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Please cite this publication as follows:

Brunger, M. (2012) Private policing: Mark Brunger considers the recent proposals to outsource elements of frontline policing to private providers. *Criminal Justice Matters*, 89 (1). pp. 10-11. ISSN 0962-7251.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09627251.2012.721965>

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Private Policing:

Mark Brunger considers the recent proposals to outsource elements of frontline policing to private providers.

As Sir Ian Blair (2012) recently noted, the tender offered by West Midlands and Surrey police (see, Travis & Williams, 2012) signals a shift that would allow the private sector to provide staff that can carry out routine and repetitive tasks at cheaper rates. When combined with the proposals by Lincolnshire Police to outsource ‘middle and back office functions’ – and even give over the running of a whole police station – to the private security firm G4S (see, BBC News, 2012), we are encountering a new wave of private provision within public policing. These changes are being hailed as ‘essential’ if current front-line policing services are to be maintained given the dramatic cuts to budgets police forces are faced with in light of the current government’s austerity measures. However, these shifts are not as radical as they might first seem and, indeed, they should not surprise us, given the slow but deliberate path towards the privatisation of policing services that have been witnessed over past 30 years or so. Indeed, to quote John Harris (2012), in his response to Sir Ian’s article, this ‘reflects two iron rules of the relentless drive to outsource and marketize the parts of the State that have so far been left alone’. As the last ‘un-reformed’ public service, the Conservatives began to subject public policing to ‘value for money’ and ‘economy and efficiency’- the so deemed ‘best practices’ of the private sector - in the 1980s. However, given their reliance on the police to become the ‘shock troops’ of the social upheavals of the Thatcher enterprise (the Miners’ Strike, Wapping and the urban riots of 1985 come to mind), these ‘managerial reforms’, as they became known, did not really get underway with any great urgency until John Major’s public service reforming administration of the early 1990s. Proposed reforms came forth in the guise of the Sheehy report (examining the rewards and responsibilities of the public police and propose a further shift towards business style structures through recommending fixed term contracts and performance related pay) and Posen report

(examining the services provided by public police forces and recommending re-distributing non-essential functions to other agencies). Although some changes to public policing were subsequently included in the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994, resistance remained fierce and the more radical plans, such as performance related pay and outright privatisation of ancillary tasks, were successfully fought off by a resilient Police Federation and the broader police lobby. Since this time, New Labour, to which Sir Ian was allegedly close, entered the stage and continued a pursuit of marketization with a missionary zeal. It advocated and undertook policies that have seen the statutory implementation of partnership policing (via the Crime & Disorder Act 1998) and the further extension of the policing family through the introduction of more civilisation of ancillary tasks – placing more officers back on the frontline, rolling out PCSOs and extending recruitment to the Special Constabulary. These were brought together under the drive to maintain the rise in police numbers funded by an unprecedented increase in investment in Criminal Justice (see, Solomon, Eades, Garside & Rutherford, 2007). As Harris (2012) notes, this has, under the shadow of the Comprehensive Spending Review, become a ‘shibboleth’ the Coalition have now managed to shatter.

But, let me return to the debate in hand. Other parts of criminal justice system have not been immune to privatisation drives: private prisons, prisoner escort and court services to name some significant others. However, in a drive to make it more acceptable, private policing has also been gradually brought more into the mainstream. Such thinking was envisioned in legislation such as the Private Security Industry Act 2001 for example. Such moves are common with the broader trends occurring throughout the world, particularly in those countries that have subscribed to economic neo-liberalism. Here, the burgeoning of private security has borne witness to firms engaging in activities from shopping mall security to routine patrolling and crime investigation. This pervasive spread of private policing services has seen ‘security guards’ pop up everywhere, as the business community in

particular have sought to increase their reliance on private policing services against a background of de-regulation and State cutbacks. So, as central government funding has receded, the public in many nations are more than ever before likely to encounter private security officers than the public police on a daily basis. More starkly, as the gap between rich and poor has widened, the more affluent amongst us, from as far apart as South Africa to the west coast of the United States, have begun a slow retreat to the perceived safety of gated communities; policed by their own private policing agencies. Even in the UK, research has uncovered the increasing presence of private firms now being hired to patrol private estates (see, Crawford & Lister, 2006).

The march of private policing then has seen it begin to outstrip public policing in both numbers and investments. Now, with the ‘age of austerity’ firmly upon us and where every part of the public services is potentially ‘out to tender’, why should we, therefore, be surprised if we see police forces up and down the country ‘outsourcing’ front line policing. To be sure, it is the next logical step. With all three main parties, to one extent or another, signed up to the ideology of marketizing the public services, or at least encouraging or not-discouraging the leaders of public services, including Chief Constables, to privatise what and where they can – or what they feel they can get away with – the privatization of policing is therefore inevitable.

Such shifts do raise a number of questions, particularly concerning what the implications of placing parts of frontline policing out to tender might be. First, accountability remains a pressing issue, particularly in terms of asking to whom private firms will be accountable. In times where we have seen regulation of private sector dramatically fail in other areas (financial services being the obvious choice), should we risk the same with something as important as law and order. How will justice with equity and impartiality be guaranteed? In terms of tendering – is the private way always the best way? At first glance,

the abrogation of these roles and tasks and delegation of responsibility to outsiders might at first seem appealing. There is, however, little risk that senior police management numbers and their pay rates will be reduced to reflect any reduction of ownership. In other words, are any true savings made? So, we should also consider the notion of whether tendering out culminates in true cost effectiveness when hiring in private providers. Finally, has privatisation really driven or provided any improved quality of services in other sectors? Furthermore, where will it leave the rump of the public police that remains funded from the State purse? Will it leave them to deal what is left? The ‘police property’ as Robert Reiner aptly put it. Those who cannot afford private policing services, such as those on the margins of citizenship and who find themselves increasingly alienated from the mainstream of society will be the ones left behind, arguably, to get the full force of a disgruntled and increasingly disenfranchised public police.

There are not wholly negatives here, however. Some have made a strong argument that non-State forms can be harnessed to the benefit of communities. When we consider the nodal perspective, as espoused by Shearing and colleagues (see, Johnston & Shearing, 2003), local networks can be harnessed to augment State providers to enable citizens in a positive, holistic and ‘bottom up’ sense. Overall, we should not be surprised then, if by 2020 private neighbourhood policing officers are matters of fact, just like the collection of our rubbish. We accept PSCOs and Volunteer Officers, so why not? Why not indeed.

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