrent only *before* one appears in it; after that the scare aspect ceases to exert any effect." He therefore tries to keep people, especially juveniles and first offenders, *out* of court, if only for this reason.

His belief in summary (i.e., immediate) justice is based on a long, and he feels, successful, use of it—in every case in which the offence complained of was minor he felt that "a kick in the pants" and a talking to was a far more salutary lesson than a charge brought in court. Such a mode of law enforcement or punishment, he concedes as being impractical in the city for several reasons. It is open to abuse, it is not within the strict letter of the law (though the point was made strongly that it was within the spirit of the law), and finally, a city patrolman does not know all the circumstances concerning the offender. Very often an urban policeman does not live in the area he patrols and has never before seen the person he is confronting. He does not have a "sense" or "feel" of the area, i.e., he may not know the attitude of the immediate community to himself or to the act which the other has done. In a country area, on the other hand, the constable has an intimate knowledge of both the neighbourhood and the person committing the act and he is acquainted with community attitudes. As an important community member, he is aware of just what should be done in varying circumstances.

To city dwellers this may sound like a very risky procedure and quite outside the law, but in practice there has been no example in this area of any breach of what the community considers to be proper conduct by the police. Of course, in serious matters there is no question of whether or not the law will be invoked—this *must* occur every time. But, in minor matters, where the police often have a discretion to prosecute or not, it seems that informal handling has done no harm at all and probably a lot of good. There is not in rural areas the preoccupation with the lofty ideals of civil liberties and the dangers of infringement of personal rights of which city dwellers are often so conscious—most people just do not have the time or are not interested in such matters.

The danger is, of course, that certain sections of the community will be handled in this manner more than others, and thus discriminatory treatment will occur, but this does not happen. In fact, almost a reverse situation has arisen with the increasing number of young (twenty–twenty-five years old) city dwellers looking for places to settle in the countryside. Aware that they pose no threat to the community as far as its continued smooth running goes, the constable has been careful not to single them out, though they meet with the almost total disapproval of, or at least lack of sympathy from, the

community.⁸ Also, some of the newcomers, though apparently moneyless and without means of support, do come from wealthy city families; to "victimise" these people would undoubtedly cause an uproar in many quarters. The problems these newcomers pose are minimal—they are occupying deserted houses without any permission and occasionally they indulge in petty theft of fruit and vegetables.

The problem really is a clash of life styles—the conservative, hard-working, down-to-earth attitude of the resident locals clashes with the easy-going, non-working stance of the transient newcomers. The community has not absorbed these so-called "hippies"—rumours as to wholesale sex and drug orgies, disgusting behaviour and lack of hygiene tend to ostracise the hippies. But as far as the constable is concerned, they present no more of a problem than any other group, they are peaceful, many of them do not drink and the problem of drugs seldom arises: he realises they probably do have an acquaintance with drugs (there have been several arrests for cultivating cannabis in the area) but again, it is a problem of manpower. He would be powerless to prevent them using drugs and his concern is more with how they interact with the community, notably the young people. "As long as they don't cause trouble they won't hear from me" was his attitude. It appears that his view represents a compromise between what is best in the eyes of the law and what is practicable in the circumstances. His main concern is that the undercurrent of bad feeling does not become an open conflict. He sees no real way in which to mitigate the problem; his sympathies obviously lie with those in the community.

The prominent point which emerges from this study is, I feel, the fact that the constable readily accepts the role of a mediator and counsellor to the community in general. Whether he is lecturing to a group of over-boisterous shearers, prosecuting in court or simply calling upon elderly people living alone, this role persists—his great concern is the continuing harmony of the community, its running as it always has previously. With the limitations placed upon him, such as lack of manpower and long working hours, the traditional role of law enforcement officer tends to give place to that of promoter of social harmony—so many of his activities are outside those duties normally undertaken by most policemen in the course of their work. He has no peculiar strengths to draw upon, save perhaps the innate respect of most people for the law. Other than that, he is very much

⁸ This was probably the only instance where the constable did not respond to the consensus of the community. But this did not threaten his acceptability to them, because they agreed on the need for the law to be administered as impartially as was practicable. Besides, the feeling against the newcomers was not intense, although it was widespread.

on his own; it is his lot to cope with situations as they arise. With such an environment, it is easy to adopt the view that the rural constable has a carefree, crisis-lacking, and ultimately, a "simple" job. Yet it is not without its problems.

