



Policing the Revolution with Special Guest Mick Palmer Part 2

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Nyck: This is Part 2 of this week's Future Sense podcast, and we've been talking to Mick Palmer, who amongst many other things that he has been involved in, and is still involved in, was the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, the AFP, for seven years until 2001. He's been involved in reform in policing, and culturally in many different areas for quite a long time. He has also shown interest, and is engaged with, mental health issues such as PTSD that he was talking about in the first part, and we recommend that you listen to the first part before you do this, although not necessarily. But we're going to talk to him further now about the future of policing.

Steve: Thanks, Nyck. Where we covered some of the challenges, and particularly events that are rolling out around the world at the moment in relation to policing and police clashes with protesters and those sorts of things, in this part, we would like to look at the opportunities and really ask the question: 'How do we allow what is effectively a global revolution in human values and human society to go ahead peacefully, and at the same time maintain law and order within our societies?'

Mick, I know that's a really large question, and I guess, as they as they say, like eating an elephant, we'll just take it one bite at a time. So I guess perhaps we could start by asking you the question, given your experience and your knowledge of how policing is changing around the world at the moment, what will the role of police look like within society in 20 years from now as far as you can see?

Mick Palmer: I guess I'm not sure what it will look like. I'd like to think I know what I think it should look like, and I think there should be much stronger partnerships created between policing and the broader community, and particularly disadvantaged sectors of the community. We have to spend, I think, far more time—and this is getting better all the time; I'm not saying this in a way that suggests we're not doing this now, I think some police organisations are doing this very well with different sectors of the community—but we need

to try to create an environment where police officers, or those people in terms of first responders, who are responsible for enforcing the laws of the land, if you like, the laws of the day, have the greatest understanding possible as to the circumstances of the people who are most likely to be committing those sort of crimes, who are most likely to be upset by the agenda of the day.

So we spend a lot more time, as I mentioned earlier, educating our people on the 'why': Why is this behaviour happening? What are the circumstances that lead to people behaving in a certain way? Now, they won't always be circumstances that you can say 'that's understandable, we should allow them to do that.' On some occasions, of course, people will be driven by greed or revenge or just whatever self-motivation might drive them that is, from a community point of view, unacceptable. But the more we can understand the circumstances against which any protest or any crime is being committed, the more chance we have of dealing with it effectively and not just dealing with the behaviour, if you like, or rather changing the behaviour, or understanding it and putting in place laws that better represent what our response should be.

Part of that has to be that we spend more time—and this is not just an issue for policing, of course, this needs government will—we spend more time in genuine dialogue with the various parties. In the same way as policing has historically been much more effective in dealing with blue-collar crime than ever it has been in dealing with white-collar crime—generally because blue-collar crime is unsophisticated, often committed in public, frequently doesn't have too much planning associated with it ...

Nyck: And probably often desperate, I imagine.

Mick Palmer: ... who were driven by desperation and so therefore not thinking too much about avoiding the responsibility. White-collar crime is normally planned and committed by highly thoughtful people who have had a lot of experience in the field and are pretty smart at hiding what they did. So we've got to get smarter at levelling that field.

We're always going to be faced with a lot of what is colloquially termed blue-collar crime, but we need to understand much more than we do at the moment, I think—the reality about why so much of that crime occurs—and start to engage ourselves much more in the preventive mechanism. There's been a lot of talk over probably 20 or 30 years now about preventive policing, but we really haven't got very effective at it. We have little pockets of success. There are many reasons for that and one of them, of course, is funding and resource scarcity. The phone rings a lot of times, police have to respond to a lot of crime—and, of course, in this current environment, that's likely to go up, not down—and so the time that you have available to be involved in longer-term preventive mechanisms is reduced, restricted, and sometimes in resource sense, almost impossible. But unless we are prepared to engage in that process so that we both get to understand each other more, we're not likely to be successful. The other thing is to think—and governments need, I think, to take a real responsibility for this; this, in a sense, without pushing one of my bandwagons, is the issue in terms of drug law reform—that while you've got offences that because of their very

nature, regardless of the impact of the offences, puts young police officers in conflict with young Australians, we're always going to have a situation of conflict and a lack of trust, with police being seen as the enemy and the young Australians committing those sort of crimes, if we think about drug use, for example, as being the enemy.

