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An Garda Síochána "The
Challenge of Policing
Modern Ireland"

Garda Commissioner Noel Conroy

February 2004



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Address By Garda Commissioner Noel Conroy to the Irish Association Belfast

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted for the opportunity to speak to you this morning and I thank you most sincerely for the kind invitation.

It pleases me greatly to share this platform with the Chief Constable and to have the opportunity to assert again, if such assertion were necessary, the extensive and ongoing co-operation that exists between our two services, an element in modern policing, not only on this island but world wide, that has become central in today's fight against criminality in all its deadly and varying forms.

GIVE SHORT BRIEF ABOUT YOURSELF

While not here to debate political theories nor political ideals, I would rather like to share a few thoughts with you on a topic, I believe, both of us here today, are qualified to discuss - policing - and, in particular, the challenges facing policing on this island as I see them.

Afterwards, I will endeavour to answer any questions that you may raise.

Some of you will be aware of the history of An Garda Siochana - the Republics National Police Service. But, I would like to take a few minutes to refer back to its early years.

Our two services, both the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda Siochana, which means Guardians of the Peace, come from the same stable, so to speak, and having evolved through different traditions, are now converging, on the central tenet of what I believe to be the key to the effective policing of this land, that is - providing an effective policing service with the consent and support of the people.

The decision to form the Civic Guard in the Republic was made in February 1922, over 80 years ago, at a meeting in Dublin's Gresham Hotel, where a plaque commemorating the event can be seen. Despite an initial decision that Constables, as they were known then, would carry firearms, those who favoured an unarmed Force, won the debate, reaching the most significant decision in the history of policing there.



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Maintaining the peace, mainly by moral persuasion rather than by force of arms, became the norm - and so it remains to this day.

The first Garda Commissioner, Michael Staines contended that The Garda Siochana would succeed by their moral authority as servants of the people. The new Police Force was accepted by the people and within a decade media reports referred to the peaceful state of the nation. An Garda Siochana had begun to understand the difference between initiating Government policy and keeping the peace as required by the Constitution and the law. Not an easy task, yet I think that over the years we have, as an organisation, achieved that balance.

We work exposed to the scrutiny of the public and their representatives through various fora and under the watchful eye of the media.

An Garda Siochana is in the middle ground, between all factions and those who seek personal or collective advantage, a position we are required to maintain and one which is at the heart of any system of justice in a democracy such as we have.

This means that, as Commissioner, I must, be in a position to account to Government for the actions and performance of the Police Service. This does not in any way undermine my operational independence, as the direction and control of An Garda Siochana is legislatively vested in the Commissioner.

An Garda Siochana as an organisation and I as Commissioner, carry out all functions in a professional manner regardless of which party or government is in power and history has shown this to be the case.

Presently there is legislation being debated in our parliament, the Dail, entitled the Garda Siochana Bill 2004, which is the first major piece of legislative reform of An Garda Siochana since the foundation of the State and which will form the basis for a new relationship between the Garda Siochana on the one hand and the Government and the people on the other, designed to see us well into the 21st century.

It follows from a comprehensive re-evaluation of the idea of corporate governance for the Garda Siochana which has been carried out in the context of the Garda Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) emanating from Government.

I will refer to some of the Bills provisions momentarily.

SiochanaAn Garda Siochana is unique in policing terms in that -



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It is nationally unified under the direction and control of the Commissioner, who is appointed by Government.

It is Regulated by statute law.

It is not constitutionally established. An Garda Siochana is not referred to in the Constitution of the Republic.

Is responsible for National Security, a function performed independently of most police services in western democracies.

An Garda Siochana today comprises in excess of 12,000 sworn officers, has 1700 civilian support staff and is deployed in over 700 locations, has a fleet 2000 vehicles and many specialist and support units. There is no reserve force, nor is there provision for special constables, although in the context of the present published Garda Siochana Bill, such matters are being debated.

Yet, these resources with their consequential operational and administrative structures, cannot effectively substitute for the acceptance of the Garda Siochana by the people and their consent to be policed. For, despite all the theories of policing, principles of policing, best practice in policing, it all comes down to this - getting the trust, the support, the co-operation and the consent of the people.

Community Policing is the bedrock upon which such policing is based. It is the philosophy of policing which I refer to as the 'partnership approach'.

It is the police working in partnership with the community, and the community participating in their own policing, with both working together, mobilising resources to solve problems affecting public safety in the long term, rather than the police acting alone, reacting to short term incidents as they occur.

