



IMPROVING THE POLICE IMAGE

*Sergeant Bob Haldane

*Sergeant Bob Haldane of Victoria Police Department, Management Services Bureau. His essay "Improving the Police Image" was the winning entry in the 1978 Chief Commissioner's Prize Essay Competition in 1978. The essay is re-published per courtesy and authority of the Editor "Police Life" (Victoria)

The Victoria Police is the only organisation in society that will answer any call for help — anywhere, anytime.¹

Few organisations in society can lay similar claim to the diversity of service proffered in the preceding quote. The Victoria Police backs this claim with the personnel and resources of the police service the pursuit of this claim is, in itself, evidence attesting to the diverse nature of police work. It is this diversity of the police task that then projects the concept of a police image as one of the most nebulous concepts in police science. The police image has been defined as —²

... the outer reflection of the standing of the department based on its performance and service. It is the reaction which emanates from the public and which is based on the public's expression of confidence and respect in a police department or a lack of such confidence and respect.

On a macro level and as an explanation of the police image in general terms this definition is adequate. In real terms, on a micro level applicable to the operational police personnel, the police image is a highly variable one, forever in a state of flux. For in real terms there are as many police images as there are individual police officers and members of the public. The police image is not a fixed and tangible object that can be erected as a visible monument to police service. Instead, it is the image that each member of the public visualises, real or imagine, as being, "the police".

Because of this, the police image is many things to many people and it is a changing image that can be buffeted by a hostile press, tarnished by dishonest members, dulled by inefficiency or enhanced by professional members of integrity. Similarly, the diverse nature of police work requires that any improving of the police image be a broad and ongoing project. It is not sufficient that police make occasional, concerted efforts at improving their collective image. The task of improving the police image is an endless one with several inter-dependent areas of responsibility. Each area is negated without support from the other but the ultimate area of responsibility lies with each and every individual member of the police service. The government, the police administration and the members of the police service, each have a share in the responsibility for both maintaining and improving the police image. Such a task is a gigantic one but it is one that must be attacked on all fronts. The police function is dependent upon co-operation and support from the public, whilst in turn the degree of this support fluctuates with the level of the police image. In modern society the police are rendered impotent as upholders of the law if public support is withdrawn and it is therefore incumbent upon police to maintain and improve the police image.

A prime area of responsibility for improving the police image must lie not with the police themselves but with the government of the day. This responsibility is both a positive and negative one, that requires governments to take certain action but also to refrain from certain acts. The government

has an implicit duty to the police to provide sufficient finance and resources to man and equip an efficient police service. No police department can hope to maintain or improve the image of its members without proper government support. Adequate remuneration, good work conditions, and the provision of ample and proper equipment, uniforms and accoutrements are all the responsibility of the government. The police administration may be vested with the task of supplying many of these things but police administrators can do little without proper support, interest and funding, from the government.

Given that the government has a duty to properly fund the police and take an interest in police activities, it must also be stated that the independence of the police is established by Law.³ For this reason the government has a responsibility not to involve the police in politics, and any enforcement of the laws by the police must be politically impartial. Inherent in this principle is a government duty not to enact politically motivated laws that bring the image of the police enforcing them into disrepute.

The fact remains that the police are more closely identified with the laws they administer than almost any other group of public servants, and that any resentment of those laws and of the measures that have to be taken to ensure that they are observed, will invariably manifest itself in hostility towards the police.⁴

Few things in the world of the police service can damage the police image as much as police involvement in politics. Police in their professional capacity have a duty to be apolitical and impartial in their application of the law. Likewise, the government and politicians have a reciprocal duty not to involve the police in matters of politics. In a democratic society, where the rule is one of law and not of men, the police image cannot afford to be tarnished by overt acts of partisanship involving politics. Members of the public service striving to improve the police image can ill-afford bad publicity, resulting from inept politicians or injudicious acts by members of government. Conversely, and more often is the case, governments can contribute towards improving the police image.

