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Policing's New Vulnerability

Re-envisioning Local Accountability in an Era of Global Outrage

Andrew Goldsmith and Eugene McLaughlin

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that globally networked activism such as that triggered by the murder of George Floyd has dramatically amplified, and consequently rendered processes of police reform and accountability more vulnerable to exogenous influences. Recently witnessed activism in this sphere derives much of its significance from the ability to leverage the latest audio-visual technologies and social media platforms. The Black Lives Matter protests demonstrate how these technologies and platforms make flashpoint images of violent policing visible to diverse, global audiences in an extraordinary manner. Using the examples of Australia and the United Kingdom, we argue that these viral images have the capacity to 'collapse contexts' and radically disrupt policing in the places to which they migrate. The complicated impact of migrating flashpoint images of violent policing from 'over there' to 'over here' necessitates urgent analysis and debate.

Key Words: Black Lives Matter, context collapse, flashpoint images, police accountability, racism, social media

Introduction

In this paper, we explore some implications of recent global activism on policing in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, USA. Our specific focus relates to the diffusion effects from this focusing event upon police accountability and reform outside the United States, and particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom. How this occurs, and what are the implications, are our key questions. There has been, we suggest, a transfer of 'outrage and hope' (Castells 2015) about the future of policing from the USA to other countries across the globe. There is something novel and important, but also perplexing , we argue here, in how 'new ways of gathering together and getting things done' (Shirky 2011) are impacting upon the police reform agenda outside, as well as inside, the USA (cf Kennedy 2020). The processes currently embroiling police politics at a local level are globally networked and are pressing for changes of principle. They are no longer tethered to incremental reforms. There are disadvantages, as well as valuable opportunities, associated with these diffusions that necessitate critical debate.

Diffusion of police reform processes transnationally as well as domestically has expanded rapidly. These transnational policing processes have typically been driven by policy elite networks in major Western states, among which the USA has long been prominent (Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007). Many of the topics for diffusion have been technical in nature (eg training, equipment) or reflected changing operational priorities (eg community policing, zero

tolerance policing, counter-terrorism, drug trafficking). By comparison, the policy fields of race and policing and police violence have tended to remain predominantly locally anchored, and often afforded little sustained focus by comparison with their more frequent prominence in the USA. However, largely underpinned by social media, the policing mediascape has become globalised and partially detached from the policy elites, impacting upon local police reform debates and perceptions of police accountability in new and often unpredictable ways. The footage showing police officer Derek Chauvin pinning George Floyd to the ground for nearly ten minutes with Floyd protesting that he cannot breathe has become an iconic image of police callousness (Olesen, 2016; Hariman and Lucaites, 2018; Neumayer and Rossi, 2018;), one provoking a global outcry and demands for change (Castells 2015: 254-255). This globally witnessed death, recorded by Darnella Frazier on her smartphone, prompted unprecedented protests linked to racist policing. Black Lives Matter (BLM) demands for the police to be 'defunded' and 'abolished' are being replicated elsewhere, throwing local police practices and processes of accountability into sharp relief. A critical question is whether the context switching reflected in these diffusion processes is necessarily salutary and 'fit for purpose' at the local level? The speed of diffusion, and the near instantaneous transfer of 'outrage and hope' from one site to another, pose risks that potentially may be counter-productive. We consider this issue further below.

The processes of digitally driven diffusion we examine are not entirely new. The history of BLMn the US is one closely linked since its formation in 2013 to the use of sites such as Twitter to build coalitions and support for its agenda within the USA(Mundt, Ross and Burnett 2018; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). However, building upon earlier cases such as Michael Brown, the symbol of George Floyd has globalised, pointing to what Alexander (2007: 372) calls 'condensed and transcendental cultural logics' around policing. The shared embrace of slogans (such as 'Black Lives Matter', 'Justice for George Floyd', 'I can't breathe', "Say his name!" and 'taking a knee') gesture to new forms of cosmopolitan solidarity and 'we-ness' that challenge previous ways of conceptualising police reform activism. Seven years ago, Martin (2013: 174) presciently observed, 'Heightened use of new communication technologies enables images of police repression, protester violence, and semi-militarized confrontation to be immediately transmitted to a global audience, placing a premium on political impression management by the actors involved.' (see also, Brucato, 2015; Casas and Williams, 2018). When 'flashpoint images' go viral they have the potential to radically disrupt policing in the places to which they migrate. This is the essence of what we are calling policing's *new vulnerability*.

While we expand further in the next section, the idea of policing's new vulnerability refers to vulnerabilities arising from context switching between different jurisdictions and states. Social media scholars have drawn attention to what they call 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd 2011; Davis and Jurgenson 2014), which sees the flattening of multiple audiences into a single context. Critical differences often disappear, to be replaced by a larger homogenised whole. Globalised outrage, we argue, has the potential to distort and subvert specifically 'placed' processes of problem definition, democratic reform and accountability (Sunstein 2017). Moreover the 'symbolisation' within police politics threatens the ability not to prejudge issues of responsibility for filmed actions. . There is, the risk here, we argue, of digital degradation, the demonising or scapegoating of individuals at the expense of 'correcting the culpable' (Lageson and Maruna 2018). In the face of the circulation of flashpoint images and

the aggregated outraged reactions of global audiences, it is important to acknowledge that 'a few minutes of chaos and violence can contain a universe of confusing events and dynamics' (Sullivan, 2020). Contextualising and verifying what is happening and why, and responding constructively, becomes more difficult in 'overheated times' (Eriksen and Hober 2016).