I also firmly believe in an accountability mechanism, whereby the community expresses its concerns and problems to the Gardai, with the Gardai explaining their difficulties and concerns and thereby reaching a mutual understanding. Community Policing Fora, a concept still in its infancy and, through a Quality Service Initiative, Customer Service Panels, are now operating successfully throughout the country, practical and effective examples of how the community and its police service are working together for the betterment of that society. The provisions of the new Garda Siochana Bill provide for a more formal consultative process with local government, a process not only designed to ensure accountability but to enhance co-operation at local level thus ensuring relevancy in the policing service delivered.



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Let me dwell on that word 'accountability' for a moment, a topic that has had some media airing in our jurisdiction in recent times. With the provision of any policing service in a democratic society, comes accountability.

Just as the business world is held accountable to its customer for the product or service that is produced, so too am I and all members of the Garda Síochána held to account for our actions singularly and collectively. This is as it should be.

When a member of An Garda Síochána begins his or her career, he or she undertakes to perform his/her duties without favour or affection, fear, malice or ill will. Throughout their service they are accountable to their superiors, have a disciplinary code to which they must adhere and are accountable to an Independent Complaints Board, a statutory body set up to adjudicate on complaints made by the members of the public against members of An Garda Síochána. Every day we are accountable to the Courts in our jurisdiction.

An Garda Síochána, through the Commissioner is accountable at all times to the Minister for Justice, and the Oireachtas

I welcome also, as enunciated by the republics' Minister for Justice in the Garda Síochána Bill referred to earlier, the establishment of an Ombudsman Commission to replace the Complaints Board which will also ensure further accountability and as a result, maintain the confidence of the public in their policing service.

What of the public ? Questions often asked of a modern police service include "What is the attitude of the Public to this service? "Is what is being delivered what is wanted and delivered in the way that is expected?".

Public attitude surveys have been and are periodically conducted. National and European surveys have shown a consistent level of satisfaction with the Garda service, covering such areas as the satisfaction levels of victims of crime, contact with the Garda, response to emergency calls, Garda visibility, policing priorities, experience and fear of crime.

The most recent survey last year provides encouraging evidence of this continuing support with 81% of people surveyed indicating that they were satisfied with the overall Garda Service. While this is somewhat lower than that recorded for 2002 (87%), it is a fact that, previous surveys, which were carried out at various intervals since 1986, have all indicated satisfaction ratings of over 80%.

An Garda Síochána, like any other organisation in this modern era, must however address demands as they arise in this ever changing, ever challenging environment.



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Let me treat some of these as I see them.

Providing for the security of the State, combating international terrorism and organised crime are areas of law enforcement, which have taken on added impetus in recent times. With the signing of the Peace Agreement and subsequent cease-fires by some parties to the conflict, the Patten Commission and its resultant recommendations and implications for cross border police co-operation, the introduction of legislation to seize the proceed of crime and the impact of the European Union on crime investigation, co-operation and security post September 11th, requirements to prioritise have become acute.

Policing has not escaped the modern phenomenon of Globalisation.

Crime respects no borders, is now organised internationally and in this age of shrinking distances both physically and technologically, multi-national responses are required to combat it. Criminal associations and syndicates have tentacles extending across the globe. Organised criminal activity is dynamic by nature, flexible in that it need not be confined to rigid structures, is continuing to dull the line between legitimate and illegitimate practises and will adapt its activity to suit its aim.

As a result of the increased sophistication of many organised criminal groups, they are also able to utilise legal differences between, not just neighbouring states or the Member States of the European Union but countries across the globe, exploiting the anomalies in the various legal and judicial systems. They can, in the modern world of today, take advantage of the ease of movement of money, goods, people and services.

Information technology and in particular the Internet, as we are only too aware, recognise no international frontiers. This makes the medium a prime vehicle for international crimes such as Child Pornography, Credit Card Fraud and Fraudulent Investments among others.

The international threat posed calls for a dynamic and co-ordinated response by all law enforcement agencies, a response that not only takes into account national strategies but seeks to become an integrated, multinational and multidisciplinary retort, world wide.

Addressing the ever-changing and ever-challenging face of organised crime requires that this response be effective.



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In 1996 the murder of an investigative journalist, Veronica Guerin marked a watershed in the fight against Serious and Organised Crime in our jurisdiction. The development of a multi-agency approach together with the appropriate legislative tools resulted in the establishment of the Criminal Assets Bureau(CAB) and a drive to seize the proceeds of such crime.

