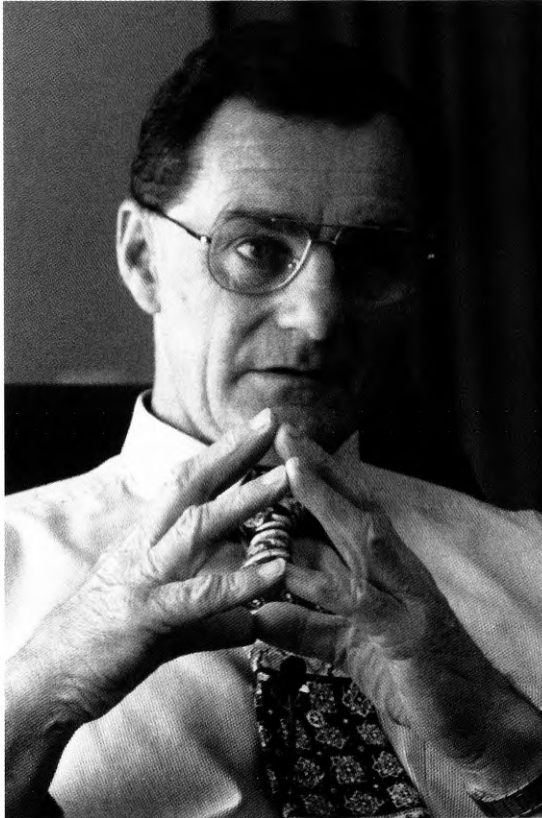


Integrity—the AFP’s key value

Changing the ethical culture of an organisation is not easy when it has been entrenched and institutionalised. The NSW Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service brought attention to the need to promote professional integrity within that organisation. AIDEX in Canberra saw the Commonwealth Ombudsman fire a broadside at some of the AFP’s institutionalised practices. This has led to the inaugural Integrity Investigations Program jointly developed by the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman and the AFP.



Commissioner Mick Palmer

By Richard Crothers

In November 1996, the AFP conducted its first Integrity Investigations Program where personal integrity was emphasised as the key factor for officers investigating members of their own profession.

The week-long course was jointly developed and sponsored by the AFP and the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. Coordinated by Federal Agent Tom O’Brien, Training, it was attended by AFP members from Eastern, Northern, Southern, Western and ACT Regions and from Internal Investigations and Internal Security and Audit at Head Office. Two members of the ombudsman’s staff also attended.

Opened by Commissioner Mick Palmer and the Commonwealth Ombudsman Philippa Smith, the course dealt with all aspects of integrity issues in operations, operations support, in-service training, and recruitment.

In his opening address to delegates, Commissioner Palmer said the program would provide guidance and support to internal investigators in terms of dealing with the internal pressures that sometimes arise from being involved in the investigation of a member of the policing profession.

“If we are to expect the highest of standards from our people generally, we must expect the best of the best from those people investigating ourselves,” Commissioner Palmer said.

“This forum focuses on some of the more critical implications, challenges and requirements involved in achieving this result.

“It is a values-based program that aims to explore and provide clear advice as to what is really entailed in practising personal integrity in an internal investigations environment looking at the conflict of interest, potential problems associated with being required to interview people you know, and the critical importance of forming and acting upon objective value judgements.”



Commonwealth Ombudsman
Philippa Smith

‘I do not wish to pretend that the work of police officers is easy—nor is the job of those called upon to review and investigate the actions of others necessarily always welcomed—but it is often through this work that lessons can be drawn as to what practices and procedures need to be improved.’

“The program also hoped to provide some guidance and support to internal investigators in terms of dealing with the internal pressures that sometimes arise simply from the process of being involved in investigating members of your own profession,” he said.

“We are committed to the very best practice of handling complaints and internal investigations.

“I believe this program is a very significant plank in the development of that platform.”

Ombudsman Philippa Smith reinforced the commissioner’s opening remarks by pointing out that by taking on the responsibility of ensuring society lives by agreed standards and rules, police officers must ensure they live by high standards themselves.

“I do not wish to pretend that the work of police officers is easy—nor is the job of those called upon to review and investigate the actions of others necessarily always welcomed—but it is often through this work that lessons can be drawn as to what practices and procedures need to be improved,” Ms Smith said.

“It is also through this work that the agreed standards and culture of the force will be set and/or reaffirmed.

“It can be a mechanism to ensure quality and where necessary a catalyst for change.”