The remainder of the paper progresses as follows. In Section 2, we examine the processes of global visibility and virality in play in shaping police politics locally. The effects of communication technologies upon messaging and representation of issues, the formation of new politicised socialities, and the risks from mediation are discussed briefly. The positive, and negative sides of this mediated new 'togetherness' (Castells, 2015: 253) are outlined. In Section 3, we look more broadly at the globalisation of civil rights and anti-racism activism, and how it has engulfed policing. Sections 4 and 5 examine the recent experiences in Australia and the United Kingdom respectively in terms of a diffusion of police politics, linked and prompted most recently by the Floyd case, from the USA to these two countries. The balance between principled change and more incremental reforms is considered in each case. Then, in Section 6, we ask what police accountability and police reform might look like in the post-Floyd era for countries outside the USA. As noted above, there is an emergent consensus in the USA that instrumental police reforms are not enough (Butler, 2020; Camp and Heatherton 2016; Smith 2020; Vitale 2017). In countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, will there be comparable campaigns to defund or dismantle police organisations in their present form? What changes, if any, will be adopted in the interests of improved public safety as well as credible forms of police accountability?

The primary aim of this study was to track the unfolding reaction to the death of George Floyd in Australia and the UK, with a particular focus on examining the police response to the 'repertoires of contention' disseminated by BLM USA. The paper is rooted in an analysis of the following sources: the extant literature on race and policing; news-media reporting; commentary pieces; the Twitter accounts of campaign groups and police organisations; police statements and official

'A hashtag isn't just a hashtag': visibility, virality and vulnerability

The death of George Floyd achieved massive *secondary visibility* (Goldsmith 2010) not least through social media networks, transforming a single incident and its local impact into a reverberating global media spectacle. This new visibility coincided with, and was enabled in large measure by, the *virality* around the image. Virality is a 'social information flow process' that circulates a particular item of information, here the mobile-phone footage of George Floyd's death , across numerous social networks, generating a high degree of collective resonance (Nahon and Hemslsey 2013: 16; Goldenberg and Gross 2020). These viral events contribute, we suggest, to an escalation process in which acts of solidarity proliferate in part due to processes of *transvaluation* that assimilate particular events, including the circulation of flashpoint images, into "a larger collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest" (Tambiah 1996: 192; also Hojer, Kublitz, Puri and Bandak 2018). The collective resonance of the Floyd footage in part can be attributed to the 'identifiable victim' effect, whereby the (now) recognisable individual, George Floyd, enables more immediate and vivid social media cut-through in terms of audience reach, engagement, identification

and empathetic response, compared for example, to a boatload of unnamed refugees (Lee and Feeley, 2016).

Emotionally charged images of this kind trigger an outraged reaction that transcends place and culture, what we are calling *flashpoint images:*

> George's death wasn't like the others. It stuck. I think it was the offending police officer's audacity that shook us. The nerve to murder someone in front of our eyes. It was his stubborn, unrelenting unwillingness to ease the pressure on Floyd's neck that stopped us in our tracks. His calm versus George's rising panic. It felt so heartless. It was so heartless (Smith, 2021).

The near-instantaneous formation of networked publics in response to flashpoint images contributes to the emergence of new forms of online sociality on a much grander scale with all the uncertainties that such scaling-up implies (Hojer et al 2018), including the stripping away of particulars and the conflation of interests.

Digital virality contributes to greater institutional vulnerability by destabilising customary points of reference for sense-making and decision-making. New forms of communion as well as the proliferation of new lines of communication, taking place at breakneck speed, produce sudden and unanticipated context-switches as well as inducing decisional vertigo (cf Keen 2005). What is shared and communicated across contexts and within online communities is not dependent on careful curation and confidence that one's audience shares one's values or worldviews. An update on Facebook or Twitter retweet, for example, can be described as a prime example of *re-entextualisation*, a process by which a sample of text is 'extracted from its original context-in-use and reinserted into a completely different one' (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 36). Institutions, such as policing agencies, are struggling to deal with social media audiences that can be viewed as being 'at once over-imagined and underdetermined' (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 42). Under such conditions, the transfer of 'moral certainties' from one context to another risks the imposition of 'hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms' (Ackerman et al 2020). The dynamics of *outrage cascades*, 'viral explosion[s] […] of moral judgment and disgust' (Munn 2020: 5), can degrade the ability to distinguish the 'truly heinous from the merely disagreeable.' No matter how appropriate, hot flows of outrage may increase social polarization by 'further dehumanizing the targets of outrage' (Crockett 2017: 771). The targets can be institutions as well as individuals or groups. The damage to reputations and well-being from Twitter storms and trail by media (Vasterman 2018), documented in a number of well-publicised cases, point to the threat to proportionality and fairness in the treatment, for example, of police officers accused of misconduct. Ironically, the public shaming or stigmatisation of individual police officers through social media can be a form of accountability that eradicates all notion of due process.

In short, a large part of policing's new vulnerability lies in the unfiltered assimilation of contexts and situations of problematic or otherwise contested police actions from one country to another. Breaking out beyond the confines of Black communities in the USA, the success of BLM 'elsewhere', in places such as Australia and the UK (as we outline below), in part points to a form of global 'homological imagination' (Nadir 2012) whereby audiences elsewhere, white in many instances as well as Black, identify with accounts of Black people

experiencing violent injustice at the hands of 'the police'. In the processes of transvaluation and escalation, the implications of context switching are significant requiring critical analysis. As we explain further in the following sections, there is no question that context switching now present a new set of dilemmas for local police and police reformers to respond to. Plotting a pathway forward under these circumstances will require, we suggest, recognising points of legitimate convergence in terms of challenges and remedial actions, while preserving points of genuine contextual and situational divergence and insisting on devising local responses to these divergent challenges. Re-imagining the local however will inevitably require engagement with the transnational and the global policing and wider justice imaginaries.

