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Labour is unlikely to scrap PCCs, so here's how it can reform them

Police and Crime Commissioners should become 'ministers for the local criminal justice system' with the political power to set the agenda.

By [Max Chambers](#) ^[1] Published 22 August 2013 16:03



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Police and Crime Commissioners

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Labour will need to address the party's position on Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), who will mark their one year anniversary in November. Photograph: Getty Images.



Despite all the talk about a lack of policy detail, there is one area where Labour will certainly be

doing some pretty hard thinking over the next few months. The party's Policing Review, led by former Met Commissioner Lord Stevens, might be long delayed but is still expected to be

published in the autumn and may provide some much-needed thinking on crime and justice issues.

Taking advantage of front-line police dissatisfaction at the government's policing agenda, the review is likely to contain various pro-police measures on issues like perks and pay, and is also likely to include promises to reverse certain elements of Theresa May's wide-ranging reforms.

It is rumoured that it will once again float the idea of mandatory police force mergers and a move towards regional police forces – an idea that is popular with some senior police leaders, but was comprehensively rejected by just about everybody else back in 2006. But as well as looking at structural changes and crowd-pleasing measures, the review will also need to address the party's position on Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), who will mark their one year anniversary in November.

On the face of it, PCCs have made an inauspicious start. Poor turnout at last year's elections, some early high-profile blunders and a media fixation on expenses and personnel have all helped to create a negative impression. But the reality on the ground will take longer to evaluate and there is emerging evidence that PCCs are bringing real clarity of leadership and proving far more effective than Police Authorities ever were at holding forces to account and improving their crime-fighting performance. Despite this, Labour could decide to make a premature call and scrap PCCs before they've really had a chance to get started.

If Labour was to decide to change the model of police governance again, emergency legislation would need to be passed by a new government upon taking office in order to cancel the next set of PCC elections in May 2016. Scrapping PCCs would not only need to be the first priority for Ed Miliband if he makes it into 10 Downing Street, it would also extinguish the progress made by a number of influential former Labour ministers who are thriving as PCCs of large police forces in the north and the midlands. For both of these reasons, the smart money is on PCCs remaining in place and being given the time to demonstrate their significant potential.

The [report](#) ^[2] we have published today is an attempt to look to the future of PCCs, rather than continue to quibble about their introduction. In it, we outline a vision for a deliberate and steady decentralisation of the criminal justice system, with PCCs the recipients of a range of new responsibilities and powers, implemented in a way designed to command the confidence of central government departments.

Our contention is that while PCCs have a valuable suite of powers in the policing realm, they do not yet have the right tools for effecting change in the wider criminal justice system. We set out a series of steps which would see PCCs increasingly assume a role similar to that of a 'minister for the local criminal justice system' – with the political power to set the agenda, hold agencies within his/her purview to account for delivery of that agenda and drive forward reforms to ensure a more efficient and effective system at the local level.

The aim should be to create a system where, instead of local criminal justice leaders looking upwards and inwards to Whitehall for direction and validation, they increasingly look outwards to each other and downwards to the citizens they serve.

The process of decentralisation we envisage starts with giving PCCs the power to influence the people, agendas, performance and coordination of the criminal justice system at both a national and local level. Once they are given the tools to allow them to work effectively within

the wider ecosystem and have successfully got to grips with their new powers, the strategy would see them becoming more financially responsible for the wider system – both for holding and commissioning with specific criminal justice budgets, and for the levels of demand created within their local areas.

As PCCs develop, whichever party is in government might also begin to ask questions about their longer-term future. These reforms have created a new set of local politicians with considerable powers (over the police, at least) – representing an entirely new infrastructure for local democracy. In this new report, we argue that policymakers should build on this by deliberately facilitating the expansion of PCCs' powers and remit in the justice space. But it is not impossible that future governments might decide to go even further. For example, in the wake of the rejection of City Mayors in last year's referenda, where attempts were made to introduce powerful Mayors in a 'big bang' fashion, it may make sense for PCCs to be reformed more fundamentally over time – gradually accruing powers over other areas of public policy.

The election of Police and Crime Commissioners was a once in a generation opportunity to reform policing and criminal justice, and reverse decades of ineffective policies. And there are now three choices facing policymakers: reverse, stand still or go forward. Going forward, by accelerating the expansion of PCCs' powers and responsibilities, will give these new figures every chance of being successful in their jobs, maximising reductions in crime and meeting the significant expectations around their role. And that's the best way of ensuring that the narrative.

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