I am a retired police officer.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has through the Police Committee decided to carry out a review of the way the single police quango is operating. I am somewhat surprised that this review has been announced over the Easter weekend and that the period of time for submissions is so short.

I have believed from the day and hour that our Government and Parliament announced its intention to pass the legislation creating the single police service that it was a mistake. Policing is in my view the most vital of the public services because it is a service of last resort in other words no one else can provide the response needed when the general public seek assistance because of criminality or some other desperate need. It is also principally a local service dealing with local communities and their needs on a day to day basis and therefore it must be in contact with local people, be known to people and the community and be locally accountable in real terms to those who represent local communities and people. The centralisation of policing instantly removed that local accountability and to put it in simple terms, having the police service of Dumfries or Shetland managed from a Government office in Edinburgh destroyed local policing at a stroke.

This leads me to my main complaint about the single police quango and that is that power and control of it is in the hands of ‘the Government of the day’. Prior to the implementation of the single police quango there were eight local police services resourced, managed and governed in a long established system with a locally selected Chief Constable, with close Local Authority involvement and by central Government involvement on an arms-length basis. Now we have one single centralised Government police quango with its Government controlled parts such as PIRC, the SPA, HMIC and the Chief Constable. The present Scottish Government is led by the SNP and their appointees. After an election another Party may well lead the Scottish Government and then control the police. This involvement of politics in policing is totally wrong in my opinion and I do not believe that many of those who backed the creation of the single police service understood what the implications were in this regard. I also believe that some politicians and others did know what the implications were and did want this control and power in the hands of ‘the Government of the day’. I suggest that the feeling has grown over a number of years among politicians that the police have had too much power and control and were only answerable to themselves and that here in Scotland that would be stopped. To have ‘the Government of the day’ controlling and directing the police is a disaster and without wanting to exaggerate can lead to scenes such as that in Spain recently when armed uniformed police were directed onto the streets to stop and prevent people marking a ballot paper in an election.

Politicians and Governments have an important role to play in policing through creating laws, rules and regulations and by calling the police to account, by
monitoring and measuring their actions and their results, by ensuring policing is sufficiently financed and that the general public are satisfied with the service provided. Day to day local policing is primarily the responsibility of the police service and I believe that some remote Government official in Edinburgh or some remote chief officer at Tulliallan Castle does not and cannot manage policing across the 80,000 square kilometres of Scotland with all its different communities, its widely different problems and concerns and its different peoples.

The last five years have shown clearly and starkly, often with terrible human consequences, the failings of the single Government police quango and I suggest the current arrangements cannot continue because if they do there will be more failings, more tragedies and more victims. I suggest this review is vitally important but unless change is brought about it will simply add to the damage already caused.

I suggest that the laws governing the police and its relationship to the Government need to be altered so that 'the Government of the day' is not 'in charge of the police service'. Policing needs to return to the triple management type system as before. Local policing needs to be regenerated and strengthened.

In the past opportunities were missed to review policing to see if it was fit for the 21st century and in my opinion the failure to do so led to the mistake of the single force idea. To sort out the current mess will not be easy but something must be done and I hope the Police Committee’s review will lead to the changes that are needed.

I wish the Committee success.

Andrew McMillan
15 April 2018