If the responsibility of government for improving the police image can be regarded as a pre-condition of improvement, then so too in part might the role of police administrators. For given proper and adequate funding and support by the government, the police administration then has a general responsibility for improving the police image at the organisational level. The role of government and police administrators in improving the police image percolates into all areas and levels of police work and each task complements the other. In this concept of shared responsibility, the police administration must exert its influence in several areas in order to improve the police image.

Although the ultimate responsibility for this lies with each and every member of the police service, it is still a team effort and not a conglomeration of individual efforts. In this regard the police administration is vested with the task of over-seeing the duties of each and every member and co-ordinating the overall concept. No matter how highly-motivated and professional an individual police officer might be, any effort at

improving the police image is limited to the degree of efficiency displayed by the police administration. Improving the police image is an individual task, governed by a collected and co-ordinated effort.

Before outlining the ways in which the police administration can directly contribute toward improving the police image, it is perhaps pertinent to emphasise the need for the police administration and police personnel to display a mutual respect and solidarity. It has been suggested that, "Police officers should be interested in the force for which they work, . . ." and that, "Good impressions on the public grow largely from contented policemen who are familiar with the philosophy of the law enforcement and who enjoy recognition, respect, and a sense of belonging to the police force."⁵

The preceding suggestion is doubtless correct and in fact echoes the concept that the police administration and the members of the police service, have a mutual responsibility for maintaining a good public image. Inherent in this concept is a duty by police personnel to maintain good industrial relations, presenting a police image of departmental solidarity and harmony. To many members of society the police department is the ultimate bastion of security and sound principles, represented by a solid and reliable front. In times of trouble and need, people turn to the police for assistance and support, assistance and support that has traditionally come from a united body of professional personnel, set apart from the lawlessness, factionalism, and industrial strife, that has permeated most other sectors of society. It is therefore an implicit responsibility of all persons involved in the police service to present a balanced and orderly front. Poor industrial relations have done much to damage the fabric of Australian society and the police service image must not be obscured by internal strife. Administration and personnel must move as one to improve the police image. The police, of necessity, must set themselves apart from involvement in politics and industrial turmoil. The public cannot be denied the secure and reliable service traditionally akin to the police. Should the service wane, or should cracks appear in the facade of the police front, then many people and things will suffer, including the police image.

It was suggested earlier in this text that the police administration has a responsibility for improving the police image at the organisational level. This responsibility is in fact a pre-condition for improving the police image at the base level. Individual members must be properly recruited, trained, equipped and provided with all necessary back-up facilities. At the same time, the police department must be involved in the ongoing task of maintaining and improving general aspects of the police image. Incorporated in this promotion of the police image on a broad basis are the efforts of police public relations departments and press liaison offices. The service provided by these latter sections of the police department are ancillary to the efforts of individual members and should never be intended to supplant the activities of members at the base level. As pre-conditions for improving the police image, the police administration must strive to recruit the best available people within the community. One of the strengths of the police service is the diversity of experience and background of its members. Likewise, one of the attractions of the police service to recruits is the diverse nature of police work, offering wide scope to the interests of candidates. Once recruited, it is incumbent upon the police administration to train police recruits for the task ahead of them. Indeed, it is at the training stage that police must be imbued with a sense of belonging and pride, that will spark their motivation to improve the police image. Once recruited and trained, police personnel must be adequately equipped so as to present a professional and efficient image. The police administration has a responsibility to ensure that the police at the operational level are

equipped for their role. This is a mammoth task, that in the computer-space age, requires that police administrators and planners keep abreast of new developments, to give the operational police officer every chance in the field. Professional criminals have shown they are very adept at utilising the most modern technology, and similarly, increasing mobility, urbanisation and a breakdown of traditional social controls, all create new problems for police administrators. In order to improve the police image, police administrators must cope with all these problems and ensure that individual members of the service are also able to cope with their responsibilities.

