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Policy processes and police reform: Examining similarities and differences between Scotland and the Netherlands

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Abstract

During 2013 the national governments of both the Netherlands and Scotland have introduced radical reforms which have replaced largely autonomous regional police forces with a national police service. Despite these structural similarities, however, there are important differences in the underlying processes which have shaped these reforms and the broader narratives about policing which have informed public and policy discourses.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the underlying dynamics of these police reforms. Following an overview of concepts drawn from the public policy literature regarding policy change, the paper describes in detail the structural changes to policing that have occurred in both countries. These structural changes relate not just to the spatial re-organization of policing but also to the structure of police governance and accountability. The focus then shifts to disentangling key aspects of the decision-making processes which led to the reforms drawing on Kingdon's analysis of policy change and policy formation. The paper concludes with a broader discussion of the similarities and differences in police reform in the two countries, highlighting important issues regarding the significance of political context, debates around localism and policing, and narratives regarding a normative vision of the police role.

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1. Introduction

Policing scholars have long had an interest in issues of police reform. [Savage's \(2007\)](#) monograph *Police Reform: Forces for Change*, for example, focuses on a number of key changes to the methods and techniques of UK policing during the 1980s and 1990s, including the introduction of zero-tolerance tactics, the development of community policing and innovations in performance management. More recently, [Manning's \(2010\)](#) monograph *Democratic policing in a changing world* includes a whole chapter on police reform, focussing on developments in community policing, problem-solving policing, hot-spots policing, and crime mapping. As Manning acknowledges these reforms are essentially 'tactical modifications in resource deployment' (p.155) and do not involve any fundamental reorganization of the police as an institution or its relationships with government. However, several countries in Northern and Western Europe are now experiencing more fundamental forms of reorganization involving macro-level changes in the structure, organization and governance of public police institutions. In many countries this has involved significant moves towards a greater centralization of policing although the scale and scope of these changes varies. In Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland the focus has been on merging police districts within an established national police structure whereas in the Netherlands and Scotland the key change has been the formation of new national police forces through the abolition of regional, semi-autonomous police organizations. (see [Fyfe et al., 2013](#)).

The similar trajectory and timing of the reforms in the Netherlands and Scotland means they offer a unique opportunity for comparative analysis which is the focus of this paper. In each country, the radical reforms introduced during 2013 have occurred relatively abruptly. In Scotland there was only 18 months between announcing the decision to reform the police and the start of the new arrangements although the changes are set against a background of creeping centralization and a long tradition of local policing ([Fyfe and Scott, 2013](#)). In the Netherlands there were only 14 months between the first moment that the government announced its aim to reform the police from a regionalized to a national system and the moment that the Lower Chamber passed the Bill ([Terpstra, 2013](#)). Despite these structural similarities, however, there are important differences in the underlying processes which have shaped these reforms and the broader narratives about policing which have informed public and policy discourses.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the underlying dynamics of these police reforms. Following a brief overview of concepts drawn from the public policy literature regarding policy change, the paper describes in detail the structural changes to policing that have occurred in both countries. These structural changes relate not just to the spatial re-organization of policing but also to the structure of police governance and accountability. The focus then shifts to disentangling key aspects of the decision-making processes which led to the reforms. Drawing on [Kingdon's \(2003\)](#) analysis of policy change and policy formation, three main issues are discussed: the pre-decision processes (involving agenda setting and consideration of policy alternatives); the importance of the 'coupling' of problems, policies and politics to create 'windows of opportunity' in terms of policy change; and the role played by 'policy entrepreneurs' in taking forward police reform. The paper then concludes with a broader discussion of the similarities and differences in police reform in the two countries, highlighting important issues regarding the significance of political context, debates around localism and policing, and narratives regarding a normative vision of the police role.

The material presented here does not originate from a specific comparative research project on police reform in Scotland and the Netherlands but rather on the accumulation of different

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