There's no winners in that at all and if we could find a way by which police were seen as the friends and not the enemy—not there to enforce the law, but rather to protect and to assist—we create a hugely advantageous relationship with the people who are most likely to otherwise come to notice and we could make very significant inroads, in the same way as they are now in a number of programs—and I'm aware of a couple with Indigenous youth who may be suffering from homelessness and unemployment and so on, are fairly significant disadvantaged, and as a consequence are committing some street offenses or other crime—the more and the closer the relationships between those people, those young men and women—generally, men, but both—and police, the better the results always prove to be.

Steve: Thanks Mick.

In terms and mechanisms for law reform—and I think this is a particularly important issue when you're talking about changing values—the values associated with the old paradigm in terms of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate in society can be quite different to, of course, the new paradigm values that are emerging now. We need mechanisms within society to provide that feedback from grassroots and from systems such as our police forces, our services, back to the decision makers in government, the people who are creating the law, for consideration of change and implementation of change.

Throughout your career as a policeman, what's been your experience in that field? Have you seen effective mechanisms where that's really worked quite well at all?

Mick Palmer: I can't say I've seen mechanisms where it's really worked quite well. One of the problems with that has been that almost all of our statistical collection and the data upon which we rely, if you like, to formulate opinions and strategies and give advice, is based again on the 'what' rather than on the 'why', and I think if we could start creating better stats, more comprehensive stats—not to say they don't exist, but in my experience, they are limited and only sectional—in terms of the reasons why crimes are committed—and some of the academics involved in the criminology field do this much better in my experience—but we need to get a far better understanding of the reasons why crimes are committed and behaviour occurs. Then, as a second phase to that question, ask ourselves what are the best ways by which we can have an impact—a positive impact—on that? Are the police the best people who can do that? Are there other people who should be involved in the equation? What should the partnership be? We need to, I think, spend the time to do that in a way we haven't done yet.

So I don't think we've been very successful, really, in gathering and then explaining or publishing or promoting the data that we really need to promote if we're going to change behaviour. Governments, if I'm quite frank, more so than police, tend to try to drive change by the fear of a big stick. If you play the game, you're going to take the knocks and the

police are left to pick up the pieces, if you like, or as piggy in the middle. We need to be much more scientific, I think, about that in our analysis of the reality of social behaviour and why it is occurring, get to the highest level of understanding we can as to why it's occurring or what we can do about that from our point of view, and it'll generally be a multifaceted response that is needed, including from governments. Some of that might require a legal change—law changes and the like—but much of it can be achieved by—and again, it goes back to our earlier discussions on the nature of policing as it changes, if you like, back from force to service, where there's greater democracy in policing and there's a greater delegation of responsibility in the exercise of discretion. When you have such well-trained and well-educated police as 2020 provides us, we should have confidence in allowing those same men and women to exercise their discretion in terms of what is the most appropriate thing to do in a given circumstance, without them being likely to be criticised for not taking firm action when some people may consider they should have—deciding not to arrest in a given circumstance. I think we need to show more trust in that environment, and we need to try to come to a collective that gives us a much better understanding of what it is that we're trying to achieve and how best we publicise and promote those facts in terms of the response that policing is given. The more people understand the reasons why police are doing things, the better they're likely to comply with those requirements.

I'm not sure, Steve, if that really answers your question.

Steve: That all certainly sits very well, and it does, thanks, Mick. It sits very well with the understanding of what's driving change in how people are changing based on the research of Clare Graves and, as we mentioned in the break, we're going to send you a copy of *The Change Code* after we've finish talking, in thanks for your input to the show.

Are there any countries around the world that are standing out to you at the moment as leading the way in respect to the kind of changes that you've described?

