

Complaints Against Police: The Politics of Reform

Colleen Lewis (Hawkins Press, Sydney, 1999, 216pp)

Colleen Lewis' *Complaints against Police: The Politics of Reform* considers Decimus Junivus Juvenalis vexed question, 'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' ('who should guard the guardians?') (p1) in the context of police accountability policies. The book is about reforming the process of complaints against police. A strong parallel theme is the spectre of politics and the often tense political relationships inevitably involved in such reform.

The book has two central arguments:

1. an integrated, reactive – proactive approach is fundamental to the long term success of the civilian oversight process; and
2. external relations need to be factored in when evaluating the success or failure of this relatively new form of police accountability (p5).

The early chapters provide a theoretical evaluation of policing liberal democracies and identify 'police malfeasance' as a central problem for western democratic societies. Lewis documents the growing disquiet and dissatisfaction with internal investigation systems that operate with little or no accountability mechanisms and are controlled by the 'guardians' themselves.

Chapter Three is a well researched account of the introduction of external, independent civilian bodies to oversight complaints against police. The chapter chronicles the emergence of such bodies in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia and provides a strong context for the case studies that form the second part of the book.

The lively discussive nature of the text is interrupted by Chapter Four that surveys and evaluates various models of complaints systems. The nature of this material is at times complex but it does allow the author to argue persuasively for a more integrated, holistic and proactive approach to the reform of complaints against police process.

Chapter Five heralds the more empirical part

of the book. Focusing on Australia the chapter highlights ways in which governments 'hinder effective oversight' through 'limiting activities' and under resourcing complaints bodies. The propensity of a government to 'starve oversight bodies' is, according to Lewis particularly prevalent when the oversight function of an agency extends to politicians (p93).

The significance of the relations between the executive government, the police and civilian oversight bodies and the need to take into account external relations in any subsequent discussion are demonstrated in the two case studies from Queensland that constitute Chapters Six and Nine.

Queensland's first attempt to establish civilian oversight of complaints against police, the Police Complaints Tribunal (PCT) was, according to Lewis, a 'dismal failure' (p100), largely due to the inappropriate relationship between the government and the police. The chapter provides the background for the establishment of the PCT in 1983 and details the factors that contributed to its demise in 1987. One of the particular strengths of this book is the lucid and lively way Lewis has clarified and integrated the complexities of Queensland State politics with the way in which the PCT was 'captured by the police and government' (p119). Lewis combines the various strands of political intent, police resistance and ineffective bureaucracy to provide a very readable and effective rendition of the period.

Chapters Seven and Eight provide the context for the establishment of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), 'the most innovative oversight body yet established' (p131). For those familiar with Queensland politics, the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the subsequent Report, much of this will be well known. For those readers unfamiliar with the details, the chapters provide a clear, concise account of a period that has become something of a watershed in Queensland politics.

The final chapter demonstrates the difficulties experienced by an organisation whose function, while primarily focused on police misconduct and corruption, extends to the oversight of politicians. Politicians are sensitive to criticism, particularly when cornered, and

have often chosen to blame the messenger. It is this, Lewis argues that is the CJC's major problem. This chapter takes in the Mundingburra by-election and the inquiries (Carruthers, Bingham, Connolly-Ryan) that arose out of the controversy surrounding the events leading up to the election. Like the earlier case study, the chapter unscrambles the complexities of the various issues remarkably well.

As Lewis acknowledges in her conclusion, 'because of its unusual jurisdiction' the CJC case study is a "more severe example of oversight body-government relations' (p182). This is true. As Lewis recounts the events surrounding the Mundingburra by election and what she calls the Coalition government's 'attempts to destroy the CJC' (p159) it is hard to believe that the holistic approach attributed to the CJC by the author can help ease tensions between the organisation the government and police and ensure the 'long term success of the civilian oversight process' (p5). More focused bodies are surely more desirable: that is one lesson that can be drawn from its analysis.

Overall the book provides a systematic, well researched account of civilian oversight bodies

and the serious problems associated with their operation. The author clarifies without oversimplifying these problems. The complexities are such that they are not readily amenable to straightforward solutions and point to the need for further research.

For example, more case studies like the Mundingburra affair would illuminate the relationships between civilian oversight organisations, police and governments. An issue such as under resourcing which Lewis sees as a strategy for limiting the activities of civilian oversight bodies (p93) may be considerably more complex. Many public sector organisations are under resourced and not necessarily because governments have ulterior motives to constrain their effectiveness.

Complaints against Police: The Politics of Reform, is the first major interdisciplinary examination of the topic. Its level of analysis and empirical detail makes it a valuable resource for future students, researchers and policy makers.

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