

## **Interview With Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon: Australia's First Female Police Chief**

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In 2001, Christine Nixon made history by becoming Australia's first female police commissioner, 85 years after the appointment of the first female police and following decades of extreme discrimination against women in police work. She is now Chief Commissioner of the Victoria Police Force, which has 12,800 personnel, including 9,700 sworn officers, in a state with a population of 4.6 million. Christine joined the New South Wales (NSW) Police in 1972, and rose through the ranks in a period when NSW police were looked to as the most progressive and innovative in the country, and also derided as the most corrupt. Her time in NSW as Assistant Commissioner covered the period of the Wood Royal Commission (1994-97), which revealed extensive police misconduct and entrenched pockets of corruption. It was widely believed that she would eventually become the first female commissioner in NSW; but there was surprise all round when she took the top post in Victoria, which for the preceding decade had been amongst the most misogynist forces in the country. The prospects were that she would face resistance and opposition at every turn, as an outsider and a woman. But she quickly developed an extraordinary popularity right across Victorian society and within the Victoria Police (Chulov 2002).

### **BACKGROUND**

This interview was conducted on the 23rd of January 2003 in the office of Chief Commissioner Nixon, high in the Victorian Police Headquarters building looking over the many construction projects in booming inner city Melbourne and out to the vast suburbs of this huge metropolis. Christine's jurisdiction extends well beyond the city limits to the forests and rich agricultural districts of the state of Victoria. In Australia, policing is almost entirely state-based, with large police departments covering enormous distances and extremely diverse urban and rural environments. Police chiefs therefore manage highly complex organisations, with many stakeholder groups, and numerous challenges associated with geographical distance and diversity of population.

### **CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

*Can you tell me a little about your childhood and adolescence? What influenced you to join the police?*

I had a very average adolescence and childhood. I grew up on the northern beaches of Sydney, the middle child of three, with one boy on either side. Swam and surfed a lot. Played netball. It was a really nice time. My parents were good. We argued with each other as normal families do. I grew up in the church – Methodist. Went to youth group. I became the Sunday School Superintendent. That had a strong influence – growing up with 70 or 80 young people. I eventually became a youth leader. They did

various things such as camps, travelled around the place, and had discussion groups. I suppose we kept them out of trouble, out of jail! Although, whether or not they would have anyway is beside the point. So it was that kind of childhood. My father was a Detective Sergeant in the New South Wales Police when I thought about joining. I'm of the '70s. So it was the late-'60s, early '70s, when the feminist movement struck, and it struck me. I read *The Female Eunuch* [Germaine Greer, published 1970] and I started thinking about what was possible for women.

*I guess Feminists were anti-police.*

Lots of people were anti-police in those days!

*Laughter*

Policing was changing quite dramatically then too. It hadn't quite made it, but it was being challenged. For example the Springbok [South African football team] demonstrations had started challenging police. There was the civil liberties movement and the Aboriginal community became active. Feminists started trying to expand the range of opportunities. I was part of that era. In the youth camps they'd always had male secretaries. I figured I could be the youth camp secretary, so I was. I achieved that for two or three years.

I said to my father, "I think I'll join the police". I hadn't really thought a lot about it. I didn't want to teach. I didn't want to become a nurse. He thought I'd make a nice nurse. There weren't many options. You could go to secretarial school, but they didn't make much money. University cost fees in those days. If there was money to be found for fees it would go to my older brother. I just figured I'd be pragmatic. If I thought about anything it was probably retail. When I was 14 I worked in Coles, when it was a variety store. But retail didn't want me because you couldn't be a female manager. After five years of working part-time, even running the payroll on holidays, they said "No". They didn't have women as part of the management team.

I then said to my father, "I'm going to join the police". He said, "No you're not". But I'd been in a police home. I had that understanding of police. Eventually he agreed. What I understood primarily was that women didn't do a great deal. They worked hard but they weren't allowed to do a broad range. I applied in February 1972. I finished school in '71, and turned 19 in May. I worked in a chemist shop until the police decided they were going to hire six women that year. Four went into the March class but I wasn't old enough. I'd been through the process. I was a bit short, but I managed to stretch myself. Well, my father talked to them and distracted them. Because he discovered that I was half-an-inch too short he decided he better come along. It was amazing times. This panel of seven or eight people – no women – would ask you questions like "You don't have a partner do you?" At that stage you could stay if you were married but there was no maternity leave. You had to go if you got pregnant. So the idea of a partner was a serious thing for them.