The globalisation of Black Lives Matter

For countries such as Australia and the UK, the diffusion of Black political influence from the US predates the emergence of BLM. In Australia these influences have been visible in the form of deliberate emulation of the 'Freedom Rides' of the 1960s in parts of New South Wales in 1965 and the formation of Aboriginal Black Power groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Briscoe 2013; Foley, Howell and Schapp 2013; Shilliam, 2015). In the UK, there has been a continual transfer of anti-racism activism across the 'Black Atlantic' as well as wider international de-colonialist struggles (Baker,1987; Gilroy, 1993; Angelo, 2009; Grant, 2020). Replicating the dominant directionality and strong influence of Black US popular culture on other cultures, this global traffic of Black political influence has been mainly, though not solely, one way. However, as noted earlier, the coalescence of social media accessibility with controversial cases of police perpetrated killings such as Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Eric Garner and Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin generating activist networks across Black but also other communities in the US. (Harris, 2015; Lebron, 2017; Khan Cullors and Bandele 2017; Coates, 2015: Lowery 2017; Ransby, 2018). The BLM hashtag transformed into the intersectional and rhizomatic co-ordination of nation-wide protests against racial stratification and police violence that stitched together into a global network.

The growing momentum lent growing anger and pro in response to further instances of video-recorded police violence, and credence in the wider public eye to the spectrum of injustices perpetrated through policing:

> These shootings weren't news in the conventional sense: they were neither rare nor a recent phenomenon. They were news because the combined impact of social media and video evidence forced a reckoning with a reality with which African Americans were all too familiar. (Younge, *Guardian*, 23 November 2019)

The irrefutable visual evidence of how George Floyd died ignited the most serious civil unrest in the US since the late 1960s. In the two weeks after Floyd's death, it is estimated that more than 2,000 demonstrations were held across all 50 states making the multi-stranded BLM the largest protest movement in US history (*New York Times*, 13 June, 2020; 3 July 2020). The violent policing of the protests spawned further protests. For Williams (2019:370) social movement activism is at its most powerful 'when it effectively names a pervasive injury and the inequality that sustains it, when it consolidates communication about the injury, and when it inspires action and reform.' As a result of BLM activism, police reform in the USA is now being debated through three lines of action – incrementalist; disinvestment

('defunding'); and abolitionism. Incrementalism continues to focus on improving the operation of existing procedures and mechanisms as well as modest procedural evolution. Examples include: regulating 'use of force' tactics; ban life-threatening restraint techniques; requiring officers to wear body cameras; insisting on implicit-bias training; demilitarising policing; greater use of civilian oversight boards; employing more minority police officers; implementing employment contracts that hold officers personally liable for misconduct, enabling the naming and decertification of problem officers; and modest rethinking of street policing practices (see Weitzer 2015; Ralph, 2020). By contrast, those advocating disinvestment ('defunding') intend to hit the police where it hurts, by re-allocating police resources to social and community services. Justice reinvestment is intended to force organisational change. Abolitionists view current militarised police arrangements as inherently opposed to Black and minority interests and unreformable. The entire edifice of 'police reform' is a sham, camouflaging the explosive growth of an authoritarian police-carceral regime. A wider, deeper reset is needed, to reduce the insecurity of those who are currently left unprotected or victimised by the police. This includes the dismantling the police-carceral complex (Camp and Heatherton, 2016; Kaba, 2020; Khan-Cullers and Bandele 2017; McDowell and Fernandez, 2018; Vitale, 2017)

In the USA, demands for 'an end to policing as we know it' have mainstreamed. The widespread uptake of slogans and memes supportive of (at least some) BLM aims by politicians, celebrities, influencers, cultural and sports institutions and corporations has deepened the potential implications and shape of police reform in that country. In what follows next, we look at the impact and influence of BLM context switching in Australia and the UK.

This is/not America: George Floyd and Australian policing

The video footage of Floyd's arrest and death reached Australia quickly, sparking and provoking a range of responses. These included public statements in the mainstream and social media linking in various ways the event in the US to situations and incidents in Australia that were seen to be analogous. The history of police-Indigenous relations is a long, fraught and frequently violent one, partly responsible for triggering a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody [RCIADC] in 1987. With the Final Report released 30 years ago (RCIADC 1991), there remains ongoing concern among many Indigenous persons and commentators that many of the underlying issues remain unresolved (AIC 2019; Cunneen 2020). This consciousness provided, as we show below, a hook for many to see resemblances between BLM's agenda and Indigenous concerns in Australia. The responses to the Floyd incident also included public protests across major and regional cities of Australia. These started within days of Floyd's death, and continued over following months. Detectable or visible in the public statements and protests by activists in Australia have been slogans, images and gestures reminiscent of, or direct borrowings from BLM messaging and particularly relating to the circumstances of Floyd's death. The most striking symbol of shared predicament came in the form of the repeated use of the phrase, 'I can't breathe'' by an Indigenous prisoner, David Dungay in December 2015 in the course of being held in a chokehold in a Sydney prison cell. This remarkable coincidence with the Floyd case, made recognisable to Australian audiences by a video recording of the restraining of Dungay,

provided an obvious way for local audiences to link the two cases and to revive memories of Dungay's death. The phrase itself was taken up as part of the repertoire of gestures used in many Australian protests post-Floyd. There were other analogies drawn between Floyd and the deaths of Indigenous persons, though none displayed such evocative similarities.