Mick Palmer: I haven't been studying it well enough to really give a valuable comment on that, Steve. I would expect it is likely, from my previous assessments, that some of the Scandinavian countries are likely to be as well advanced as any. And that will vary, but I'm just not across the detail. I haven't had occasion to look at that in quite a while, quite frankly.

What it seemed to me, on my last assessment of that sort of thing, is that wherever you looked, whether it be the United Kingdom, Scandinavia or other police forces around the world, they were doing some things well. They'd have an initiative, or maybe a tandem or a group of initiatives, that were achieving a lot in given discrete areas of activity or focus, if you like, without it becoming a force-wide mandate or discipline or directive or expectation. And I think that's what we need to do.

I think, again, getting back to where we started in terms of what John Avery was trying to create with his *Force to Service*, it's about changing the environment across the organisation, not just for particular parts of it, not just in troubled areas where—and I know there's, as I understand, a very good initiative occurring at the moment in Dubbo involving Indigenous young people and the police in Dubbo, where the connectivity between the two and the way

in which they're doing business and the exercise of discretion and finding ways other than just arrest to deal with socially disruptive behaviour, have proven to be enormously successful. I saw, in the Northern Territory, many examples of that, but they tend to be sort of singular-focused or area-focused because it's a problem area or a problem group of people or whatever—or they're recognised or seen to be—rather than becoming the new mandate of the service itself.

I think that's the challenge we have to get. It's the downside, if you like, of using discretion as an arm to say that we do have very well-qualified young men and women and we should allow them to exercise their discretion much more broadly than what they do. I think that would take us a long way towards achieving some of these connectivities and levels of trust that we need to achieve between ourselves—between police and society or the community at large—but it's only sort of part of the equation. I think we need to think a bit more deeply about that issue, and we need to, as John Avery said, we need to sort of create an environment where, from the top down, this is preached as the way we do business.

If we're going to be successful in this new age, getting back to the question, some key questions ago, Steve, we need to develop a better and much more positive and constructive relationship with the community at large, and particularly with problematic portions of, or disadvantaged portions of, or at-risk portions of the community in order to ensure that whatever we decide it is that we should do, it is based on the best possible advice, including, particularly, advice from the people who may be committing the behaviours upon which we are focused, or who are being impacted by it. So, who are the people who should know most about this and why it's occurring? What can they tell us? What does that tell us we should do about dealing with it? How much advice should we take from these people as to what it is that most likely will be successful?

The answer is we don't take anywhere near enough advice like that at the moment. They'd often have the answers to their own problems, because not many people want to live in a situation of violence or social unrest, or whatever. So, to ask the people most impacted by the behaviour as to what it is they think would be most likely to make a positive impact, beyond that which we now do, I think would take us quite a way down this track. But those things have to be embedded over time as part of the force or the service psychology.

Nyck: Yes. You've sort of answered the question I was ruminating about because you've been talking about the 'what' and the 'why', and I kept on wondering about the 'who', and you've started to answer exactly that question about that connectivity between those often disadvantaged groups—multicultural, Indigenous and so forth—who are out there who don't feel that they have a voice in that sort of engagement.

But going back, just quickly, I just want to mention some figures here, because you're also talking really, as you said, top-down, but you're talking about—training is not a very good word—but from the same article I quoted in the first part from *New Directions in Police Academy Training* from last December—it's an American document—they talk about police academies in the US, and maybe it's slightly different here—the amount of training that amounts to about 213 hours of operations training: firearms and defence, use of force—168 hours; self-improvement—89 hours; legal education—86; mental illness—10 hours; and in

the category of self-improvement, more than half the curriculum focuses on health and fitness, and the remainder of self-improvement training consists primarily of ethics and integrity, communications, professionalism and stress prevention management. Most of this is quite a small amount of all of that and is not standardised across the US.

I don't know how that sits here, but it occurs to me straight away that there doesn't seem to be, in that very simplistic categorisation of those parts of the police training, that there's not—or is there?—specific training regarding minorities; regarding different cultural truths and who these people are out there that that these new police officers are going to be policing, in fact?

