

**Street Weapons Commission – London**  
**Chris Huhne MP**

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

Chris Huhne welcome. I know that in your role as a Liberal Democrat spokesman on home affairs you're very interested in the role of the police in relation to restoring community confidence in the police and how that can have an impact on crime and particularly gun and knife crimes in our cities. How do you envisage actually making that a reality rather than a pious aspiration?

**Chris Huhne**

Well let's start with stressing why that it is so important because policing it seems to me only really works if the police are clearly perceived to be on the side of the community that they're policing. Policing by consent traditionally and that's when you get intelligence, when you get leads about criminal activity. It's also how you persuade people in local communities to

actually take the witness stand and give evidence in court and without those two things, without intelligence and leads and without people being prepared to come forward and give evidence in court we can't get convictions and therefore we can't be effective against crime. So the relationship between the police and the communities they serve is absolutely essential and if

we're going to rebuild that trust I think there are a number of issues that we do have to be very aware of. One is that a number of young people particularly in ethnic minority communities feel already put upon by some police methods. But where for example there's a very high chance of them being stopped and searched. So young black men in London. You're already talking about

stop and search likelihood of seven times other people. And what we mustn't do is get into a situation where random stop and search, as has happened in the past, is actually destroying the trust between communities and the police force. So I think intelligence led stop and search is very key in tackling gun and knife crime. I think building up community relationships with making

sure that the police are present, are actually involved, talking and listening, to the local community as opposed to merely jetting in in a squad car and jetting out again. I think that's

absolutely essential. So neighbourhood policing. Local community policing is an essential part of establishing that relationship between the police and the police service. And I think that in

a nutshell is the key thing. I think there are various things that one can do to help build up that relationship. One of which is to make communities aware of the problems and to give them direct means of accountability to the police service.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

And what does that mean?

**Chris Huhne**

Well what it must mean in the long run is that we need to move towards a situation where I think there's greater democratic control of local areas over the police service. Not the sort of proposal that we've seen from the Conservatives where you have an elected sheriff because I think that would be a way effectively of ensuring that minorities in a policed area were not properly represented on the police authority. But certainly one should look I believe at for example electing police authorities because this is after all a group of people who have the right to raise or lower the resources to a local police force and should also be able to focus in on local priorities. What we're doing at the moment is setting a whole series of Home

Office targets which are often very inappropriate for particular local police services. For example Manchester doesn't have a major problem of street robbery and yet there it is having to put resources into an issue precisely because the Home Office has decreed that there is going to be a national target for this which actually isn't appropriate to local communities. So

I think we have to get to a more realistic appraisal of what is happening locally. That means by the way since information is power that local people have to know what's going on. They have to have local police statistics. They have to have the local crime statistics and local clear up rates to know how effective their local force is being in tackling the problems that they

want to see tackled. Now that's already happened in London. London has moved to having ward level crime data now but it hasn't happened anywhere else in the country. And if you look at places where there's been a major improvement in tackling crime for example the great experiment under Mayor Juliani in New York ... information was absolutely key part of it.

What he essentially did is on a regular basis had a certain number of basic data coming back and he was able to hold precinct chiefs to account for what was going on in their area. And if they had a local problem put more resources in. if they weren't actually tackling that problem then make sure that they were held to account and the local community could see that they were held to account.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

I think Fay has a question.

**Fay Selvyn**

You're the second person today actually whose mentioned Juliani and it's quite interesting because my understanding is actually that the statistics for New York's declining crime actually mirrored a decline in crime across all of the major cities in America. And it wasn't actually due to tactics that he specifically took so it would be interesting for you to come back on that. and also we had some very interesting presentations yesterday from Merseyside Chief Constable who basically was very clear. Our job is about being the enforcers of the law. We're not the social workers. We're not the soft fluffy ones on the edge. And there were some difficulties he and another witnesses saw in doing the more soft edge stuff by people in the community being seen as grasses and not wanting to do that and that making the situation worse. So what would be your perspective on those two things?

**Chris Huhne**

Well on two things one of the things that strikes me in this area I have to say having come

at it from economics is that the amount the sophistication of the work that's done on research on crime is relatively poor compared with other areas of social science. So for example I think we ought to be doing much more aware of the relationship between crime and what's happening

in the overall economy, particularly unemployment. What's happening between crime and for example the number, the sheer number of particularly young men that happen to be in the population at any one time. and there are as you've pointed out these big mega trend but I don't and certainly if you take sort of long run, the baby boom generation and so forth, as you get a rise in the number of young men you do tend to get a rise in the amount of crime. You get a fall in the number of young men you tend to get a fall. But I believe beyond that there are real issues around policing. And I have no doubt, having interviewed Mayor Giuliani on this issue when he was Mayor and talked through, I have no doubt that New York actually tackled

that issue very effectively in the short run. And I don't think that you can show that the quite rapid reduction in crime which happened in New York City was mirrored elsewhere in major cities in the US over the short period of time that those actions were taken. And local accountability, the accountability of the police service was absolutely crucial. But I would caution you

against also taking this view that somehow the soft side is unimportant. Because the soft side is actually crucial for policing. Come back to that point if the police don't have the trust of the community that they serve they can't get the intelligence to tackle crime, they can't get witnesses to appear in the witness box, they can't convict the criminals that we want to see

convicted. So it's absolutely essential that there is that relationship of trust and where we've seen it break down for example in Northern Ireland between the Northern Ireland police service and the Catholic community in the wake of the over the top decision to impose excessively tough measures of internment it was a disaster for policing because the Catholic community

simply didn't talk to the police service any longer. And you didn't get the intelligence. You didn't get the witnesses coming forward and actually it aggravated the whole problem. So

the soft side, as you put it, needs to be very carefully balanced because actually what we all want to see is a reduction in crime. The real issue is if you go in hob nailed boots first you're going to make the matter worse or better. And there has to be a balance.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

Let me bring Ian in here.

