The Police Response to War

Elizabeth Plumridge
Rowan Carroll
New Zealand Police Museum

The importance of personality: Cullen verses O'Donovan

In 1914, John Cullen was Commissioner of Police[1]. It was a time when the personality of the Commissioner could stamp the police culture. Cullen was a harsh man, 'naturally a strict man' as he said of himself, and he ruled the police inflexibly. His rise from the rank and file to Commissioner was due largely to his ruthlessness - even to the point of bending the rules to his own cause - his unbending conservatism and his ability to cultivate allies among key conservative politicians. That these characteristics also won him enemies only gave him satisfaction. A 'man in my position must have a certain number of enemies' he said.

In 1914, Cullen's report to the Minister of Police was rosy: Police Force numbers had increased to 870 men, of whom 707 were constables and 52 were plainclothes detectives. There were also 15 District Constables and 8 Native Constables. Two new stations had been opened in the last year and a pay increase of one shilling per day had been given to all ranks.[2] Conditions 'under which New Zealand police are now serving are better than those obtaining in any other police service in the Empire' Cullen wrote complacently.

But his men did not think so. This is evident in Cullen's own report, although he seems to have been so blinded by self-righteousness that he failed to appreciate the import of what he wrote. Although 80 men had joined the Force in the last 12 months, they were not necessarily happy men. 'It was' said Cullen smugly, 'only natural ... that some of the junior men of the Force feel their duties irksome for the first year or two of their service, but they soon settle down to their new conditions of life and generally become very good and trustworthy policemen' (AJHR p6). In fact, the rank and file were 'almost unanimous'[3] in their dislike of Cullen's model of policing.

Work conditions were hard and intrusive. In rural areas, police seem effectively to have been on call at all times. In cities, it was shift work on the beat. Day shifts were split: 5.00am - 9.00am and 1.00pm - 5pm, or 9.00am - 1.00pm and 5.00pm - 9.00pm. Night shift was from 9.00pm until 5.00am without a break, although a hot drink was delivered from the station sometime between midnight and 1.00am. An officer was allowed a 15 minute pause to consume the drink, but could not leave his beat.

[1] A national police force was formed in 1886.
[2] Constables and NCOs had been given a further £5 to buy shoes and have their uniforms made up from cloth supplied and in addition a blue cloth overcoat was issued for night duty and a blue waterproof overcoat, blue and white helmets, and leggings 'as required' were issued. J. Cullen, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion. Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives H-16," (Wellington: House of Representatives 1914), p 7.
[3] Committee of Inquiry, "Committee of Inquiry," (Wellington: Police Department 1919).

Split shifts meant in effect a 13-hour working day. For instance, it was acknowledged[4] that a man starting at 5.00am would have to leave home at 4.30am and would not return for 'a hearty breakfast' until 9.30am. If he then had to attend court he would have to leave home again 'almost immediately' to be at court by 10.00am. He was unlikely to get home from court work until 11.00am. He would 'require dinner' immediately in order to return to work by 1.00pm. He would not finally finish working until 5.30pm.

Cullen made it impossible for the men to complain, lobby or negotiate for improvements in these conditions. Although in 1913 Cullen had apparently given permission to join the Public Service Association (PSA), a police regulation prohibiting 'combinations of any kind' was effectively a veto. Not until Cullen reluctantly retired in late 1916 did men begin to join the PSA.[5]

In a sense, the declaration of war in 1914 was a godsend to Cullen, since it allowed him an even stronger mandate and stifled resistance to his rule: agitation to improve the lot of civilian police was unacceptable to a community in the first fervour of patriotism.

Cullen used the outbreak of war to tighten his control over police by imposing punishments on any who wanted to enlist. Police were as keen as any to volunteer and many applied for leave to do so, but Cullen imposed an immediate 'embargo'. Cullen said he appreciated 'the patriotic spirit which prompted these men in their desire' and that he had been 'reluctantly compelled' to decline applications[6] but, in practice, he punished men for enlisting. An officer had to formally resign to enlist, which meant he forfeited superannuation, seniority and had no guarantee of re-employment. In other government departments men retained superannuation while on leave and were guaranteed re-employment. Some departments even kept men on half-pay while at the front.[7] Within weeks of the declaration of war, about one third of eligible men across the civil service had enlisted and over 40% of railway workers [8] had enlisted. Nevertheless, when the Minister of Police was attacked about the police embargo, he staunchly defended it and declared that if policemen were allowed to enlist in great numbers he 'would not be responsible for the safety of the country'.[9]

But despite anxiety to keep police numbers up, there were only small net increases in the size of the police force during 1915 and 1916 since a steady stream of police officers did resign to enlist.[10] Once conscription was introduced in 1916, automatic appeals were granted for any policeman drawn in the ballot.

At this point, in late 1916, Cullen reluctantly resigned. He was replaced by John O'Donovan. O'Donovan was a very different man from Cullen, despite the superficial similarities of both being Irish and both rising from the rank and file to be Commissioner. Where Cullen was determinedly austere, O'Donovan was expansive; where Cullen was feared, O'Donovan was liked and where Cullen wanted to impose discipline, O'Donovan wanted to inspire.

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[4] **W. Riddell et al., "Report of Committee of Inquiry," ed. Police Department, Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (Wellington: Government Printer, 1919). Need to decide citation style**

[5] J. O'Donovan, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," (Wellington: Police Department 1919).