The Dungay case provides a very clear example of significant context collapse or switching in which the nature of the collapse might be said in some ways to be divisive rather than persuasive in its effects. While the US setting involved police and the death of a Black man in the street, Dungay's case, as noted already, occurred inside a prison and involved prison officers. For many Australians, Dungay's case was a reminder of a longstanding concern about Indigenous deaths in custody of all kinds, not limited particularly to police. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which reported on this topic 30 years ago still resonates strongly for many critics of the Australian criminal justice system (Langton 2020); its ongoing salience for many has provided an anchoring point for meshing of local campaigning with US racial politics around policing. The assimilation of US racialized policing with broader Australian critiques of Indigenous overrepresentation across the criminal justice system was in no small measure buttressed by the coincident use of ''I can't breathe'' in the final moments of both Dungay's and Floyd's lives. In such rapid and often dramatic conflations, there is inevitably some glossing over of differences between the two settings (eg prior histories of police-community relations), as well as in terms of the details of the respective cases (eg situational factors, individual health histories) and the likely or actual targets for attribution of responsibility and institutional reform (police, prisons, other agency). To some extent, the outrage generated becomes generalised, and sometimes misinformed and misdirected. For example, Australian police, in comparison to their US counterparts (Edwards, Lee and Esposito 2019), rarely shoot anyone, Indigenous, Black or otherwise. Over eleven years (2006-2017), official records indicate Australian police shot 47 persons; only 2 of which were recorded as Indigenous victims (Australian Institute of Criminology 2020). Indigenous deaths in police custody from any means are relatively uncommon; in the period 1991 to 2016, there were 64 such deaths recorded, an average of four or five cases nationally per year, with just one case nationally in one year (AIC 2019: 9). In the same period there were 247 Indigenous deaths in prison from a variety of causes.

In this and other instances post-Floyd, one can see examples of what Alexander (2007) calls *referential slippage*. In the process, as we have seen, the occasion is presented for a broader critique of police despite some significant differences in the policing of Black and Indigenous communities in the two countries. For example, the head of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service was quoted on 18 June as stating, 'We cannot be silent while police violence is unchecked and continues to kill our people.'' This comment was made in response to NSW police attempts to limit the number and scale of some post-Floyd BLM protests in Sydney (Human Rights Law Centre 2020). While generating shared outrage and fostering expressions of solidarity, such examples of slippage potentially also imperil the operation of institutional accountability mechanisms through encouraging distrust of those mechanisms by some participants or mistargeted expectations on the part of others. Deaths in prison custody cannot be remedied by police reform alone and indeed some prison deaths will remain unavoidable. The record of police forces in reducing deaths in police custody in the past 30 years is overlooked, as is the distinction between police and prison custody. These slippages, often done intentionally or casually for political effect, also promote division and make consensus more difficult, as well as promoting antagonism among those deemed 'guilty

by association.' As well as promoting misconceptions and accentuating division, context switching can, ironically, contribute to a loss of local perspective, as local voices and interests are overshadowed or skewed in the context of a new preoccupation with the language and symbolism of BLM US signage, slogans, and politics (Anthony 2020).

An Australian case more analogous to Floyd's is that of Kumanjayi Walker, an Indigenous man shot by police in the Northern Territory on 9 November 2019. In part, this case makes the point that analogies between the US and Australia predate the death of Floyd. It is alleged that Walker first stabbed Constable Zachary Rolfe with a pair of scissors before being fatally shot three times by Rolfe. The incident took place at Yuendemu, a remote Indigenous community. The response by the Northern Territory Police, Rolfe's employer, was fast and decisive. Senior police attended a community meeting to try to allay concerns within the Indigenous community. Those concerns were partly framed explicitly by BLM awareness, with news footage of the meeting showing BLM signage on the walls of the meeting room. The system's response also included the NT police commissioner making a public statement on 11 November, just two days after Walker's death, indicating that the investigation into his death would be independently oversighted by a combination of the Territory's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and the Western Australia Police (ABC 2020). This proposed structure is significant, reflecting a clear desire to signal that the case would be handled impartially. However, on 12 and 13 November, the ICAC chief, Ken Fleming, participated in Walker-related protest marches in Darwin and Alice Springs. In both protests, media coverage confirms the presence of BLM signage carried by Indigenous protesters. However, his impartiality was soon questioned after he stated publicly on 13 November, 'One of the most important messages today is: 'black lives matter'…anyone who says contrary to that is guilty of corrupt behaviour' (Mandarin 2019). Almost immediately, Fleming's comments drew criticism of perceived partiality on his part within government and from some police, a criticism he accepted by withdrawing himself from the case (Northern Territory 2019).

