Justice Committee

Railway Policing (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from Billy Scott

The subsumption of BTP Scotland into Police Scotland by the SNP, a party I have supported for a good number of years, is undoubtedly one of the most petty and ill-informed political moves I have witnessed.

To fully understand the rationale of the SNP in this matter I believe you have to go back to Kenny MacAskill being the Justice Secretary.

In 2007 during his tenure there was a terrorist attack at Glasgow Airport. BTP Scotland after the terrorist attack carried out a very large, probably unjustified and certainly poorly managed number of searches. These searches were carried out under anti-terrorism legislation and allowed random searches. BTP were the only force in Scotland to use this legislation so liberally. MacAskill at the time, rightly so, was concerned that he as Justice Secretary had no control over what Scotland based officers were doing. He vocalised this strongly at the time. Unfortunately since this time it appears BTP has been in the SNP sights and MacAskill’s replacement Michael Matheson has carried on with the ‘vendetta’ which has led to the current position.

The Smith Commission should have been an opportunity to put in place some sort of legislation to improve communication and accountability between the Scottish Government and the BTP. Rather we now have a poorly thought out plan to destroy a well-functioning organisation for what could be seen as short sighted political revenge. The Smith Commission and interpretation thereof would have been far better served by working with the BTP to better move forward.

With regards specifics:

BTP officers have certain extra skill sets which they use and enhance on a regular basis. Subsumption may well involve extra (current Police Scotland) officers receiving some extra specialist training of the same or similar type. However proficiency comes with using these taught skill sets. BTP officers use these skills on a regular basis and as such have maximised their abilities. Diluting these skill-sets will undoubtedly mean that some incidents will not be dealt with in the same current proficient manner. Further, officers who currently have and display these specific skills will also eventually move away from the railway environment to other non-railway policing roles and the specialist skills will be further diluted and eventually lost.

Cross border arrangements at the moment are seamless, officers work on a regular basis particularly with their closest England based counterparts. Trains can easily be policed if required for a journey the length of Britain with minimum officer abstraction. Mutual aid between areas is cost free and easily arranged. Two control centres cover the whole of Britain and a common crime and intelligence system accessed by every BTP officer is in place. Every advantage is currently there and easily utilised
why do away with this? Losing this seamless cross border potential will vastly increase disruption potentially and possibly even put lives in danger. Also a quick phone or radio message to a BTP colleague in an adjoining Division can also easily be readily utilised. Time and time again travelling criminals or vulnerable persons can be traced and dealt with appropriately ASAP.

The visibility or lack of can only have a negative effect on passenger safety and confidence. At the moment officers are dedicated to work within the railway network. On a daily basis they have contact with railway staff and representatives from the various Train Operating Companies (TOCs). Real time information passed quickly and effectively to highly trained specialist officers who know the network, the staff and the problems. High visibility where required and in the numbers required. Partnership working particularly with Police Scotland is currently effectively utilised. Once the partner status changes to being only Police Scotland the priorities change from area to area. Railway specific problems may not always be a Police Scotland top priority. With the current dedicated BTP service the railway will always be the number one priority.

The rail operators are in total agreement. The current partnership working they have with the BTP is effective and is the best business plan for moving forward. Police Scotland frequently do not understand the dynamics of dealing with railway incidents. They often deal with incidents on the railway infrastructure by automatically closing off and stopping all railway traffic. This method is certainly not so disruptive in a non-railway environment. Therefore all trains are stopped even when this is not actually required. They routinely fail to understand the ongoing disruption this can cause to 1000’s of customers and commuters mainly remote from the incident site. A classic example is when BTP deal with ‘standard’ railway fatalities. Without in any way compromising the dignity of the deceased or the enquiry the death is dealt with usually within an agreed 90 minute disruption time. Ensuring that it is dealt with properly and without unduly disrupting the entire network. Compare this with Police Scotland and it seems roads are shut for many hours for tragic road deaths which certainly sometimes on the face of it seem routine. Carrying this method into rail deaths would be catastrophic.

As for the role and terms and conditions. It would be naive in the extreme to think the role will not change. No doubt the initial set up will try to ensure the ‘BTP’ operate as a separate division. However this will over the years change and eventually officers will be utilised within various current geographical Police Scotland divisions. As policing is non-political the use of officers is up to the current Chief Constable and there is no doubt the ‘railway police’ role will eventually all but disappear.

BTP Officers do have unique and separate working and pension conditions from Police Scotland. Conditions agreed by both parties when they joined the BTP. Officers and staff are concerned as there are no concrete answers in place regards changes to pensions, terms and conditions. A ‘political promise’ is not reassurance enough. As a result of these proposals officers have already left others will follow suit before and if the subsumption happens.

The BTP is far from perfect, however working with and improving what we currently have is a far better prospect than hoping Police Scotland can cope. Even in an
independent Scotland the joined up railway network would be better policed by a single specialist BTP.

Billy Scott (retired officer)
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