*Had you met any women police?*

Yes. I had an aunt who was a police officer. She was a family friend but I saw her as an aunt. That was school lecturing, pedestrian crossings. She had been some

encouragement. So, I went through the process. They took me in October 1972, with one other woman. We started at the police academy in Sydney for a six weeks training program. You did exercise and gym morning and afternoon. And you did the basic law subjects. I got through and I was sworn in on the 6th December 1972. I quite liked the academy.

*You never thought: "What have I got myself into?"*

I do remember walking in the door at the academy – which was an old old building – and seeing a sea of blokes and thinking, "Gee, this is kind of interesting". But you see I was young and competitive and fit. So I didn't think there was any big deal. And I knew I could study. I also figured that if policing didn't work out I'd just go and do something else.

*You were a very confident young lady?*

I think I was really. The church work helped. I had become the vice-captain at school. I was captain of basketball teams. My mother was the type of woman who, from the time when I was six, gave me a shopping list and said, "Here, off you go". She worked in Coles in different jobs. She was a very strong woman who believed we should be brought up to look after ourselves. So from the age of eight or 10 I would shop and pay the bills, and take my friends to town. My brothers can all cook. They all clean. My father was away a lot, because he was a ballistics expert. So mum really brought us up. Mum was typical of a lot of independent women of her time. She worked to pay her own way and should have been made a senior manager. She just did her job very well but couldn't go further. That always made a strong impression on me – the way this country didn't tap into the enormous range of women who could have contributed but weren't allowed.

*What were the main stages of your career up to Assistant Commissioner in the NSW Police Service?*

I joined by going into school lecturing. That's what women did. You could give eight or nine lectures a day. The blokes did the rosters and the women did the work. Lectures were given on road safety, water safety, stranger danger, bush fires. I think it was pretty productive. We did a lot on water safety. In the morning and afternoon we did school pedestrian crossings. For about two years I used to stand outside a girls' school in Sydney on the northern beaches, on the Pacific Highway, and walk seven girls across the road in the morning and five girls across the road in the afternoon.

The other option at that time was to work in plain clothes in the Women Police Branch of the Criminal Investigation area. There were 130 women when I joined. Half were in school lecturing and half in criminal investigation. Both areas were run by women. I went into the Women Police Branch for a short time but then went into operations at Darlinghurst [inner Sydney]. I was one of the first ones to work in operational policing in '76. I did that for a while. I then wanted to become a detective. They wouldn't let me do it the way I wanted to do it, which was the way the blokes did their training. So I ended up being sent to work for John Avery [later Commissioner], who was doing a review of police training. He was also a quasi-policy adviser (before we called people that) for the Deputy Commissioner. The

reason I went there was because they were going to send me to the country or find some other place to get me out of the way where I would be quiet and not cause any trouble. This was because I had become the President of the Women's Branch of the Police Association when I was 21 years old.

*Not a good move?*

Well, it was a highly unusual move. I can't figure out why they gave it to me. Perhaps there were two reasons. One was that they thought my father would protect me, because he was an executive member. But the other reason was that I'd been agitating for minor and major changes as part of a group of women that had been pushing for change. That got us into operations and changed the way women became detectives. We finally got maternity leave in '75. It was pretty much drawing on the changes in the outside world that needed to impact on policing. I'd also started to go to TAFE [technical college] to do a personnel administration course. So they said to me, "You're an academic. You can go and work for this other academic". It was John Avery, who at that stage I think had finished writing his masters thesis, which was later published as *Police: Force or Service?*