**Ian**

I'm quite interested some of the measures that you mentioned before with regards to for example local policing and you seem to suggest rolling it to the other areas of the country. However we've got that in London. We've got a lot of local policing neighbourhood policing but still we find crime more or less on the increase. There is no need to remind you that last year we had 27 youngsters killed. How would you or what would you propose that can be done in addition to that local policing and other measures that are in place that just somehow just doesn't seem to be working very well? What would you propose that the police should do to make the measures more effective if you like before rolling it out to the rest of the country?

**Chris Huhne**

Right well it's a first step because if you don't understand what's going on in the local area you can't analyse it and you can't deal with the problems. So It's absolutely the first step that you have the data of the sort that is now being published in London. The community policing in London I think has had a good effect if you look at the overall numbers, but it is relatively new

This is not an experience that's been going on for a long time. And it certainly hasn't been rolled out in other parts of the country. You're absolutely right to point out for example to the shocking number of young people who've been killed in London. In fact and continue to be. I think it's 12 so far with the death in Peckham on Saturday. So there is a continuing and

serious problem here which needs to be tackled. And I think violent crime has to be top of the list of priorities for every police force in the country. It's what people really want. But what strikes me when you look at the issue of violent crime and policing is how enormously varied the experience of different forces actually is. The detection and clear up rate for violence against the

person in London for example is 30% it's the lowest in the country. The detection and clear up rate for violence against a person in Northumbria is 64%. Now these are meant to be really serious crimes that police anywhere should be taking and giving the highest priority to. And yet you have an enormous discrepancy in the effectiveness of different police forces

in dealing with it. Now I think part of that is a local accountability issue. Part of it is undoubtedly London is a lot more difficult to police than Northumbria and I don't discount that at all. But I think it's also there is an issue of police efficiency. And if you talk to younger people in the police force they often do get frustrated. Some very, very bright young recruits in the police

forces get slightly frustrated at what they see as sometimes excessive slow response to change amongst senior police officers. And if you talk to some chief constables what you find is their ability to actually manage the police force is surprisingly circumscribed compared even with other public services let alone with the private sector. So for example chief constables

find it very, very hard if someone is no longer performing in a senior role to actually say well look Jack you've done a sterling service over the years but actually you're not longer fitted to this role. We need to move you on. And the only option that a chief constable actually has is to put them effectively in charge of something just as important somewhere else. And that's really

not good enough. I think there has to be an ability for chief constables if they're going to get held to account by their local communities ability for the chief constables actually to turn around and say well hang on a minute we need the management tools to deliver the job. I think there's one other thing.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

Chris let me just bring in Gus John here.

**Gus John**

I'm interested in the correlation between the quality of data and management information and public trust and confidence in the police in dealing with these matters. Staying with that what I'm interested in is this. I work and live in Manchester and I know that there's a relatively small number of people involved in knife and gun activities in that city. My view is that the way

in which these activities are classified as gangs ... give those young people involved in it an elevated sense of their importance and the fear they cause in communities and consequently the greater majority of people who are not part of that see themselves as not having a function in relation to it. I wonder what your view is about the way we designate some of these activities and those groups gangs?

**Chris Huhne**

Well I think we should always avoid trying to glamorise any criminal activity. I think that's absolutely essential. I'm not sure myself that that's going to be a key part of the solution to the problem in terms of tackling knife and gun crime in particular. I think that you know if you're looking at short term measures. We've talked about the long term measures of rebuilding trust

between the police and communities but looking at short term measures I think analysing hotspots, intelligence led stop and search, trying to get a bit more joined up government so for example the people who are responsible for searching people coming into this country are devoting as much time to looking for guns and knives as they are to cigarettes because this comes

under the Treasury. We actually have nine times as many officials searching for cigarette smuggling as we do searching for gun and knife smuggling. Now that's a lack of joined up government because it's a Treasury priority to boost the revenue. It's not a Treasury priority

to get down the number of guns and knives coming into the country. So I think we need a bit more

joined up government but those are the quick things I would do. But certainly stopping any glamorisation also will help and I think we need to be aware of that.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

So if you were going to give us one recommendation would it be tighten up the controls of guns and knives coming into the country?

**Chris Huhne**

I don't think that this is an area frankly that ... lends itself to one simple recommendation. I mean I think that there are some short term actions which revolve around toughening up border control. Making sure we don't have gun smuggling which has been the case in a number of the high profile murders we've seen recently where clearly the gun has been traced to

coming into the country and we haven't had adequate controls there. I think we need hotspot analysis. We need to make sure that we've got intelligence led stop and search. Not random stop and search because of the potential worries that that will lead to in terms of breakdown of the trust between ethnic minority communities in particular and the police force. I think those are

all absolutely key measures. But in the longer run it's working on rebuilding the trust between the policed and the police to ensure that intelligence is better. Witnesses coming forward. And I do think we need to very seriously take on board the proposal from the Association of Chief Police Officers for witness anonymity in gang areas. I think that's absolutely essential.

That the police are able to offer cast iron guarantees of anonymity to witnesses to come forward where there's a real risk of intimidation. So it's not something that's going to lead you to an easy one solution. But there are a range of things which I believe can bear down on the problem of violence and would be effectively.

**Cherie Booth (Chair)**

Chris thank you.

CUT