Just four days after the shooting, Rolfe was charged with murder. He was only the second police officer since the early 1980s anywhere in Australia to be charged in their capacity as a police officer with murder or manslaughter. He was granted bail and on 26 October 2020, four months after Floyd's death and the subsequent charging of Officer Derek Chauvin for Floyd's murder, he was committed for trial for the murder of Walker. The other case, of a police officer in Western Australia, related to the shooting death of an Indigenous woman, Joyce Clarke, on 17 September 2019; again, a case predating Floyd, but similarly to the Walker case, one also marked by protests explicitly invoking BLM, alongside signs of 'Justice for Joyce' (ABC 2020). Several noteworthy factors arise here; in the case of both Floyd and Walker, the officers involved were charged very soon after the deaths, in both cases, four days. By contrast, the WA case involving the death of Clarke, the unnamed police officer was charged some five months after Clarke's death, a delay that the police commissioner felt obliged to justify in response to public criticism. Also of note is that the WA officer was the first police officer in that state in 93 years to be charged with murder in the line of duty (ABC 2020), while as noted, Walker's charges were the first of their kind in many decades anywhere in Australia. The juxtaposition of BLM-inspired protests in response to Indigenous deaths at the hands of police and the (almost unheard of) resort to charging of officers implicated in Indigenous deaths with murder is hard to ignore, suggesting some context switching. As we see also

below, the overtness, heightened sensitivity, and speed of official reactions in such cases cannot be separated from awareness of BLM and Floyd-inspired anger.

Some forms of context switching are less ambiguous in their connotations, and thus less likely to promote division. Some forms are conspicuously positive. Diffusion often generates new insights for other settings, which are in search of novel ideas. Diffusion can also be two-way; as well as messages moving from the 'centre' to the 'periphery', those at the periphery can sometimes inform and influence the primary agents of diffusion (Della Porta and Tarrow 2012). Face to face contact is often a key element in this reciprocal influencing process (Brescia 2020). An example is provided by the November 2017 visit by BLM US leaders Patrisse Cullors and Rodney Diverlus to Australia. Invited to come to receive the Sydney Peace Prize on behalf of BLM, they were also able to visit some Indigenous communities. On one meeting held in Mildura in the state of Victoria, the BLM guests were told about the operation of Indigenous (Koori) courts in that community. In these courts, there are key roles for Indigenous representatives in participating in the findings and sentences of the court. BLM founder Cullors expressed open admiration for the operation of the Koori Court, describing it as 'really revolutionary and powerful,' something not found in the US and 'something I've only dreamed of' (SPF 2017). BLM leaders might equally also have been exposed to other local effort to 'decolonise' policing and the use of imprisonment, such as the use of Community policing patrols in lieu of regular police (Blagg and Anthony 2014; Porter 2016) and Justice Reinvestment programs (AIC 2018; Cunneen 2020). Each of these areas are ones in which there has been local innovation and progress in ways unrelated or only indirectly related to developments in the US or indeed elsewhere.

Across Australia, post-Floyd, it has been possible to document the impact of the Floyd case upon police statements and actions, some pointing to sympathy and concern for the deeply held feelings of injustice among many Indigenous persons and their non-Indigenous allies. In several cities, frontline police officers engaged in the policing of BLM-linked protests were observed to express solidarity with protesters in various ways, significantly including the 'taking a knee' gesture along with protesters. Through dialogue between police and members of the community, the implications of BLM and the Floyd death provide stimulus for deepened communication including expressions of intent. A senior police officer, Assistant Commissioner Parrott, directly acknowledged that the protests both in South Australia and elsewhere had prompted the SA police to 'refocus' and 'question' their approach to the policing of Indigenous communities. He said that while he could understand why some local Indigenous persons would feel resonance with the US movement, he was concerned that if its agenda and priorities were taken out of context, it would make trust locally between communities and the police more difficult. That said however, he admitted that the police needed to re-address the problems arising in current and past relationships and acknowledged that more effort was required to recruit officers from Indigenous backgrounds. In addition, a new 'reconciliation action plan' was being developed in which recruitment from the Indigenous communities would be a priority. Around the same time, in response to footage of several police officers restraining an Indigenous man, the Commissioner announced publicly that the officers concerned would be withdrawn from patrol work pending an internal investigation into the incident. At the press conference at which these steps were announced, the Commissioner acknowledged that, post-Floyd, he expected officers to be 'highly vigilant' in their dealings with members of the Indigenous community (Channel 7 2020).

Summing up, it remains early days in terms of assessing the scope as well as robustness of any changes of attitude or practice in policing/Indigenous relations in Australia from the BLM/Floyd phenomenon. Arguably, there has not been fundamental reform of any kind in the short timeframe since Floyd's death. Nonetheless, as we will also see in the discussion of UK developments, there have been some tangible expressions or markers of influence, both positive and concerning.

This is/not America: George Floyd and UK Policing

Footage of George Floyd's death produced an immediate reaction within Britain's Black communities, re-energising and galvanising BLM UK and myriad campaigning groups. In defiance of the Covid pandemic lockdown ban on public gatherings, George Floyd protests took place outside the US Embassy in London on 28th May 2020, with a range of BLM inspired slogans and actions including 'taking a knee'. Further mass protests calling for an end to police brutality. took place across the country for four consecutive weekends, capturing the news agenda and generating heated public debate. On the weekend of 30-31 May, 'Justice for George Floyd', 'Kneel for Floyd' and 'The UK is not innocent' protests took place. In London, thousands of people protested in Trafalgar Square and outside the US Embassy. However, in addition to expressing outrage about George Floyd the protestors highlighted three intersecting instances of 'institutional racism' in Britain, namely: racialised policing; racialised state neglect across multiple institutions; and the unaddressed legacies of Britain's imperialist past. BLM UK used acts of police violence in the US to draw attention to racist policing practices in the UK. Context switching united George Floyd with Black British lives 'stolen' as a result of fatal interactions with the police, most notably Mark Duggan and Rashan Charles, as well as Stephen Lawrence, the touchstone instance of institutionalised police racism (Cottle, 2004). Protests about racist policing and a labyrinthine, ineffective police complaints system that reinforced police impunity were co-joined with allegations of racialised state neglect. As in the US, BLM UK framed racism and coronavirus as co-joined 'deadly pandemics.' This was in response to data showing BAME people in the UK were nearly twice as likely to die of the disease as white people. BLM UK also incorporated the politically potent 'Justice4Grenfell' and 'Justice for Windrush Now' campaigns. Re-activating a campaign to remove statues of slavers from the nation's commemorative landscape, likewise amplified the newsworthiness of the BLM protests, pivoting public attention towards the nation's involvement with the transatlantic slave trade.