Mick Palmer: Yes, again, I'm not right across the detail. I haven't looked at state police force training schedules for a long time, but I think the answer is certainly, yes, they do. They are given education and development in those areas. I think it's probably fair to say, nowhere are we doing it as well as we could, or giving it as much time as we need, but that's a layman's answer. I don't know the detail, and there may be some very good examples of the fact that that's not right, and they are. But I'd be surprised if, in fact, we aren't doing that as well as we could and should.

Sometimes, certainly historically in my experience, it was more of a 'tick the box' situation, doing lip service to that issue rather than really dealing with it effectively and thoroughly. So I think we can do better. It is without question, you know, those soft sciences, if you like, that are going to be critically important going forward. I mean, one of the downsides—and you quoted from one of those publications previously about the amount of equipment that young police officers these days carry, which I guess is one of my banes. I understand why it's happening, but I think it is a hugely counterproductive situation.

The best weapon the police man or woman will ever have will be his or her brain and powers of negotiation. Your mouth will always be much more valuable to you than your pepper spray or your sidearm or your baton. We need to spend a lot more time in making sure that people have the best possible skills and have the best possible understanding of the ways by which they can successfully and diplomatically negotiate a troublesome situation without the need to put their hand on a weapon. The better we get it that, you will find the result is, the less they will have to put their hand upon a weapon.

Nyck: Is there room for empathy in a future police force, to take it that far?

Mick Palmer: Absolutely. Yes, I think there is. I think that's got to be part of the training, and this is there in some circumstances.

There's a couple of things I think we need to really make sure people understand. One is, even today, police exercise positive discretion far more than negative discretion, in terms of not taking action when they could and giving people the benefit of the doubt or letting them explain their conduct, and allowing them to learn a lesson from that without taking

formal action. Police do exercise a lot of positive discrimination in favour of a person who they find otherwise technically committing an offense, and they spend a lot more time helping people than ever they do arresting people. That's sort of the nature of policing. We know there's a lot more good people in the world that we have to help than there are bad people that we have to arrest. That is the reality, and again, it's a bit like a referee in a football game. You notice the mistakes, but you don't often notice the good things they do, and I think that's the case in policing.

There are a lot of enormously positive things that occur that of course, none of us noticed because that's what they're paid for, and it's only when things go wrong and when people use force they shouldn't use, or use pepper spray in a circumstance they probably shouldn't use, or people think they shouldn't use, etc., that it gets publicity. I think it's important to try to get that balance. Empathy's not devoid of presence at the moment. Young people who join policing are generally pretty smart. As I said, they're academically well qualified, they're pretty articulate and they'll pick things up pretty quickly. All we need to do is sometimes give them a few more tools, a few more ideas about how they may exercise a certain pattern of conduct, and they'll be more than happy to pick it up and run with it, particularly as they're the people against whom the violence is going to be perpetrated if they don't get it right.

So to teach people how to diffuse situations in a range of ways and how to create empathy between yourselves and people who may otherwise not feel a great deal of empathy towards you, is a very positive thing to do in terms of all parties. It is achievable, and I know from my own career, way back as long as I go, which is a long time, the police who were always the best were those that who could think quickly on their feet. They were good with the words. They would frequently defuse situations where other people would end up coming to fisticuffs or worse. Good detectives, good officers, have always been good at using the power of speech and the power of empathy, and collegiality, if you'd like, to diffuse the situation, gain the trust of the people who otherwise were very distrustful, and hose down a situation that could have become very violent. I think we need to build on that, and again, I think empathy is very much focused on the 'why', Steve, isn't it? You can't really have empathy unless you understand more about who it is we're dealing with, why it is they're likely to be doing what they're doing, why I shouldn't be so angry about the fact they're doing it than I otherwise would be, because I've got some understanding now of why that might be happening, and how it is, therefore, I can do something about it that might be a win-win situation for both sides.