Then over the next while I stayed in policy. The Labor Government in New South Wales came in [1976] with a dramatic reform agenda for policing. But it wasn't about reforming policing. It was about reforming the laws they policed. It included things like the Bail Act. They implemented the Manhattan Bail System, where you got points and if you got so many points you got out! This was instead of cash – when the poor people stayed in jail and the rich people got out. They decriminalised drunkenness and prostitution. Summary offences legislation, language – there was a whole range of things. We had this role of working with the government on legislation and developing police education to put out to police what these new rules and laws were. It was an interesting time. For the next six years I continued to work there. I also continued to go to university. I did industrial relations at Sydney University for two years. Then I went to Macquarie University where I did politics and philosophy part-time. It was great fun. They used to do papers on sexual abuse and domestic violence. I also got involved in the reform of the law in NSW – '81 on domestic violence and '83 on child abuse and protection. We set up new legislation, training and governance structures for police in those fields.

'84 I went to Harvard for two years on a Harkness Fellowship. It was a fabulous time. I went to Harvard – Kennedy School of Government – partly because John Avery had gone around the world looking at educational institutions because the federal government was going to set up a policing institute. They never did, but he'd had a look at Harvard. Georg Kelling was there and Mark Moore and James Q Wilson and similar people. So when I won the scholarship he said, "You should go to Harvard". When I got back two years later he'd become the Commissioner. So I went back into the policy role. Eventually I applied for the senior policy job. I got it, but the Police Minister Ted Pickering refused to take it to the Governor in Council [the appointed head of government who holds veto powers]. The Police Board recommended it to him but he refused.

*What was his reason?*

He said I should be a sergeant in the western suburbs of Sydney. He said it would be a better experience for me. Maybe he would have been right but I wasn't prepared at that stage to do that. So I went to education. John Avery had put in a lot of changes in education and in community policing. I got the Chief Inspector's job in Quality Control of Education. Then in '92 I applied for a superintendent's position in education. There were only two other applicants because it meant going to Goulburn and not many people wanted to go there [a remote town where the police academy is located]. Then in '94 I applied for the Assistant Commissioner's position in Human Resources. The job went before the police board, which had citizens on it. I got the job much to my surprise and everyone else's. I was there for four years, but three days after I got there they announced the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police. [Often referred to as "the Wood Commission", the inquiry ran from 1994 to 1997 and unearthed major problems across most types of police corruption.] So I thought, "This is good!" It was a really interesting time be in HR. So we worked with the Royal Commission. Towards the end of it, Commissioner Peter Ryan and I had a chat and he suggested that would benefit from operational experience. He had become somewhat concerned about people attempting to undermine him. I think he saw concerns where I didn't think there was any need to, so part of that was that...

*Have you read his biography ?*

Yes, I did. I did. He tells it the way he sees it.

*I think he had a fairly sympathetic biographer.*

Yes, he did – a very sympathetic biographer! [Williams 2002] So, anyway the outcome of that was that I moved temporarily into operations. I went to the western suburbs of Sydney as a relieving regional commander, into what I think is the most difficult region in the state. And I've got to say, at that point in time I thought, "This could be tricky". I hadn't worked operations for years. It's not that I didn't understand the legislation or didn't know about best policing practices. And I had managed a large area. When Ryan came in he had asked me to take on education as well as HR, and I took on reform of the NSW Police. But when I went out there, there were nine local area commands and you wonder how it's going to go. But it was terrific. I really liked it. They were good people. We worked as a team. They realised I had failings and they realised they had failings. I went from there up to North Metropolitan, which was the harbour bridge up to near Newcastle. It was a rapid growth area with lots of problems, but it also had the wealthy North Shore. I was there for about nine months. Then a decision had to be made about where I was going to go permanently. Peter Ryan had got to a point where he couldn't get rid of me – which I think he would have done if he could have. So I got sent permanently to the South-Eastern Region, which was south of Sydney down to the border with Victoria and into the Snowy Mountains. This is a great region. So I had great experience in urban and rural regions. It gives you a broad base. From there in 2001 I got the Victorian job.