This initiative has proved very successful, has been viewed by law enforcement entities from other jurisdictions as a model to be replicated and is akin to the Asset Recovery Agency in operation here in this jurisdiction. Such units are proving very effective tools for law enforcement in targeting serious and organised crime.

Combating such phenomena as terrorism and organised crime has necessitated the specialisation of sections of An Garda Síochána and the development of such initiatives as the Witness Security Programme, dedicated Money Laundering, Computer Theft and Paedophile Investigation Units as well as sophisticated IT solutions to address, not only the national, but the internationalisation of the criminal and terrorist threat.

Close liaison and co-operation with law enforcement agencies world-wide have become essential in what is euphemistically termed "the fight against crime" and while agencies such as Interpol and Europol continue to grow in relevance, as in most policing matters, it is the co-operation "on the ground" between police officers and their nearest neighbours, that ensure effectiveness in day to day policing.

Members of An Garda Síochána serve as liaison officers in some European countries, and continuous co-operation with the institutions and member states of the European Union facilitates a cohesive approach to serious, organised and terrorist crime, the effectiveness of which is developing rapidly.

Memorandums of Understanding exist between An Garda Síochána and the Ministry of the Interior of the Russian Federation and the Hungarian National Police, and others are under consideration by the Government in respect of some other E.U. Countries.

In line with police forces around the world, An Garda Síochána is, as I have said already, constantly facing a rapidly changing and ever challenging environment. As we face into the new Millennium, we are planning for the future.

Crime figures fluctuate, yet as one of the barometers as to the quality of life citizens can hope to expect, there is no level of crime that is acceptable. The rise in the rate of gratuitous violence for example, in the area of Public Order, is a major quality of life issue.



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The general call is that more resources should be deployed be it through more police officers on the beat or CCTV.

While I agree that the deployment of more resources will have the effect of deterring violent, loutish and coarse behaviour, the prevention of such behaviour, which has in recent times grown to levels which are causing fear and concern amongst people in all our communities, comes at a significant financial cost and, as such, requires a cohesive response from the overall Criminal Justice System.

The resolution of the Public Order problem, no less than in the area of Traffic management, requires a synergetic approach with multi-agency involvement and a concerted effort on many fronts to tackle the drink culture that has contributed to and exacerbated the violent and menacing behaviour witnessed each night in locations throughout our jurisdiction.

Operation Encounter, is one initiative in operation throughout the republic, focusing Garda resources on this public order issue. Members of An Garda Siochana police areas where numbers of people are likely to gather late at night, for example outside fast food outlets, public houses and night clubs.

It focuses on offences such as Drunk and Disorderly, Abusive Behaviour, Assaults and under-age abuse of alcohol as well as the observance of the Licensing Laws by the Licensed Trade.

Attitudes to alcohol which is a prevalent factor in many public order situations, the availability of more disposable income, particularly amongst the younger generation, and a general diminution of respect for law and order, and authority and dare I say, a failure to deal with the responsibility that goes with being a member of a civil society, all indicate the need for a society re-think on how we deal with situations such as this.

In the area of Traffic, the parallel regarding enforcement is also there. Speeding, the non-wearing of Seat Belts and Drunk Driving are identified as major areas of concern, and a specific initiative - "Operation Lifesaver" has been in place since 1997.

This initiative, targeting breaches of the Road Traffic Laws specifically in these areas and emanating from a Governmental Road Safety Strategy, has resulted in Annual road deaths have reducing from 472 to 341 last year, a total which had been rising up to the commencement of the operation.

However, the deterrent effect of high visibility policing patrols, together with fixed or mobile camera checks, cannot of itself, I believe, be totally effective in changing



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driver behaviour - an essential requirement if the number of collisions and fatalities on our roads is to decrease.

Changing driver behaviour must be addressed in a holistic manner, through education, be it in the school environment or elsewhere. Codes of conduct, laws and regulations must be adhered to and enforced, and meaningful sanctions imposed for any infringement.

Recently introduced Road Traffic Legislation in the Republic, incorporating a Penalty Points System and the proposal to extend that system later this year, particularly when it is supported by an integrated I.T. solution due to be delivered shortly, to many other fixed charge areas, will, no doubt, go some way in endeavouring to change driver behaviour.

Advancing the capability to record traffic violations against offenders from adjoining jurisdictions would, I believe, enhance the effectiveness of such an endeavour. In this regard, I had a meeting last year with members of the British Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, who are working on a report which seeks to implement a single penalty point's regime throughout the island of Ireland.