[6] J. Cullen, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," (Wellington: Police Department, 1915).

[7] 'Fairplay" letter to the Editor, Evening Post 30 November 1916

[8] "House of Representatives," *Ashburton Guardian*, 6 October 1915.

[9] "CIVIL SERVICE ENLISTMENTS.," *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 6 October 1915.

[10] J. O'Donovan, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion. H - 16," (Wellington: Police Department 1917).**NOTE DECIDE HOW BEST TO ENTER AR INTO ENDNOTE ????**

Nothing epitomised this as succinctly as Cullen's farewell. O'Donovan organised a generous send-off: all available police were formed into a parade of honour, the Attorney-General, Cullen's close ally, was asked to give a fulsome eulogy and despite the fact that Cullen retired on a substantial 'well deserved' superannuation, O'Donovan organised to 'present Mr Cullen with a substantial cheque'.[11] In return, Cullen was graceless, responded only 'modestly' before chastising police by saying 'there was room for further improvement' and haranguing the Minister about the need for bigger budgets.[12]

O'Donovan came from a devout and high achieving family. Among his family was a senior cleric in the Marist Order in Australasia,[13] a provincial politician in New Zealand, a well-known journalist and a stipendiary magistrate. O'Donovan was well educated and although he joined his brothers to operate a 'big' building contractor's business on the West Coast goldfields, he never lost his love of education. As a serving police officer O'Donovan in his own time studied and qualified in law, not in order to practice but 'merely ... for the use it was to him in his occupation'. He was soon widely and affectionately respected in and outside the police. In 1902 when O'Donovan was made a Sub-Inspector and modestly attributed this to 'good luck', the local newspaper agreed with the proviso that 'the luck is to the police force and the public'.[14] After only a short time as Commissioner, O'Donovan was regarded affectionately. The local newspaper included him in its Christmas doggerel of 1917:

As Commissioner, all can attest
That O'Donovan's one of the best.
He has run the Police
With smooth axle-grease,
But I don't want a spell as his guest'[15]

O'Donovan was seen as bringing 'fresh qualities' to the position of Commissioner after Cullen, 'and the force will not suffer in efficiency for it' said the press. He 'is one of the most popular officers in the force'. Not 'aggressive', he was a 'born instructor'. O'Donovan was no patsy, but 'commands high respect as a capable man possessing to rare degree a blend of invariable courtesy with the most uncompromising regard for duty'.[16]

As Commissioner O'Donovan showed this 'uncompromising regard for duty' in the counterintelligence the war demanded of police. But he first made sure he had the support of his force: he took up the cause of his men in the face of intractable problems left by Cullen.

Although after 1916 police were effectively free from conscription, they had to 'scrupulously' abstain from recruiting any man eligible for military conscription. This meant there was a 'considerable reduction' in numbers,[17] the Police training Depot in Wellington was closed and O'Donovan took on scores of 'temporary' police, almost as an emergency experiment. 'It is' he said, 'not yet known to

[11] Free Lance 21 December 1916, p 16.
[12] New Zealand Free lance 21 December 1916 p 16
[13] New Zealand Freelance 28 September 1917 p 17
[14] New Zealand Free Lance 22 March 1902 p 16.
[15] New Zealand Free Lance 28 December 1917, p 26.
[16] New Zealand Free Lance24 NOVEMBER 1916 P 4.
[17] Ibid.

what extent this experiment will be satisfactory' since these men were untrained and 'some are advanced in age'. Nevertheless he was 'glad to state' after a trial period, that temporary police have 'generally given satisfaction'.[18]

By the end of war, the police force was nevertheless in a parlous position. Recruits were almost impossible to get and O'Donovan attributed this to two causes: the high wages obtainable in civil occupations, and absence of eligible recruits still with the Expeditionary Forces.[19] O'Donovan set about putting the problems to rights. He clarified the right to join the PSA. He set up an inquiry into conditions and anomalies in working conditions; and he gave pay rises, he introduced an eight hour day, despite recognising this would be more expensive for the Department, and he reversed Cullen's policies by reinstituting rights to re-employment, superannuation and seniority.[20]

He also lobbied hard for improved office and housing for police. Reading between the lines of O'Donovan's careful reports, it is clear that Cullen had 'completely ignored' the issue and lost many opportunities to purchase properties that would have turned into 'valuable public assets'. As a result in some areas, the police were 'practically homeless' by 1918.[21] O'Donovan so devoted himself to rectifying matters that in his 1919 Annual report he told the Minister that he was confident that conditions for police meant policing was 'a most attractive career to the best of the young men in our community'. O'Donovan was proud to declare his was a force in which there was 'no discrimination of nationality or creed', where there were good working conditions, good superannuation and good security of tenure. But most importantly, O'Donovan said it was a profession where senior officers were 'intimately acquainted' with the work of the rank and file and consequently there was a 'sympathy' which 'softens the relations between officers and men'.

In a short time and in difficult circumstances, O'Donovan had both humanised policing and brought it into the twentieth century.

"Civil Service Enlistments.". *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 6 October 1915.
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[18] Ibid.
[19] O'Donovan, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion." P????
[20] Ibid.
[21] J. O'Donovan, "1918 Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," ed. Police Department (Wellington: Government Printer, 1918).