## **PHILOSOPHY OF POLICING**

*What is your philosophy of policing?*

One of the best parts of Harvard was “The Future of Policing” – a series of executive sessions they hosted [published by the National Institute of Justice]. These were quite a luxurious way to think and learn about policing. People who were involved included Herman Goldstein, George Kelling, James Q Wilson, Larry Sherman. There were people like Lee Brown, the Police Chief in Houston. He was really quite different and revolutionary. There was Darryl Gates, from the Los Angeles Police Department, who was very solid and politically powerful. Much of my philosophy of problem oriented policing was developed there. I went there understanding the “force or service?” notion. I understood the need to protect society in areas such as domestic violence and child abuse. We were the ones who had some capacity to deal with family violence and conflict situations. I had an education that encouraged me to see that the role of the police was the protection of liberties and of people’s right to protest. I had sponsored restorative justice in relation to youth offending. So problem oriented policing was seen by me as a very useful way of bringing the community together to identify a problem and solve it. But I think the notion that you should have facts and see what the research tells you is crucial. I think policing suffers terribly from a lack of research. That’s policing’s fault. What do the facts tell you? What are the problems people are facing? What are you going to do about them and will it make any difference? Those are the kind of bottom line questions.

*What do you think of zero tolerance policing and the NYPD Compstat model?*

I think that what the Compstat part did was to focus people. It said, what are you doing in your area? I think the Compstat part was a reasonable accountability mechanism. I thought the zero tolerance was over the top, and it eventually got dropped off because the community was not about to tolerate the sort of treatment that was meted out to people.

*In your view, what have been the main changes in policing in your lifetime? What is your assessment of these changes?*

I wish I could say the influx of people who were shorter and different sized and from different nationalities and different backgrounds. I think that’s been a piece of it, that started to change policing. I think that policing has changed in very interesting stages from what the government wanted, in the ‘70s, and eventually understanding that there were different ways to do things. Education has been a huge issue in policing: the idea that you could get a university to deliver education programs and produce police officers that were just as good as any other kind that had been produced under any other models – or even better. So, education in policing has been an important change. The adoption of management techniques. The understanding the police have had to come to that they are part of the government service delivery network and need to work with other government agencies to deliver efficiently. Are we delivering services efficiently and effectively? Those questions are all part of the increasing accountability of policing. There is an argument that we are different. I don’t think we’re different, although there are still some issues about the type of work we do in investigations. We still need some distance from the government.

*What do you think should be the priority areas for preventing crime?*

I think safer-by-design – the way we design our buildings. I think that a lot should go into the up front end of parenting – developing parenting skills and risk assessments in parenting. With drugs I support trends with addicts, which is to see it as a health problem and as early as possible to look at consequences and think about rehabilitation. In juvenile justice we need to think more about prevention programs for young people. Domestic violence: if people learnt how to deal with conflict we wouldn't have bullying in schools and we might respect everyone's right not to be beaten. That's all very ambitious but I think policing has a responsibility to advocate a lot of that and not just the other end. It's at both ends that you have to advocate.

## **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

*You were in charge of human resources in the NSW Police in the latter part of the 1990s. What were your main achievements in that time?*

There was an impetus then, because of the Royal Commission, to think about different sorts of systems and practices in the way police should be dealt with and in support for police. We had to look at fairer systems for promoting police. Executive development programs I think are paying off now in NSW. Taking education out into the tertiary system has been very interesting to watch in NSW. It's saved money but it's a step along the way to taking police education into the tertiary sector altogether. Managing police performance included separating performance management and discipline so that it was much clearer how police were going to be dealt with. The fines system was taken away so that we didn't behave like traffic police giving you a \$200 fine for this or that. It was more about behaviour management and modification, and different sorts of programs that people could be put into to deal with whatever the problem was that they had. Drug and alcohol issues were very important. I initiated a study of 1,100 police in the city that came back showing 43% had alcohol problems and, in relation to the general community, a lot of other health and fitness problems. So, I like to think we put in place some good health programs; as well as random alcohol testing, targeted drug testing. If you get a sober police force you get a much better police force. That was a big change. Career structuring. National registration for police [a system of uniform licensing to allow officers to work in any jurisdiction] – although the timing was not quite right there. There were two papers, one on the future of policing and another on the future of work. That was about a lot of flexible work practices that we started to work toward. Police got a 28% pay rise. The Union did most of the work but that involved a collaborative approach with the Police Association. Better structure and support for regions and local commands in the sense of intelligence, management training and selection, better administrative assistance in terms of access to HR and payroll systems.