The conflicting demands which society imposes on the policeman (a high success rate in overall police work coupled with strict adherence to formal rules) makes it difficult to achieve the former without some derogation of the latter. Despite the relaxation in the rural situation of some of the legal rigidities which bind policemen in other areas, there must still be obedience to rules relating to the general ordering of a constable's duties. Even when these appear inappropriate and may exacerbate community feelings, they are what higher authority demands and must be accorded. Discretion as to what line of action may be adopted in important matters is strictly limited and it is only in the more mundane parts of the constable's job that he can exercise some real control over their outcome.

He is required to master a wide range of skills, from person-to-person counselling through to the handling of homicidal situations. It is assumed by the community that he is equipped to undertake these tasks, regardless of his personal perceptions as to his skill. Thus he has two pressures upon him, both of which are heightened by his isolation from other policemen—his personal sense of adequacy in a situation and also the community standard of what is, or is not, adequate. Not only must he cope widely, but also well.

Because of his close association with and dependence on the local community, the rural policeman *has* to adopt an approach to life and mode of living similar to that of his peers. He may be forced against his better judgment to agree with the values and precepts which the community holds in high esteem, in order to maintain constant rapport. It is easy to see the potential for trouble here—where the consensus of the community is for a course of action which runs counter to the policeman's own inclination and understanding of the law, what is the solution? A situation where the two viewpoints are completely opposed must not be allowed to develop, and this type of conflict is unlikely because the constable is in such constant contact that he would discern very early just where the community stands on any particular issue and he can react accordingly.⁹

Allied with this problem of dependence upon the community is the question of just how much involvement does he undertake. A policeman¹⁰

⁹ Cain, *op. cit.*, 90.

¹⁰ Cain, *op. cit.*, 8, from a report by the Association of Chief Police Officers (1960).

... must be part of the community and yet at the same time, it is always dangerous to become on too intimate terms with people to whom at any time he may have to apply due process of law.

The amount of familiarity he allows to develop between particular members of the community and himself will depend basically on his perception of their reliability and understanding of his obligations as a police officer. Although this study does not attempt to deal with the wider effects of the policeman's role, especially as it affects his wife and children, it will be seen that this problem is of great importance to the constable's wife. If anything, finding a comfortable and satisfying level of community interaction is a more immediate problem for her than for her husband. She does not have the automatic benefits of obedience and moral acceptance which her husband enjoys.

Added to these family exigencies are the inconveniences caused to domestic life by off-duty callers. The debit side of discretionary work hours which the constable can work for much of the year is that he is constantly "on call"; this is the expectation of his community. It should be remembered, however, that these calls often represent a large part of the positive feedback the rural policeman gets. The absence of such contact would be interpreted by this policeman as an indication that he had lost some of his rapport with the community.

In the course of this article, perhaps I have overstated the problems confronting a rural police officer and not sufficiently emphasised those factors which make rural policing a fulfilling job. For the compensations which do exist are large. He is a full member of the community within which he works and the likelihood of serious trouble threatening his ability to cope is very small.

It is not a job appealing to all—obviously, one's chances for promotion are not enhanced by moving into a small, rural environment¹¹—but it has a quality about it which is lacking in an urban setting. It is a safe assumption to make about the rural policeman that more of the man and less of the trained official is required. He is, above all, an instrument softening the impact of the law and allowing for the gentler functioning of his community.

¹¹ In fact, the reverse situation could probably apply. If a man is doing his job well and enjoying it, then his superiors will be reluctant to change him and risk the possibility of a replacement not being able to re-establish close contact. Promotion would not, therefore, be a reason for constables applying for country positions. With some reservations, it is probably true that country policemen have renounced aspirations to higher ranks within the force.