As noted above, given the Covid lockdown restrictions and BLM UK's street protests, the critical question was how would the police respond? Police leaders deployed two strategies, appeasement and disassociation to reframe and refute criticism. Senior officers from different forces responded straightaway issuing individual statements condemning George Floyd's death, On 3rd June, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) published a statement declaring

> We stand alongside all those across the globe who are appalled and horrified by the way George Floyd lost his life. Justice and accountability should follow. We are also appalled to see the violence and damage that has happened in so many US cities since

then. Our hearts go out to all those affected by these terrible events and hope that peace and order will soon be restored.

The NPCC also disconnected British policing from US policing, emphasising the obvious operational and contextual differences between the two systems and beatifying: the 'long-established tradition' of policing by consent and accountability; adherence to unarmed policing and the principle of minimum force; and a commitment to tackling 'bias, racism or discrimination wherever we find it'. The NPCC statement also acknowledged the right to protest, but during the pandemic, asked for the public's cooperation in observing limits on public gatherings.

However, protestor and police public order tactics in London in particular, followed a predictable trajectory, generating footage of: violent disorder; snatch squads and mounted police charges; the use of the contentious spatial control tactics; and officers seemingly protecting far right counter demonstrators. However, there was also remarkable footage of police officers: pressurised into 'take a knee' by chanting protestors; retreating from protestors; and standing by, seemingly helpless, as government buildings and historical monuments and statues were graffitied and vandalised. A turning point was reached on June 7th when the statue of slave trader and philanthropist Edward Colston was spontaneously toppled in Bristol and thrown into the harbour. This act, recalling attacks on Confederate memorials in the US, generated complaints from conservative politicians that 'woke' policing policies had ceded control of streets to lockdown-defying rioters and vandals. The police were now at the centre of the UK's culture wars.

It is not yet clear as to whether BLM UK can translate its protest energy into a sustained reform agenda. The core message of racialised injustice has resonated in a compelling fashion, enabling it to reach beyond activist circles and transferring its demands into more favourable arenas. Its visual imaginary and rallying slogans are now embedded within the broader cultural matrix. A government commission on racial and ethnic disparities was also established. In addition, BLM has sparked an unexpected national conversation about Britain's historical role in the transatlantic slave trade and the politics of public commemoration. At the time of writing, it is harder to discern a tangible impact on UK police policies and practices. BLM USA demands for justice reinvestment or abolition of the police have had little to no airing (Joseph–Salisbury, 2020). In fact, police empowerment in the form of extra resources, new powers and acquisition of coercive control technologies has occurred. However, in re-igniting debate about institutionalised police racism, BLM UK has amplified the campaigning voices of local victims of police bias and discrimination. There has also been a demand for the abolition of the 'toothless' Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). This, 'calling out' on 'institutional racism', in turn, continues to produce a contradictory police response. The NPCC announced a 'plan of action' to address racial inequalities in the criminal justice system concerns over stop and search, racial disparities in the use of force and under-representation of BAME officers.

However, BLM UK protests have also resurfaced internal divisions demonstrating that the Macpherson report's finding of 'institutional racism' still haunts the police. As the crisis unfolded, Cressida Dick, Britain's most senior police officer, drew a line in the sand, rejecting allegations of 'institutional racism'. She deployed a classic 'that was then, this is now' narrative stressing that the Metropolitan Police had "come such a very, very, very long way"

since the Macpherson Report. 'Institutional racism' is viewed as a restrictive characterisation that undermines officer morale and operational effectiveness, living little room for improvements. Institutional resilience depends on rigid reinforcement of a 'rotten apple' conceptualization of racism. However, a flurry of video recordings of Metropolitan Police stop and search police actions, past and present, circulated, posing fresh questions about racial profiling. In July 2020 Team GB sprinter Bianca Williams and athlete partner Ricardo dos Santos were stopped by the Metropolitan Police. Video footage of this encounter attracted 1.2m views on Twitter after being posted by her coach, the former Olympic champion Linford Christie, with the tag: 'Racist police aren't just in America'. As a result of analysing a range of audio-visual and witness statements, five police officers subsequently faced an IOPC misconduct investigation for potentially contravening standards of professional behaviour and treating the couple 'less favourably because of their race'. The following month, Labour MP Dawn Butler and former shadow minister for equalities, accused the Metropolitan Police of racial profiling after she and a friend were stopped. The incident was also video recorded with officers defending the stop on the grounds that they were tackling 'gang and knife crime'. Butler said