*Policing in Australia, as in most countries, has been extremely male dominated. Do you see that as a current problem?*

I suppose it is in the sense that you're still dealing with vast numbers of blokes, in all of the police organisations – 80%. We still need a critical mass of women. I still think that's in the vicinity of 35%. Then I think you'll start to see the change in policing. The women are still seen as on the fringe in some cases. I think the blokes are being encouraged to lighten up a fair bit and leave some of the male behaviours behind. I

think capsicum spray has made a major difference. There's not as much physical aggression as there was.

*To what extent did you pursue policies aimed at redressing the gender balance in policing in your time in charge of HRM in NSW?*

Part of it was support for a spokeswoman's network, which had started in the '70s. It was a Labor government initiative for government departments to establish the network. It was quite a useful tool. If you look at many senior women in that state, they went through the program. There was a training program. They didn't have it when I started but it came in later. It also involved women meeting together to discuss issues. They met biannually and would select projects to work on. So they would take on maternity leave protocols or childcare. In policing, flexible work practices and part-time work took a long time to get settled. But that helped a lot of women, who were leaving, to stay. Physical barriers to entry – climbing over the walls – were able to be got rid of.

*So you were the one who got rid of the obstacle course test in NSW?*

Yes. I was in charge of that area so it was easy! It was around '95-6. The other issue was how you attracted more women. I came to visit Victoria in 1992, and Victoria had twice as many women apply to become police officers as NSW had. So I went back to NSW and said we could do a lot more advertising to attract women. So we started a recruitment campaign, especially in schools. Of course, in Victoria what was happening was that women who came in didn't progress. They just left. But in NSW we had a lot of different support programs that allowed them to come together to develop leadership capacities. Getting good selection panels that didn't hold women back was important. Celebrating the 85th anniversary of women in policing was a wonderful event and drew attention to the issue. Having a thousand women march through the streets of Sydney was staggering. I got accused a lot of using the system to support women, but I didn't worry too much about that.

*Can policing accommodate working mothers?*

I think it can if we're better equipped to deal with shiftwork. I don't think we've put enough effort into understanding shiftwork, flexibility and the needs of parents. More thought could be given to using casuals and looking at patterns of deployment.

*How have domestic responsibilities affected your own career progression?*

I had mature age stepchildren, so "No". That's part of why I have been able to do what I've been able to do. Up until I was 38 I didn't have a permanent relationship.

*Promotion seems to be a particularly vexed issue and source of dissatisfaction in Australian policing. What do you think is the best way of ensuring that the best people are promoted – or at least of devising a system that is reasonably fair and has rank-and-file support?*

I would like a career structure that allows people to develop their expertise and be able to deliver it, and gain qualifications and experience, and progress up a scale.



There are limitations about how many people you can have at different levels. But I like career streaming: that we see management as just another career stream, not the only major policing career stream ever invented. Models where you have analysts grade 1 to 6. Senior leading police officers, operational consultants grades 1-6. We need career streams like that that are clearer. Then you have efficient promotion or advancement systems – although we should get rid of this notion of “promotion”. It’s got old connotations. It should be about career advancement into higher levels of skill.

*Australian police departments have traditionally been very insular. Do you see much movement in the future in terms of civilianisation and cross-border movements of personnel? Would this be a good thing?*

I’d like to see in five years time that police can move between police organisations. Superannuation portability remains a major problem. You should be able to be registered – and you could be not practising and go off and do other things. We need common educational standards. It’s about the growth of the profession.

## **EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

*What is your preferred model for the nexus between recruitment, education and training? In particular, what do you think of the issue of university education? There seems to be a split in Australia at present between jurisdictions that retain academy training but increasingly take university educated recruits, and those that are shifting training to a university campus in an integrated model? What is your preference?*

I don’t know what the best model looks like. It depends on your perspective. NSW moved to the mixed model, and I think that’s a good model. The mixture of education and skills based-operational practice, that allows you to reflect on your experience, is good.