I think there needs to be more. I think certainly it is part of the training programmes at the moment, I would suspect in every police force, but we can do much better.

Steve: That's fantastic, Mick. We're really appreciating your thoughts here.

Just going back to that really big question that I asked at the beginning: How do we allow a revolution to take place on a large scale, which involves the decentralisation of power—in other words, governments of the present day actually giving away some of their powers, decentralising them—and still maintain an orderly society? What I can say from the research of Clare Graves and what we've learned from history is that change needs to happen faster these days, simply because our communication technology is very fast, and so if people who

are wanting change can talk to each other very quickly and they can make big things happen very quickly—we have the whole flash mob thing now with mobile phones and that kind of stuff—from a systemic point of view, what we need is faster communications and faster processes for considering and designing and implementing change within our social systems. So this is really goes to the heart of government, I guess.

I'd be interested on your thoughts in terms of where we start with that, because what we're really talking about here is, we're talking about a large number of people going out on the street and saying 'we're not happy with life', the police being the meat in the sandwich, as you said before, and then somehow the reasons—the 'why' behind that—needs to be discovered in the first place and then communicated back to the decision makers—and I guess we're talking about government, and we're talking about structural change that's needed here to the way we govern ourselves—and how do we accelerate that process of the consideration of the need for change in the design of new systems, enacting new systems in those sorts of things, and basically accelerating the change process. I mean, if we don't do this consciously, it's going to be forced upon us, and I think the whole COVID-19 exercise we're going through right now is a great example of unexpected forced change where we have no choice but to drop everything and do something different. Of course, that's damaging our economy, it's damaging the work force in terms of unemployment and those sorts of things, and ideally we want to try and avoid the collateral damage as much as we can. Have you got any thoughts about accelerating that social change process?

Mick Palmer: No, no bolt of lightning thought, I have to say. I mean, certainly it's a question for governments, much more so than police. I think it's all interwoven in the bigger picture we've been talking about, in that governments have to become better, I think. I mean, the mere fact that somebody is protesting about something isn't a case for saying, therefore, it should be changed. I mean, sometimes protests are based on pretty narrow thinking or a personal grievance that may not have a great deal of substance or of sustainability to it or legitimacy to it if you look much more broadly and carefully at it. Every protest is not the sort of protest that ought to win just because they protest, but many of the agitations, of course, are driven by very deep-seated social unrest and social disadvantage, and a lot of very solid grievances that really do need to be addressed and dealt with, so it's not one-size-fits-all, I guess is the point I'm trying to make, the fact of protest.

Policing, as I said before, has got a lot to gain if they can reduce the number of protests and increase the amount of trust between protesters and governments and so on, because they're the piggy in the middle and they're the people who are going to be attacked if the protests turn in any way violent. I think as part of that process, governments are always going to be loath to let go of control, so it's going to have to be a measured and step process of changing laws gradually to reflect the will of the community, if you like, which is really what elected governments are supposed to do.

I think as part of that process, one of the things I think that does have to happen is that governments have to be much more prepared to both seek and listen to the comments of people like police organisations, for example. If the police were to do the job we're talking about—really spend even more time on increasing and improving the empathy between

themselves and the people they're most likely to have dealings with, to change the way in which they're doing business so it becomes much more aimed at reducing and removing conflict and developing strong and positive relationships—in other words, looking at the 'why' of the crime and dealing with that, rather than just arresting the people for the 'what'; if governments are then willing to listen to the reasons—not only the reasons why that's happening, because I guess that argument would almost have to be run before the government would give the police organisation, in many cases, the money necessary to do some of the 'why' things I'm talking about—but if the results of those behaviours and those initiatives were shared with governments, governments would be much more relaxed, I'm sure, to say, 'okay, that means we could think about, for example, removing that law or changing that behaviour pattern or allowing that to occur.' I mean, in almost every situation, it is fear that creates ignorance that creates the fear, and the more we understand the reasons why something is happening, the more likely we will not fear it and realise there is a way by which we can deal with it. I think that's very much a case for governments.

