

DEMOCRATIC SAFETY POLICY

Three ways of taking the public seriously

I would like to thank Martin Innes for joining us today and for his presentation of the Signal Crime Perspective. Before I will react upon the proposals he has made, I would like to tell something about the research that we have done in the Netherlands last year. In fact we studied six neighbourhoods in larger cities, characterised by all kind of serious problems such as poverty, high crime rates, low level of education, high degree of mobility, old houses, concentration of ethnic minorities and of course ... feelings of unsafety among the population. There are at least three parallels between our own research and the Signal Crime Perspective that Martin Innes has proposed.

First of all, there is a parallel in methodology. We have tried to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to develop a very broad understanding of feelings of unsafety in those neighbourhoods. Using at least four different databases, including the main system of the police itself, we could detect the main factors that lead to feelings of unsafety and other complaints of citizens. But we also did quite a lot of interviews to hear stories about specific risks in those areas, about their development during the last decades, about the strange behaviour of certain groups, about the operations of the police itself and about the effects of local policies. Furthermore we had our own observations in the field and we also asked a professional photographer to document the situation on the spot. The results will be

published in a beautiful book within a few months. There is indeed a clear parallel to the approach of Martin Innes. We are not afraid of figures, correlations and other more or less objective indicators for unsafety but the stories, the images, the personal impressions and the feelings of the inhabitants are equally important for us.

The second parallel has to do with the conclusions and the results from our research. It turns out that feelings of unsafety are not related very strongly to the aspects that politicians or policy makers seem to prefer. Quite a lot of local authorities seem to assume that safety mainly depends on the hardware of an area, such as urban structures of the economic situation. By improving the structural side they hope to diminish antisocial behaviour and the anxieties that are related to it. But the conclusion of our analysis was that we have to pay much more attention to social, cultural and even the moral aspects of neighbourhood life. There are indeed – as Martin Innes has stressed – certain incidents, certain kinds of behaviour, certain signs and impressions that contribute a great deal to feelings of unsafety. This also applies to the judgement of the public on the police. We heard several complaints about the police but they never touched on questions of efficiency, detection rates or so called productivity. Instead of that the complaints were mainly related to a lack of visibility, the long time it takes before the police arrives and the fact that people had to make a long distant call to explain the situation in their own street. In other words: we also found a big gap between the world of policy makers for whom safety is primarily a juridical

category and the world of common people for whom the signals of social and moral disorder prevail.

The third parallel has to do with the political consequences of this approach. One of the similarities between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands is that both countries prefer a strong cooperation with the general public. As a result of the events on 9/11 and the growing danger from organised crime or terrorists groups, there is an tendency to reduce the tasks of the police to its core business: protecting public order by the use of violence. Nevertheless there is also quite a lot of resistance to such a reduction and even an ambition to enlarge the spectrum of tasks. As far as I can see quite a lot of people – not only within the police but also from the public itself – would welcome the proposal of extending the spectrum. And that indeed could be a consequence of the research we have done. If we take seriously all the stories, impressions and priorities that people in the worst areas have expressed, we cannot define our safety policy in an one sided way. For instance by simply implementing the goals of the Home Office on an local level or by neglecting the main concerns and complaints that citizens in the neighbourhood have. In that respect we have to find an new way to involve at least some of the most active inhabitants into our policy, not only in defining the goals and making up plans but also in the way they are realised of executed.

From this it is only a small step to the second part of my contribution, namely: three ways of taking the public seriously. I have got the impression that in our part of Europe – not only in the United

Kingdom and the Netherlands but also in countries as Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Sweden on Norway – we feel the need to make a durable relation between safety policy on the one hand and democratic traditions on the other. In a more negative sense you could say that we don't like a kind of safety policy in which civil rights and civil liberties are at risk. And there are good historical reasons for that fear. A least in our country we still have a clear commemoration about the awful events in World War Two when thousands of Jews could be deported from Amsterdam and other cities to Nazi-Germany thanks to the fact that the police and local authorities knew exactly where every citizen lived. We would not like that this happened again, although we know that building up more advanced databases with detailed information about people and neighbourhoods could be inevitable in the struggle against terror. What we don't want is an kind of DDR-state in which the police knows everything about everyone and in which civilians cannot trust the police. So the question is: how can we organise our community intelligence without risking the danger of a police that is beyond democratic control?

In that respect we have to take the public seriously and not just in one way. In fact there are three ways to take the public seriously and they all are related to the research Martin Innes has done. Firstly we have to take citizens seriously as informants of the police. That is the way Martin Innes tries to collect his information and also the approach we have used in our research. The personal stories, images, complaints and impressions of people in the street are as important as

the figures or statistical evidence that we deduce from official databases. Secondly we have to take the opinion of inhabitants in their role of citizen seriously. They can – and to a certain degree have to – participate in the main decisions of local safety policy. They can formulate their own priorities and have influence on the safety program in their own neighbourhood. Thirdly we have to take citizens seriously as contributors to more safety, as people that cooperate with the police in surveillance, in maintaining public order, in warning for certain risks, in using their ears and their eyes. In other words: expanding the spectrum inevitably leads to a more active role of citizens, especially in neighbourhoods where safety is at risk.

Perhaps these ideas are the result of our modest understanding what is going on in today's world. You are invited to teach us in this respect. Is this only an kind of Dutch imagination and are we naïve ? Or do we see here the possibility of an new and durable connection between safety and democracy, a connection that is linked to the moral traditions of North-western Europe and where the lessons of history are learned very well ?

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