*Was there much resistance to that in NSW?*

Yes, but it was a Royal Commission recommendation so we had a bit of weight. People primarily argued two things. One was that nobody would want to join the police. And who would join if you weren’t paid to study? But neither of those turned out to be a problem. NSW has thousands of people trying to get in. And the money that was saved went into operational policing. But, look, I don’t think there has been enough rigorous evaluation of what makes a difference to police education.

*Australian police departments also seem unable to settle on a stable system of management training. Again, there’s been a lot of upheaval and change, and there’s a policy conflict between in-house management training and more generic university-based education. What is your view? To what extent do you think police departments should support officers’ university education with time off and payment of costs?*

The problem now is that it’s so expensive with fees to send police to university. Part of the answer is to create a competitive system, with some kind of balance. But we’re going to have to be selective and invest in future management. You owe it to the members to have well equipped managers.

## RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

*How would you describe relations between police and criminologists in Australia?*

There's a famous publication in the NSW Police called "The Dialogue of the Dead", on relations between police and criminologists and how they come from different perspectives. One says, "Why is it they only ever want to publish things we've done wrong?" The other says, "Why do they always want to cover up what they've done wrong?" But of course in the past criminology was the only realm of study for police, and a lot of police in this state did criminology. And it was sponsored and supported. For me, academic studies have affected my view of policing. Access to research has underpinned the way I try to think about what we're going to do in policing and overcome the opinion-based, "this is what I feel", stuff.

*What about the "police-bashing" industry amongst criminologists?*

That hasn't done a lot of good. Some make a reasonably good living out of it. But policing is just as responsible for not having opened up to research. Although, it would be good to see criminologists take a more positive perspective on researching policing

*Are there areas of police practice that are currently under-researched?*

I think domestic violence. It's a major part of police work but there's very limited research. Same with intelligence. There's not a lot of work done here on best practice in intelligence.

## CORRUPTION AND REFORM

*As a senior member of the NSW Police Service during the Wood Commission of Inquiry in the 1990s you have probably seen about the worst that a police department can experience in terms of the exposure of corruption. How do you explain the depth and breadth of corruption as it developed in NSW?*

From the 1960s there were a number of influences on the police. There was the relationship with government and government corruption. So gambling, vice and alcohol corruption developed.

*Commissioner Avery was determined to rid the force of corruption. But arguably he wasn't successful.*

I think Avery did far more than the Royal Commission did in terms of getting rid of corrupt police. It started really with Jim Lees, who was the Commissioner in '79-'80. His appointment moved the organisation away from the path it was heading. The Labor government that had come into place was a bit ambivalent but decided it wanted to be part of the non-corruption model. So John Avery comes in '84. They get people for lots of things and sack them, and have a judge in the appeals court who upholds the sackings. I think it was about 260 people that departed in the first two years, which was a very substantial number. But what John Avery recognises is that corruption is the main piece of work that he needs to do something about when he

gets there. But then you have to start building systems for corruption resistance. He started that process. Then comes someone like Commissioner Tony Lauer who comes out of Internal Affairs and responsible for being a corruption fighter. I think part of it is that we didn't know all the levers that you might use to reduce corruption. Eventually the Wood Royal Commission figured out a lot more tools, and also a lot more information about who was corrupt and their backgrounds and common traits that should have helped you pick them. Where there is opportunity, and so much money, and people willing to sell their souls it becomes very hard.

*Do you have any observations of the conduct of the Wood Commission? Did it have appropriate powers and adopt appropriate strategies? Were its findings accurate and fair?*

I thought so. I thought the drug and alcohol issue was very important. I thought the use of external people on search warrants in integrity tests, with opportunities to steal money, was good.

*How do you respond to the charge that a large-scale corruption inquiry always leaves senior police from that period looking complicit?*

Yeah they do! That's the charge. I think Wood's line was, "If you didn't know you should have". It's a key issue that police need to pay attention to because it undermines our whole organisation. Because I didn't work in operations you could say I stood on the sidelines and wasn't exposed to it. So whether senior police were complicit in the sense of being corrupt, I don't think that was the case. Whether they were complicit in the sense they didn't put preventive steps in place that they should have, I think that's an accusation we all have to wear.