I mean, in recent times, I've been watching some governments changing their position in terms of street violence and talking again about getting tough, and if we're not careful, building more prisons and so on. It's an easy answer and it's publicly popular if people don't have anything more to go on. If the 'what' is the extent of their understanding and they see more break and enters and more street violence or more assault and robberies, the more you lock up, the better off those people are going to like it. But if you understand the reasons why some of that is happening, and that there are things we can do to make it far less likely to happen, people might think more broadly about what the effective treatments to that problem might be.

Governments are not going to do anything they think is unpopular. That's why drug reform is so difficult, in my view, to achieve, but people are concerned, and I've had senior leaders of governments in this country personally say to me: 'We know what to do; we don't know how to get re-elected if we do it', or words to that effect. And it's because of their belief in the fear of the community, in governments being seen to go weak at the knees about illicit drugs. If people have a better understanding of the reality of what we mean by that and the fact that it's not going weak at the knees, but rather becoming smarter with the way in which we deal with the problem, it's much more achievable. And I think that to me is this challenge in terms of coming to a different recipe moving forward.

Steve: I agree entirely. It kind of reminds me of the rules of engagement challenge from my military experience, where if all you've got is a rifle, then you go from shouting and pointing the rifle to shooting somebody, and what you really need is a few steps in between there to smooth out the process. I think we need some steps in between what we have at the moment to allow this to progress, otherwise it's going to be like a pressure cooker and the lid's going to blow at some point, and we'll end up with the sorts of things that are happening in the US. I hope not. I hope it doesn't get to that. But we seriously, obviously need to have a deep think about it and look at creating mechanisms to let that pressure out and allow things to change, I believe.

Mick Palmer: Yes, we do. We need to be proactive, don't we, Steve? I mean, it's right to say at the moment, I don't think we're facing the same problems the United States is facing in any way, but if we sit on our hands, sooner or later it will occur.

There are things we can do. It is much easier now for us to be proactive and to create some of these relationships that we've been talking about than it will be if things reach the United States. The level of distrust over there is such that there is going to be pretty hard to pull some of the key players to the negotiating table, or if you do, to keep them there and have any meaningful dialog. I don't think we're anywhere near that stage, really, but now is the time to strike while we have the opportunity, and to really go beyond the lip service and really try to create an environment where we do have absolutely meaningful dialogue, we really think carefully through what are the initiatives that could make a difference, what are the levels of understanding we don't have that we need to achieve, and how might we do both.

It's not rocket science in actual fact. It just takes time; it takes patience, and government's not very good at being patient, as you know. You're given money for a fiscal year budget and you're expected to achieve certain outcomes, and if you've got a long-term process, for example, to law reform in terms of an area of policing, if they don't see the results in the first 12 months, they are likely to withdraw the budget or curtail it. That is my experience and I think that, in this current environment, is exactly what we don't want to have happen. We need to have the patience to realise some of these changes will not happen overnight, but they're critically important for us to engage in and to ensure do happen, and that we need to invest now to achieve the future results that obviously all of us as a society need to be achieved.

Nyck: Wonderful.

Mick Palmer, we're going to have to leave it there. Thank you so much for joining us in these two segments of this week's *Future Sense* podcast.

Steve: Thanks, Mick. We'll certainly be in touch again. We'd love to talk to you about PTSD and drug law reform as well, down the track some time. Thanks so much for your time, and I really hope that your wise words on this podcast reach the right ears.

Nyck: Indeed. I have a need to call you a Former Peace Officer rather than police officer. Thanks very much, Mick Palmer.

Mick Palmer, who is former Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police for seven years and much more than that. Thanks, Mick.

Steve: Cheers.

Mick Palmer: Thank you.

You've been listening to the Future Sense podcast with Nyck Jeanes and Futurist, Steve McDonald, broadcast weekly. We're also happy to be liked—or loved—on the platform that you're listening to right now. And we welcome feedback, comments and input. Thanks for joining us, and remember that the future is here now, it's just not evenly distributed.