DEVELOPING POLICE UNDERSTANDING OF ABORIGINAL ISSUES

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THE QUEENSLAND POLICE RECRUIT TRAINING PROGRAM EVOLVED AS A RESULT of the Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry and the subsequent establishment of the Criminal Justice Commission in Queensland, under the Goss Labor Government. The Police Service is in the process of professionalisation, of which the recruit training course is part. The Police Service now requires recruits to undergo a year of academic study, one semester of which is conducted through two tertiary institutions in Brisbane. The second semester of study and training is carried out at the Oxley Police Academy. On the successful completion of the year's study and training, recruits receive an Advanced Diploma in Policing which gives them a year's credit towards completion of a BA degree. A number of serving officers of the Police Service are undertaking the BA in Justice Studies at Queensland University of Technology as part-time students, in order to meet the requirements for professionalism in the Service and to advance their careers.

The first semester of study includes four compulsory units: "Contemporary Issues in Australian Society", "Communication for Justice Professionals", "Ethics" and "Introduction to Law". Police recruit students spend four days per week at university, and one day per week at the Oxley Police Academy.

Attitudes of Police

As the lecturer involved in presenting Aboriginal issues in "Introduction to Law", "Contemporary Issues in Australian Society" and "Communication", the writer can only describe the first semester as a distinct culture shock, being totally unprepared for the degree of opposition and hostility to Aboriginal issues. However, as the semester advanced, subtle shifts took place in students' attitudes to a range of issues.

At first, it seemed that the entire student body was racist or, at least, ethnocentric, but gradually it was realised that the overt hostility was coming
from a minority of predominantly male police recruits who managed to maintain their anonymity in group behaviour. There appeared to be three distinct groups:

- a majority of students with dogmatic, racist views;
- a minority of students with open-minded and aware attitudes; and
- a minority of students who are ethnocentric, lacking knowledge of and/or experience with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people, and perceiving their culture to be superior.

From the writer's perception, the third group is the one which experiences most attitude change towards Aboriginal issues by the end of the semester.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Issues**

During the two three-hour blocks of time assigned to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, a panel of Aboriginal and Islander community members comes in for a question and answer session. Members of the Incarcerated Persons Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (IPCHAC) are involved in this session in which a free exchange of opinions takes place. This is a turning point for most students who have an opportunity to relate directly to community members in a non-threatening way. At this point, awareness is raised. Questions arise which have been dealt with in lecture presentations but the affirmation by the panel on those issues tends to reinforce and validate information previously imparted. The information and cultural interaction become synthesised into an acceptable and understandable form. There is a realisation that Aboriginal issues are not just historical and sociological facts but part of a living culture which is as valid as any other.

This Murri community input is the most valuable aspect of the course and students have commented that it has been the most rewarding aspect of their semester of study. General student feedback is that they want more time allocated to this process of learning through interaction with community members.

In the "Communication" strand, individual Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander community members go into small group tutorial discussion sessions which take a further step in breaking down barriers of prejudice, fear of the unknown and anxiety. Police recruits, in particular, are interested in how to behave in community situations and derive practical advice from community members. Other students are interested in a wide range of cultural issues, becoming absorbed in these informal expressions of a different world view. Most students have not had positive interaction with Murris before.

Two members of the Justice Studies Unit at Queensland University of Technology, Gayre Christie and Dr Simon Petrie, are undertaking a longitudinal research study into students' attitudes. The results of the first semester research are soon to be published. In this study (1992), the attitudes of Queensland University of Technology Justice Studies BA Degree students, Justice Studies Police recruits and Oxley Police Academy recruits were compared, measuring attributes such as attitudes towards institutional authority, ethnocentricity, attitudes towards women, conservatism and authoritarianism. They were tested at the end of the semester of study.
Developing Police Understanding of Aboriginal Issues

The results indicate that Justice Studies police recruits and Oxley Academy police recruits have a gender difference in attitudes, with males having higher ethnocentricity scores than females. However, Justice Studies police recruit students and non-recruit students scored significantly lower on measures of authoritarianism and ethnocentrism, compared to police recruits completing the traditional Police Academy training course.

While this first semester study involved comparison with an Oxley Police Academy group, subsequent research in the longitudinal project will measure students against themselves, that is students involved in the first semester Justice Studies course will be tested at the commencement of the semester and at the completion of the semester. It is planned that the longitudinal study will run for three years and will follow-up students already tested.

It will be interesting to see whether the effects of tertiary education have lasting results. Christie and Petrie (1992) cite Smith, Locke and Walker who maintain that:

. . . the bulk of evidence seems to suggest that the most educated (police) are lower in stereotyped beliefs about minorities and less prejudiced than people with less education. The difference apparently results partly from introduction to new perspectives through contact with faculties and other students.