Notwithstanding these developments, is it not a sad reflection on our society that we still have to force people, through regulation and sanction, to protect their own lives and those of their families.

The Drug problem - again the question of the effectiveness of enforcement in the strategies to combat this modern day scourge, is ever present. Educational and treatment initiatives aligned with enforcement have not had the desired effect in ridding our cities, towns and villages of drugs.

The "problem" is not confined to this country, it is trans-national, has organised crime behind it and is going to require a concerted superhuman effort by Governmental, Statutory and Voluntary agencies if any advance is to be made in this area.

Dare I mention Immigration, Asylum-Seekers, or Racism? - areas of concern which have engendered debate in recent years, and which have challenged our own society's norms. The role of enforcement in this realm is a day to day reality for our police service, a reality that is being dealt with, not only in the countries of the European Union, but world wide. The number of people seeking asylum in Ireland has grown in recent years, for example in 1992 there were only 39 applications for asylum, whereas in 2002 there were 11,634 applications.



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Since the early 1990's the Republic has been in the throes of rapid change from a society that was for so long mono-cultural to one that is now, quite evidently, multi-cultural.

This phenomenon, while relatively new to us, has been the norm in numerous countries throughout the world.

In response to the unprecedented growth in the number of non-nationals, The Garda National Immigration Bureau was established in May 2000. It has responsibility for the co-ordination and direction of strategies to combat trafficking and illegal immigration including the enforcement of deportation orders.

Allied to the policing of immigration matters, the phenomenon of Racism, again a relatively new concept in policing in our country necessitated measures to combat a rise in incidents of a racist nature. Protocols and procedures needed to be adopted to address this area of concern.

A Garda Racial and Intercultural Office was established with responsibility for co-ordinating, monitoring and advising on all aspects of policing in the area of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Looking to the future, further challenges will be presented in the sphere of policing and matters that will impinge on strategies to deal with those challenges will include:

Increased levels of urbanisation, increases in population and the diverse nature of that population.

Diminution of social control from family, Church and State.

An increase in the number of individuals and communities who feel marginalised.

Changes in the nature of crime, including increases in the incidents of gratuitous violence and growing concern about crime against women and children.

Increased sophistication in the nature of crime and the support systems used by criminals, be it ordinary, organised or terrorist related.

Internationalisation of crime, terrorism and the growing International drugs market.

Increased expectations from the public of higher levels of service and effectiveness from the criminal justice system.

Openness, Transparency and Accountability demanded on a scale as never before.



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High standards in the way, not just the Policing Service, but the Public Service in general is delivered.

Therefore, in an increasing urbanised and mobile society, in which crime and deviant behaviour are interwoven with so many aspects of life, no one agency can have the sole ability either to prevent crime and disorder, or control it.

This is the responsibility, as I have said, for the entire community, working in partnership with their policing and other agencies.

I see an increase in the number of civilian staff providing a back-up and ancillary service for An Garda Síochána, thus releasing more Gardai for the core duty for which they were trained and to increase the visibility of members on the ground.

In future, I see Specialist Units playing an ever-increasing role in crime investigation and policing generally. Action is and will continue to be intelligence driven.

Enhanced co-operation on International crime investigation, (joint investigation teams) especially in Europe, through E.U. structures and Europol, and world-wide through Interpol.

As each step of the Peace Process unfolds, I become more optimistic that An Garda Síochána will not be as immersed in such security problems, as has been the case for a period of over thirty years.

Both our police services are and will continue to change, perhaps considerably, as we move further into the 21st Century.

I would like you all and the public generally, to understand the challenges that confront us all, in achieving the correct balance between effective and socially acceptable policing. What I have referred to in the last few minutes are but some of the areas in which An Garda Síochána will face challenges, as I see it, in the coming years.

There was a time when the Garda Síochána was seen as all things to all people. That day is long gone. Policing is not the sole responsibility of An Garda Síochána nor indeed the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

It is an individual responsibility, a civic responsibility, a community responsibility.

If it is true that policing cannot be effective in a free society unless it is socially acceptable, then the question necessarily arises as to how best to ensure that the public understand what is required of them, to enable their police service to act effectively.



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Just as there is a duty on society to support the police, there is also a duty on the police to ensure they act in a way, which commands the confidence of the community, which they serve. Opportunities, like this gathering here this morning, make a substantial contribution to a better understanding by the police and public, of what is required of each other.

Thank you.