> In the light of Black Lives Matter, what we are trying to do is dismantle the structural racism that takes place. Macpherson said that the Met Police is institutionally racist. Cressida Dick doesn't like that term - that is not something that she should be saying. What she should be saying is 'I lead an organisation that is still institutionally racist after 20 years, I need to stop that. I need to cut that institutional racism out of the Met force and will do whatever it takes. That is what she should be saying... and that is what she is not saying. (*London Evening Standard*, 10 August 2020)

Such incidents led Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Sir Steve House to complain that 'the increasingly routine trial by social media is unfair and damaging to individual officers and has the potential to undermine the role our communities need us to do to protect them and keep them safe from violence' (*Times*, 13 August 2020). The Metropolitan Police Federation also protested that officers were being vilified because of the reckless circulation of fabricated video clips of street encounters. By contrast, officers were not legally allowed to release their own bodycam footage to reveal the 'full story' behind these interactions

> Our officers and the public deserve to be treated fairly but to continue to choose to conduct a trial by social media is damaging, unfair and can lead to social tension which in the current climate is highly irresponsible (*Times,* 13 August 2020).

Cressida Dick's rejection of 'institutional racism' was questioned from within when former Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Patricia Gallan, the most senior Black woman in British policing, and Mike Fuller, Britain's first Black chief constable, declared that there was a 'racial justice crisis' within policing. Fuller stated that police-community relations were so strained that a George Floyd style incident could happen in the UK. In August 2020 the Metropolitan Police announced that the Stephen Lawrence investigation would be moved to an 'inactive phase'. Retired Metropolitan Police superintendent Leroy Logan, former head of the Black Police Association, tweeted: 'The crazy decision by Cressida Dick to shelve the Stephen Lawrence case couldn't come at a worst time [with] trust in police at its lowest for decades, especially during this time of the #BlackLivesMatter movement & she didn't have to do it. She doesn't care!' For Lee Jasper, former policing advisor to the Mayor of London

Police denial of institutionalised racism places a lid on the relational and emotional pressure cooker that constitutes relations between African and Caribbean heritage communities and police services. The longer we leave it on, the more pressure we build up. That pressure is becoming intolerable and will, at some point, explode onto our streets with devastating consequences (*Independent*, 13 October 2020)

In the next section we consider what the present contested politics of policing in Australia and the UK signal for the future of police accountability and reform.

Believing is seeing: Re-imagining 'Local' Police Accountability after Floyd

Policing has entered an era of 'new vulnerability' whereby vocabularies of reform and the urgent agency migrating from 'other places' are disrupting local perceptions of the police and policing and setting the agenda for what should be remedied, replaced or abandoned. This is compounded by the 'slippage' of discrete time periods, with their associated images of protest, into one another (Fisher: 2014: 5). Context switching is pushing and stretching the politics of policing in novel and challenging ways. In this increased local vulnerability to 'distant' representations of policing, there are both opportunities and risks for police reform and enhanced accountability.

In terms of the former, audio-visual technologies have been adopted as potential means of ensuring accountability and officer professionalism. The omnipresence of video recording means that policing now functions in a networked 'copwatching' media-scape (Block, 2016; Simonson, 2016). One of the most notable outcomes of the initial BLM USA protests was the introduction of the body worn camera (BWC). These devices were subsequently marketed as the 'ultimate witness', making policing more transparent and bolstering officer accountability (Fan 2019; White and Malm 2020). From a police perspective, the public would have a clearer picture of the realities of policing and courts would have access to irrefutable evidence against the accused. In addition, the 'observer effect' would ensure a reduction in the number of confrontational street encounters. However, such devices offer no quick technological fixes, especially where parallel footage taken by citizens challenges police accounts, or when, cameras fail to work. Aside from raising suspicions, police officers are now left more exposed in terms of accounting for both their own recorded and non-recorded actions as well as the contents of selfie-cam recordings (Sandhu and Haggerty, 2017; Clayton Newell 2019). Without the video recordings, it is unlikely that charges would have been filed against Derek Chauvin.

Another visible outcome from context switching is renewed levels of interest in mechanisms for investigating allegations of police brutality and killings. The relative rarity of police officers in many jurisdictions facing serious criminal charges may start to change as some recent Australian and UK cases suggest. The adequacy of external oversight mechanisms, at least by implication, has re-emerged in both Australia and the UK in the past few months; the coincidence with Floyd and local BLM events cannot be discounted as being without significance in this regard. It is not outside the bounds of possibility that concerns about potential bias in the handling of deaths of Black persons could lead to new investigative and approaches emphasising independence and thoroughness; the response to the death of Walker in the Northern Territory is just one instance of possible movement in this direction,

something that would directly respond to historical criticisms of police investigating police and the weakness of some oversight mechanisms, particularly in relation to cases arising within Black and Indigenous communities (Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody [RCIADC] 1991).

Two other areas of renewed incrementalism in the present climate are the areas of recruitment and training. Police forces in Australia and the UK are restating and showing signs of acting publicly their desire to recruit more BAME and Indigenous persons. Inevitably, use of force incidents captured on camera locally readily resonate with the flashpoint images of those victimised by the police. In addition to the familiar response of 'more' and 'better' training in the ways police use force, as well as consideration of less-than-lethal technologies as alternatives to lethal force measures, there looms the larger question of the appropriateness of police responding at all to some crimes or incidents. It is evident in some controversial cases of police violence that the person involved has a serious mental health problem. Many conflictual police-Black encounters might be avoided or handled differently. Apart from more or different training, there is the 'defunding' point (at least in part) that other agencies acquire responsibility for some of the tasks currently falling under the police mandate, and that police might concentrate on other problems. While it appears some places such as Australia have made some advances in these areas, recent local expressions of BLM-related sentiment arguably serve to remind those interested in police reform that more can be done in respect to these initiatives.