This study does not investigate what percentage of recruits undergo significant individual attitude change but it is the writer's perception that there is a minority of police recruits whose mindset and cultural conditioning remains racist. This is not surprising, considering the tacit acceptance of racism in Australian society. It would be quite unrealistic to expect otherwise.

It seems that many police recruits identify with the "police culture" as soon as they don the uniform. Even though they are external to the Police Academy for four days of the week, the day at the Academy reinforces this sense of identity with the Service. This encourages students to behave as a group, rather than as individuals, when undergoing tertiary study. It also appears to give more conformist students a defensive stance when any reference to policing arises, and, of course, it does so inevitably when addressing Aboriginal concerns. This "police culture" identification gives rise to a considerable degree of hostility and resistance to Aboriginal issues.

Fortunately, by the end of the semester, the minority group with rigid and unchanging attitudes are less overt in their racist attitudes, realising themselves to be the minority at this point. Nevertheless, these few police recruits pose problems for the Police Service when they become serving officers. There appears to be a need for a more rigid system of selection of recruits and while there are Aboriginal community members involved in the selection process, some re-assessment of the procedure is required to take greater account of attitudes, even though it is appreciated that applicants would tend to mask any racist or ethnocentric tendencies in order to be
accepted as recruits. In particular, young students coming from the secondary school system exhibit an unacceptable level of racism.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Entry into the Police Recruitment Scheme**

This raises another concern, which is the entry of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons into the police recruitment scheme and into the BA in Justice Studies course, and the level of racism which they, undoubtedly, will experience. Since the dominant white society does not experience racism firsthand and is unaware of the daily occurrences which blight black lives, there is a pervading air of inevitability which lurks in the corridors of tertiary institutions when the issue of racism arises.

**Police Recruitment**

There are suggestions that, in the near future, new police will be recruited after undergoing a full degree in Justice Studies. (This is now the procedure for entry to the Australian Police Service.) This seems to be a desirable procedure for recruitment to the Queensland Police Service, if professionalism and social awareness are to be priorities in the Service. This would tend to reduce the problem of "police culture" identification and "groupie" behaviour when students undergo tertiary study. The process would provide, hopefully, more independent thinkers in the Service.

While cultural awareness can diminish racist and ethnocentric attitudes, the writer suggests that nothing less than a pro-active stand on racism will deal it a mortal blow. Racism has been assigned to the "too hard" basket for too long and will linger there as long as academics look to EEO initiatives and anti-discrimination legislation to do their work for them. It is altogether too convenient to talk about "free speech" which merely maintains the white status quo and conveniently assigns anti-racism to the politically correct movement (Wilson 1992). Combating racism is not given the priority it deserves and is relegated to corners of tertiary institutions as a peripheral or minority concern.

**Justice Studies and Senior Police**

In Justice Studies the writer is also involved in several other second and third semester lectures. In these classes, there is a significant number of senior police students studying part-time. The resistance to Aboriginal issues here is of a different kind to recruit resistance as it is based not only on folk knowledge and ignorance but on ingrained, rigid attitudes reinforced by negative interactions with Aboriginal and Islander people in policing. This has implications for newly-appointed officers going into the field. How will they maintain the level of acceptance and understanding they have gained of Aboriginal and other issues as a minority in the service?

Many new recruits are coming into service with high ideals and social consciences because they see that the service is attempting to change and professionalise. The Service cannot afford to lose these people because of old, rigid attitudes.
Conclusion

The Justice Studies course outlined here goes some way towards changing attitudes but the issue of racism cannot be subsumed under a banner of cultural awareness, and must be confronted as a particular issue, despite the flack.

In the Justice Studies first semester units of study, placing Aboriginal issues within the broader framework of "Introduction to the Law", "Contemporary Social Issues in Australian Society" and "Communication" which are compulsory units gives the issues a validity and established place in the curriculum. However, one barely touches the surface of pressing concerns. There have been difficulties in establishing a meaningful continuity in second and third year, attempting to fit into confined curricula outlines. However, the course has only run for three semesters and constant assessment and reassessment is occurring. It is now proposed that the writer prepare an elective unit, for both internal and external study. It would seem that there are no compulsory, individual units of Aboriginal study throughout Queensland University of Technology faculties and most likely elsewhere in tertiary institutions.

If resolution, reconciliation or understanding is to occur between the indigenous people of this country and the rest of the population, there will have to be an all-out effort to facilitate that process through education. In particular, law faculties have a duty to lead the way in raising issues of rights and recompense (which are central to the justice system) and the false foundation on which this society currently rests.

The Police Service merely reflects the broader society. In the past, it has mirrored its most conservative and reactionary aspects. In Queensland, things are slowly changing and, despite the wear and tear which racism brings to the writer's door, there is an increasing number of police recruit students coming through that doorway seeking dialogue on Aboriginal issues and making the job worthwhile.

References

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