

## **Police response to war:**

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### **Uncontrollable demand and decreasing resources: holding the line**

#### **Introduction**

The outbreak of war in 1914 presented the police with a problem they had not met with before: increasing demand for police services but decreasing resources to provide them. In 1914 some months before the war, Commissioner Cullen spoke of how 'local bodies, private citizens, and officers of the Police Force make frequent appeals for more police' that he could not meet<sup>1</sup>. But once war was declared demands for police escalated from across the public service. Every arm of government turned to police in moments of need. By 1919 Commissioner O'Donovan declared that such demands were threatening the police by 'causing indiscipline and neglect of the legitimate requirements of the public in respect of purely police protection and attention.' O'Donovan hinted at impending emergency: 'I purposely avoid pointing out in what respect this condition of things may be disastrous' he told the Minister.

#### **Uncontrollable demand**

Unreasonable demand for police services began immediately with war. Within a few months Commissioner Cullen complained of the 'volume of work ... the police are performing on behalf of other Government Departments'. Somewhat pompously he was 'of opinion that the police should be relieved of these duties as much as possible'.<sup>2</sup> Matters did not reach crisis level while the police were able to add to their numbers a little, as was the case before conscription in 1916. But after that, although O'Donovan never complained publicly while war was being fought, it was clear police were overstretched. By 1917 the 'large number of inquiries sent to the Police for attention by other Government Departments' meant that in the Wellington District no officer could take annual leave.<sup>3</sup> In 1918 only one of four planned new districts were formed, because no officer could be taken off the front line for administrative work needed to establish new districts.<sup>4</sup>

O'Donovan always did all in his power to aid the military, but once it was clear in 1918 that the allies had all but won, he began to talk publicly about unreasonable demands from other agencies. . Just a few weeks before the Armistice in November 1918, he wrote of how successful the cooperation between police and the military had been 'the best result possible in all circumstances' due to 'the considerate concern evinced' by military forces when making requests.<sup>5</sup> Other government departments showed no such 'considerate concern'. A few months after the Armistice, O'Donovan

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<sup>1</sup> AJHR 1914 H-16, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," p 8.

<sup>2</sup> J. Cullen, "H - 16 Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," (Wellington: AJHR, 1915).

<sup>3</sup> Superintendent Norwood, AJHR 1917 H - 16, "The Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," p 9.

<sup>4</sup> AJHR 1919 H - 16, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," p 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> AJHR 1918 H-16, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," p 7.

very stoutly attacked the 22 departments, each of which 'seems to consider it has the right to first call for the assistance of the police':

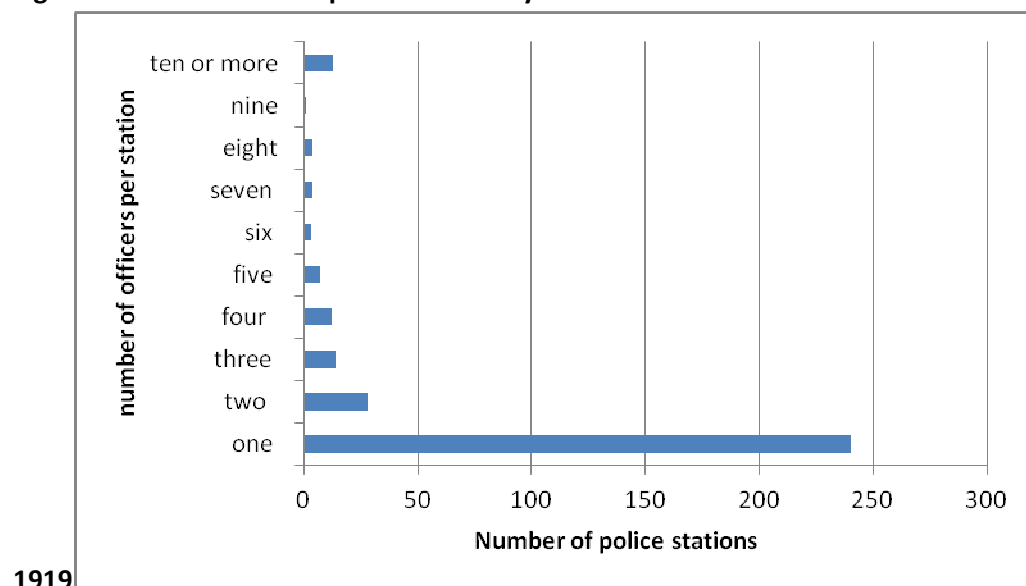
Public bodies and Hospital Boards consider they have a right to demand the assistance of indefinite numbers of police. To illustrate ... a hospital surgeon in a town where only six police are stationed requisitions for three of them to take charge of a refractory or suicidal patient. He insists it is the duty of the police to look after such patients. Under pressure of necessity, established by precedent only, the police furnish the necessary guard, to the absolute neglect of all other police requirements. The extraordinary demands made for "trained detectives" and for "policemen in plain clothes" indicate that even public men and public officers seem to lie under the impression that whole squads of detectives and plain-clothes men are kept in reserve awaiting their call, like fire-brigade men.<sup>6</sup>

### Decreasing resources

O'Donovan explained that by 1918, hundreds of his men had been obliged to take on formal duties as officers of some other government department<sup>7</sup>, at a time when Police numbers were depleted 'far below its normal number'. At the moment he wrote, the number of police was 878, 80 of whom at any one time were on the sick-list or long-term leave. It is he said, 'it is no wonder that the question is often heard "Where are the police?"'<sup>8</sup>

O'Donovan did not draw attention to what was probably too obvious to him to bear mention, but which sharpened the problem: the New Zealand Police Force was distributed across 327 stations in a very thin blue lines indeed; 240 of these stations were one man stations.