Turning to the risks of over-identification with the messaging and agendas flowing from BLM USA, one can equally posit risks at each of the three levels identified earlier. First, we should ensure that local police are accountable for their actions. The outrage directed at police should not be allowed to impinge upon the impartial operation of processes of investigation, prosecution, and grievance resolution. Empathy by itself 'is an insufficient condition for [real] solidarity as, without judgement, emotions tend to collapse either into sentimentalism, as in pity, or into self-absorption' (Chouliaraki 2013: 196). The legitimacy of these processes will likely continue to depend upon the effective provision of voice and other procedural rights to both the complainants and those accused or implicated in wrongdoing. In large measure, the 'new vulnerability' we have identified lies in the rapid migration of sentiments, judgements and demands originating in one place to the circumstances and participants in other places. Shared sentiments are not necessarily identical with collective predicaments. Decisions about the innocence or guilt of a particular police officer or police department implicated in acts of killing, violence or other dereliction of duty, or about reform gaps in policing, need to reflect more than shared global solidarity and spectator expressions of empathy.

This caution on our part is not to suggest that police reform agendas should be dominated or concerned exclusively with considerations for procedural, incremental improvements. Recent outrage has ensured that the 'genie' of wider police reform is now out of the 'bottle' in places such as Australia and the UK, unleashing consideration and revisiting of deeper and wider reform possibilities. As suggested already, if local communities favour greater interest and experimentation in areas such as diversion from the criminal justice system, and greater integration of mental health services with police and other social services, this will represent a quantum step forward in terms of improved responses to chronic challenges often falling to police by default or the neglect of others. It will also be an active expression of local democratic policing, rather than a submission to a larger, more abstract and oftentimes inadequately worked through and disconnected context switching agendas.

One can predict, therefore, that those seeking to 'abolish' the police inevitably encounter considerable political resistance. The case for doing so implies an abysmal relationship between some citizens and the police that defies other means of resolution. While serious unresolved issues continue to challenge police-community relations in both Australia and the UK, there have been areas of progress that point to important contextual variations from the US experience. There are also areas of demonstrated 'under-policing,' for example, of domestic violence in Indigenous and BAME communities. While state sanctioned police seem likely to remain central to addressing the security concerns of most citizens, Black, Indigenous or other, there is scope for further experimentation and implementation of pluralised and hybrid models, whereby other agencies and groups share responsibility for the co-production of public safety with the police (eg Wood and Shearing 2013; Porter 2016; Nockleberg 2020). As noted, these questions also resemble important pre-existing discussions around 'justice re-investment' whereby resources currently spent on prisons and traditional policing are diverted into local community programs designed to offer improved social and economic opportunities (Brown Cunneen, Schwartz, Stubbs, and Young 2016)

Conclusion

A multi-faceted network of globalised racial justice activism poses an unprecedented level of challenge to the police. The rhizomatic character of this network derives much of its significance from audio-visual recording technologies and social media platforms. These platforms have permitted the growth of policing's new visibility to diverse, global audiences on an extraordinary scale. 'Cop watching' now takes place in this interactive global social mediascape. Images, persons, symbols, critical incidents, and political agendas relating to policing 'anywhere' now migrate almost instantaneously roosting 'somewhere else'. Having reached this critical diffusion point, we are obliged to reckon with the implications of these changes for local policing. Articulating what 'better' policing could mean post-Floyd in Australia and the UK will be no easy task. First, police forces will always be vulnerable to high-risk service failures, either actual or perceived, because of their mandate and volatile working environments. And grievous 'historic' service failures continue to haunt contemporary policing, reinforcing that vulnerability.

Second, local police are now exposed to digitally driven pressures to change or even abandon current models of policing. Perceptions and problems of policing 'over there' routinely switch into divergent 'over here' contexts. The response to these re-encoded viral messages requires critical evaluation to ensure that proposed reforms reflect rather than short-circuit important local differences (Porter 2016). Our argument is not that there are no similarities to be found between places or that a shared sense of grievance leading to constitutive campaigning does not exist. As this paper demonstrates, context switching can serve an important double function: generating a sharp wake-up call for complacent police forces whilst catalysing a new generation of campaigners struggling to represent the 'unrepresentable'. Having said that, vexing questions remain about the diffusion of an Americanised global image of 'the police' as a fundamentally problematic institution. The potency of this totalising image makes it difficult for 'local' police forces to persuade a

sceptical or indeed hostile public that policing is not institutionally racist, that police recruitment actively encourages minorities to join, that operational policing is relying less, rather than more, upon lethal options, and that a culture of impunity does not exist. Subsequent research needs to focus on how 'local' police forces can demonstrate that 'this is not America'. And 'local' police forces are further hindered by their seeming inability to explain how racism operates in the construction of policing and why ever-expanding numbers of 'race and policing' reform initiatives fail. In lieu of credible policy actions, the geo-political reach of cross-cutting flashpoint images, such as that of George Floyd's death, have the potential to shred the reputations of 'local' police forces. All police forces/departments should take note of the activist guidance that appeared after the Derek Chauvin verdict: 'News Flash. Have your cell phone ready at all times to record all interactions with the police. Don't walk away, Stay. Record. Upload. Repeat. Thank you Darnella Frazier.#JusticeForGeorgeFloyd'.

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