*The post-Wood reform period (from 1997) has been marked by extreme controversy and conflict, culminating in the premature resignation of the reform Commissioner Peter Ryan in 2002. How did the reform process get so out of control?*

I think a lot of the changes that went in after Wood were very good and did bring about quite substantial changes in policing in NSW.

*Yes, my interpretation is that there was a surface controversy but underneath substantial reforms were taking place. There were some pretty serious, aggressive, anti-corruption strategies like integrity testing.*

Yes. It's sad for me to see the negative publicity about reform because a lot of those sorts of changes are making a difference. Fundamentally, it's a strong organisation and it benefited enormously from the Royal Commission.

*What's your position on the issue of external oversight versus in-house responsibility for investigating complaints and applying discipline?*

Part of me says, you be responsible for your own, with oversight accountability through an ombudsman with own motion powers to investigate anything it wants to, to make the community confident that the police investigations were being conducted properly. I think if you moved it outside I'm not sure you get better results. I think if

you're going to charge senior police to do a job then part of what you have to charge them with is doing that and if they don't do it then you better depart with them.

## **BECOMING CHIEF COMMISSIONER**

*How do you explain your appointment as Chief Commissioner of the Victoria Police?*

It was timing. It was the least likely place that would ever appoint a woman as commissioner. I think everyone thought that. What had happened previously was part of the point. The Kennett [conservative] government had come in with authority to cut costs. That meant that huge amounts of money were pulled out of the public sector. Policing was held at bay for ages but eventually, in attempting to get better fundamental technological resources, it had to give up police members as a way to pay for it. A sergeant would turn up at a station and eight members would be gone. That caused the union to become very active, and a lot of conflict to occur with management. There was a high attrition rate. There was a rise in prisoners in police cells because no police cells were being built. Prisoners were being kept in police cells serving sentences. That all got to a point where that government was departed with. The new [Labor] government had a commitment to reconstruct the police. Morale was very low and there was a lot of anger. They had been in two years and the government set up an external committee to search, instead of just selecting from within. There were lots of arguments about that. The committee saw that I had lots of recent operational experience, experience with a royal commission, academic qualifications. I think they saw it as a risk and they saw themselves as somewhat courageous in appointing a woman. They did a lot of enquiries and checking.

*You don't think you were being used to punish senior police who were associated with the Kennett government?*

No. The main senior officer who was associated with the Kennett government was gone. Victoria did have a history of outsiders being appointed – especially in the earlier days of the organisation.

*Few people could dispute the fact that in the decades prior to your appointment the Victorian police had developed notoriety for being something of a law unto themselves. There was a series of scandals over police shootings, extreme cases of sex discrimination, heavy-handed tactics in public order policing and raids, and a rising problem with successful litigation for a range of abuses of power. To what extent did you feel you were stepping into a cauldron?*

I did a lot of reading, including earlier inquiries into the Victoria Police. They had an interesting process. When they were shooting people, for example, they then went into depth, with Project Beacon for example [advanced weapon training focused on restraint], and then they quite dramatically changed their training and their equipment. It took a little while to see a problem and face it, but they then did a very good job. There was the window shutters inquiry – where police were being paid money to tell security firms that windows were broken. Some 500 police were involved in that at one stage. They should have figured it out beforehand. But they put in place good steps to prevent it. The drug squad is the most recent one I've had [police selling drugs]. We've reformed the way it operated and have ongoing investigations.

*To what extent did you experience hostility to you personally, particularly as an outsider or as woman, in the early days of your appointment? I guess no one would dare now.*

Laughter. Yes, once they've given you the job it's a bit hard for people to do that. I haven't seen any undermining. I think the members were extremely happy that they had someone who they didn't know and didn't know them. I was able to say to people, "You can change from today if you like because if you used to do things a certain way you might want to do them differently in the future". There was an opportunity for people to start afresh. They understood I understood policing, and they also thought I was human. It took me a while to realise this. For example, fairly early on I was driven to a Centenary of Federation ceremony and I wound down the car window and spoke to police there. There was a look of shock. Later on I was trying to find my way back to the car and got lost. I chatted with lots of police and asked them who they were. Apparently that was a revelation. Nothing like that had ever happened to them before.