Ms Smith said the genesis of the integrity

program came about as a result of the AIDEX demonstrations in November 1991 and the subsequent review by her office of the 169 complaints received.

This led to her release of a public report in 1993 of which one of the recommendations was the need to improve the training and quality of police internal investigations.

“Things are changing,” she said. “I was pleased that given the recent demonstration at Parliament House, we received only one complaint, not 169.”

The Integrity Investigations Program was the first specific training program for AFP officers working in Internal Investigations and Internal Security and Audit.

Rather than being a program covering the mechanical skills for an internal investigation, the forum aimed at giving participants the opportunity to discuss the problems and dilemmas that could be faced by internal investigators.

Ms Smith said that, by commencing the program, she believed the AFP was setting an example for the other policing organisations in Australia.

Also speaking at the opening of the forum, Deputy Commissioner Adrien Whiddett pointed out that it was no accident that ‘integrity’ headed the list of the AFP’s expressed values.

“If integrity does not underpin the other values, what reliance can be placed on any one of them?” he said.

“The record shows that from time to time the rules have delivered up numerous transgressors and they were dealt with, and perhaps lessons were learnt along the way—but was ‘integrity’ ever learned?”

“I suggest that integrity is not capable of being learned as a piece of information may be acquired, delivered and absorbed in quick time in a classroom; either it is something you have and live by or it does not exist for you at all, and in its absence, you or someone else are simply left to deal with cause and effect.

“It is possible, of course, to understand and comply with an ethical doctrine without necessarily possessing personal integrity or ethical values. The prescribed rules of conduct of any particular profession or vocation may be digested and regurgitated on demand when it suits, but necessity and habituation in such cases are the drivers and must not be mistaken for a manifestation of personal integrity,” Mr Whiddett said.

He said that codes of conduct alone were not enough to ensure integrity within an organisation, especially when such codes were imposed by the executive.

Mr Whiddett suggested that a commitment to ethical standards needed a “holistic” approach.

“The plain fact is that ethical standards in policing do spring from fundamental and enduring principles as to what is expected by a democratic society of its law enforcement officials in whom it has granted certain powers and authorities to act justly in its interests,” he said.

Mr Whiddett said that the AFP had to accept that it could not give a “cast iron guarantee” on the integrity of its employees but it could insist on and maintain an ethical standard internally which would appeal to those individuals who possess and live by sound principles of personal conduct.

Commenting on the course, Mr Whiddett said ethical standards should not be left to training programs alone.

“They must be a prominent constant in corporate life throughout the entire period and scope of an individual’s employment, demonstrable and visible through the example and commitment of others and of the organisation in its corporate undertakings,” he said.

“The AFP’s ethical future lies in attracting and developing the professional individual who accepts and respects the unique responsibilities of independence of action and discretionary

judgement and accepts personal accountability as a professional, regardless of position or title.”

Commissioner Palmer said for them to work effectively, values such as integrity must be embraced by the people within an organisation not simply imposed by the executive.

“If, within policing, the environment created is one which celebrates good practice and integrity and rejects and positively disclaims any semblance of the reverse, the practice of its practitioners is likely to reflect the environment within which they work—not because bad people are made good by the environment, indeed quite the reverse.

“Policing historically has recruited a very high percentage of very good quality people. Sadly the same history tells us the environment has not only tempted but tainted a number of them.

“In the AFP context we have approached these challenges with a whole of life, whole of organisation approach, aimed at creating an environment in which bad practice and corruption cannot germinate or grow and if born will be quickly identified, isolated and eradicated, not because the people moving to identify and eradicate do so in fear of organisational reprisals or sanctions, but because of the rejection and condemnation of such behaviour by the policing practitioners themselves,” Commissioner Palmer said.

The ombudsman said there were areas within a police officer’s working environment in which integrity was paramount.

One area of concern with internal investigations was a potential conflict of interest. This could arise because of prior knowledge of an investigation or prior involvement in an operation.

“I encourage you to declare such conflicts and where necessary seek guidance from a supervisor or my office,” she said.

Ms Smith said she believed that it was preferable for agencies and management to deal with and fix their own problems—but there had to be a public confidence that this would be done well.

“Public trust in the integrity of that process has been dented and issues of accountability and integrity are now firmly centre-stage.

“There has been a culture within the police force of not reporting about peers even when their behaviour has not been appropriate.

“It is because of these issues and challenges that I see this course as being so important and why the Ombudsman’s Office has jointly developed and sponsored this inaugural program,” Ms Smith said.