**Figure 2.1: distribution of police officers by**



Source: AJHR H-16, 1919

This was a police absolutely without reserve resources.

<sup>6</sup> AJHR 1919 H - 16, "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion," p 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. and for a full list see Appendix 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p 10.

## Local responsibility

The comparative isolation of these one-man stations meant that local constables had to respond to diverse demands; no other agency had this level of penetration across the country. But this front line of isolated constables to a large extent had to be self-reliant since communications were limited. Reference could not be made to senior officers to deal with importunate demand.

Telephones were in use in some areas since in mid-1913, Commissioner Cullen reported that 24 new telephone connections had been installed and appreciated 'especially in the remoter districts'. In cities and where roads were well-graded, police derived 'considerable advantage ... from the use of bicycles in the performance of police duty'. Bicycles were not purchased by police, but more than 180 police officers 'use their own bicycles on duty and ... are granted an allowance for the same'. In 1915, the 'use of bicycles ... had been greatly extended'.

But during the war, the police had no motorised vehicles, which were seen as useful in towns and cities rather than in the country. Country roads were not yet reliably traversed except by horse. Not until after the war, were police able to get any motor-cars or motor-vans. It appears that a certain amount of wooing of the Minister of Police was then necessary. O'Donovan congratulated the Minister on his 'valuable suggestions' and the 'personal supervision' he had to produce motorised vehicles<sup>9</sup>.

However in one-man stations, constables had no ability to 'pass the buck' when demands were made for their services. By the end of the war, probably more than half the front-line police officers were also officers of some other government agency. In this sense they were subject to multiple lines of accountability<sup>10</sup>

Small wonder O'Donovan spoke of 'indiscipline'. But there were only a small number of police who fell short and were dismissed or required to resign<sup>11</sup>. O'Donovan's concern was surely not a concern that there was mass insubordination; it was a concern about 'neglect' of 'legitimate ... purely police'. He was concerned that so divided had police officers become with accountabilities to other government agencies, that core policing issues – most particularly 'legitimate' issues of public order – might be pushed to the side. By 1919 he was very concerned about this. There were formidable precedents in continental Europe for social failure –and O'Donovan wanted the New Zealand Police to be in a position to pre-empt anything similar:

Many of the conditions obtaining in continental countries as an aftermath of the war prevail in this Dominion and cause a certain amount of apprehension and unrest. I refer to the cost of living, the hampering of industries and commerce, and the dislocation of labour. Happily.... no definite organized public upheaval occurred. The good sense of a community enjoying the most liberal constitutional privileges has asserted itself in every emergency<sup>12</sup>.

While New Zealand Police did not have to face the social dislocation of continental Europe, they did have to deal with unreasonable demands on their time and multiple lines of accountability. This was

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> see appendix at end of section.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2.2

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 10.

a kind of erosion from within. But the face of this, the New Zealand Police Force maintained its professionalism. In every year of the war, commissioners were able to say that 'good conduct and efficiency of all ranks' was well maintained.

## Appendix 2.1: number of police holding additional non-police positions in 1918

Registration Officers (Registration of Aliens Act).....	327
Sub-enumerators for collecting agricultural statistics .....	290
Clerks of Court .....	125
Bailiffs .....	133
Inspectors of Factories .....	164
Probation Officers .....	161
Licensing Officers under Arms Act .....	41
Inspectors of Clubs .....	34
Inspectors of Weights and Measures .....	25
Registrars of Pensions .....	25
Police Gaolers .....	22
Inspectors of Fisheries .....	30
Kauri-gum Rangers .....	18
Receivers of Gold Revenue and Mining Registrars .....	16
Clerks of Licensing Committees .....	10
Registrars of Births, &c. ....	7
Agents for Public Trustee ....	3
Customs Officers .....	3
Crown Lands Rangers .....	2
Registrar of Electors .....	1
Members of Force employed on clerical duties .....	28
Members of Force employed as Court orderlies .....	5

## Appendix 2.2: resignations and dismissals

Year	Resigned voluntarily	Called upon to resign	Dismissed	Services dispensed with	Total required to resign or dismissed or dispensed with
1913	30	1	4	3	8
1914	34	3	1	4	8
1915	19	5	7		12
1916	30	4	3		7
1917	41	2	3		5
1918	34	7	1		8
1919	30	7	1		8

Each Annual Report tabled the number of police 'casualties' by which was meant loss of officers from any cause. Death or illness was usually a small component, most were retirements and voluntary resignations. There was no increase during the war in the small number of officers who were either called upon to resign, were dismissed or had their 'services dispensed with'.

Source: Annual Reports on the Police Force of the Dominion

AJHR 1914 H-16. "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion."

AJHR 1917 H - 16. "The Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion." 9.

AJHR 1918 H-16. "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion."

AJHR 1919 H - 16. "Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion."

Cullen, J. "H - 16 Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion." Wellington: AJHR, 1915.