### **BEING CHIEF COMMISSIONER**

*You seem to have an extraordinary popularity amongst both police and the public in Victoria. How do explain this? Do you attribute it to a distinctive leadership style? If so, is this something you have cultivated, and is it difficult to maintain?*

When I started I went out to Frankston and to Geelong (two problem locations) and I said to them, "Here's what I think's important. We should have fair process in everything we do. We're going to treat each other decently like adults. I'm not any better than you. I expect you should treat me the way you would like to be treated". Then I asked them what needed to be fixed and they told me. I didn't come with an agenda. They told me what needed to be fixed. So going out and talking to people, being accessible, making the senior managers work shifts, having e-mail access...

*Staff can e-mail you direct?*

They can and they do – all day! That undermines all the senior management structure, and some of the senior managers hate it. I've also spent a lot of time, I've got to say, fixing past history and some of the things that were done to people so that's there been a level field. Lots of little things, and some big things. For example, four police had been shot in Bendigo some years ago. There had not been any medals. So we had a major ceremony, the whole community was invited, there was lots of healing, and all four police came back to work – and we paid compensation, which hadn't been done. So it's about all that symbolism and fairness, and fair process and decency. And then it's about setting goals and saying, "We can do this. Come on". I have been lucky with cooperation from the government – getting the prisoners out of the cells for example, and getting additional resources. Some senior police still can't figure out that you can't treat police like automatons. I also spend a lot of time in the community. I've spoken to hundreds and hundreds of community groups. I sometimes work six nights all over the state of Victoria. I wanted the community to meet me and see that police were connected to them and were going to treat people with fairness and decency. I think the community wanted to see that.

*Could you tell me about your relations with the police union?*

Good. I'm trying to get them to lighten up a bit. They still behave a bit the way they used to. They were in the bunkers and the trenches fighting, and they've got to find their way out now.

*What about your relations with the Police Minister and the Premier, and the Shadow Minister [the opposition spokesperson on policing in the parliament]?*

I really like Victorian politicians and the way they see the relationship with police. They don't interfere in any operational areas. They have policies they would like us to pursue but it's done with collaboration. The Premier's very ethical, and so is the Minister. They're very easy to get on with. The Shadow Minister is a good man. I've met with him and the National Party person to try to balance things. I don't see my appointment as a political appointment.

*So there's not the same level of politicisation as in NSW?*

No. Thank God! It's so much better.

*What have been your priority areas for change in the Victoria Police in terms of operational strategies?*

We've spent a lot of time developing a five year plan with the community and government departments. We've said we'll deliver four key things, with lots of different tools and techniques. Primarily we're going for a 20% drop in crime, and 20% in road trauma and injury. We haven't settled on a percentage for fear of crime, but we're going to have a run at fear of crime. The other one is customer satisfaction. We're looking to bump that up. The government was saying, "What do I buy if I spend \$150 million a year for the next five years in the Victoria Police?" So these are the kinds of things we've said. To do that we will need a whole range of more effective technology than we currently have, particularly in access to information. It involves forensic science, particularly around DNA and laboratories. It involves 150 crime scene officers who will be the one-stop constable who comes when your house is burgled or car stolen. We used to send four lots of people to your house when you got burgled. There is also a strong crime prevention focus, particularly in safer-by-design, working with local government in strong partnerships for identification of problems and prevention at local levels, and working with health and education on that. The new police assistance line to handle calls in a different fashion will make a big difference. Getting prisoners out of police cells releases seven or eight people a day in some stations. Using intelligence in a different way: we've had a lot of success with stolen motor vehicles in the last six months. We've dropped it by 38%.

*How was that done?*

With a partnership approach, with immobilisers, programs about immobilisers, targeting repeat offenders, working with major shopping centres about high-risk locations. So, they're all parts of it. There is a lot of untapped capacity that will be released!

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## References

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