It is incumbent upon the police administration to properly recruit, train and equip the police service. The administration also has the task of formulating policies and general departmental philosophy and for promoting the general image of the department. In this regard the police administrators must keep themselves up to date with current events and in turn must ensure that police personnel and the public are kept well informed. Modern police departments cannot afford any self-indulgent insularity, that prevents insight by the media and the public into the workings of the police. Instead, police departments must disseminate information to keep the public informed of what the police are doing and why they are doing it. "The Australian press has a reputation for being particularly hostile towards the police . . ."⁶ but police departments can do much to overcome this by the distribution of accurate and pertinent information, relevant to the workings of the police. It has been found that, ". . . the police have more experience in dealing with the public than the public have in dealing with the police," and because of this the police must promote their image. Many images of the police held by the public are not formed from personal contact but are derived from the media. Therefore it is essential that the police present to such people an honest and frank image of police and policing. Similarly, it is the responsibility of police departments to counter false and misleading information about the police, that might be spread by the media. This is not a task for individual members but is one of the preconditions to improving the police image that must be undertaken by police administrators. Of equal importance, it is imperative that police administrators be seen as fair and efficient in dealing with complaints by the public against members of the police service. No police department can afford to harbour dishonest, inept or unfit police officers and public confidence can be inspired and the police image improved, if police administrators deal efficiently and fairly with internal discipline problems. Police administrators have a duty to the public and members of the police service to ensure that the image of the department is not damaged by the actions of a few errant police officers. It is thus in these ways that the police administration can contribute to improving the police image.

Like the government, the police administration's responsibility for improving the police image is by way of fulfilling a number of pre-conditions. Once given all these pre-conditions, it then becomes the ultimate and absolute responsibility of every member of the police service to maintain and improve the police image. The best possible recruits, well-trained, well-equipped, given full departmental and governmental support, operating under favourable conditions, must then produce the quality of service required of them. Every police officer, from the Chief Commissioner of Police to the newest cadet, has an obligation to strive to improve this police image as part of the collective police image.

It is the clear responsibility of every member of the service to make every endeavour to support both his own image and that of his colleagues with his employer, the public.⁸

In the final analysis, any improvement of the police image must take place at the base level of operation; at the level of police/public contact. As stated earlier in this text, the nature

of police work is diverse and the number of police images is variable, but without doubt the general police image is a manifestation of the images presented by individual members in their dealings with the public. Thus, police officers are judged by the public on a multitude of variables, that includes not only on duty factors but also factors relevant to a police officer's off duty behaviour. For this reason it is essential, in the interest of the police image, that members of the police service regard themselves as police ambassadors in all their dealings with the public. Some members might find this scrutiny of their off duty behaviour quite repugnant but in the overall assessment, the potential for damage to the police image by off duty members is great. On the credit side, the police image can be enhanced and improved by activities undertaken by members when off duty.

Community involvement and a pride in oneself can only serve to improve the image of the police. It is not good enough that police personnel be neat, polite and efficient, eight hours a day, five days a week. The police task is unique, as are the conditions imposed by participation in it, and the police image is not one that ceases to function after hours. One often sees in the media of publicity given to police officers who indulge in errant behaviour whilst off duty and invariably the police identity is given impetus in the headlines. Once a person assumes the role of a police officer, that person assumes the shared responsibility of all members of the police service, for improving the police image; an image that endures in all contacts with the public, on and off duty. It has been found a timeless feature of the police image that it is,

... the member dealing with the public who moulds public opinion for, by his behaviour will the Force be judged . . .

He must realise that no matter how efficient the Police Force is, how many crimes are cleared up and criminals arrested, it is still judged by the individual citizen as he finds it from his own personal contacts.

Thus, it is without question that the ultimate responsibility for improving the police image lies with individual members of the police service. In all their contacts with the public, police officers must be fair, polite, honest and professional in all respects. We live in a world of ever-increasing efficiency and police too must aim to be truly professional and efficient in their task. Police must be able to respond under pressure and bear the police image in mind even at the most trying times. Self-control and restraint are admirable attributes for a police watching public. The police officer conscious of improving the police image must aim to be a person of integrity and honesty. Few people achieve perfection in a lifetime but the aim of each and every police officer must be to work in a positive way toward achieving perfection in the police task. Police personnel motivated to this end and consciously working towards it, will prove the mainstay in improving the police image. Governments and police administrators must fulfill the pre-conditions enumerated herein and then each and every police officer must make a concerted and ongoing effort to improve the police image.

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