

## **State Politics: Do We Really Need a Police Force?**

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*John Casey*

In anticipation of the installation in September of [Andrew Scipione](#) as the new NSW Police Commissioner, perhaps we can revisit some of the knee-jerk political posturing on policing from last year's pre-election period in NSW.

In May 2006, the recently installed Premier Morris Iemma announced that the law enforcement agency in his State would again be called the 'NSW Police Force.'

This decision was a reversal of the shift toward the idea of policing as a 'service.' (In 1990, the Greiner Government changed the name from NSW Police Force to 'NSW Police Service' to reflect the shift to a more community-based policing approach.)

Iemma's turnaround completed the work started by Michael Costa who allowed NSW Police to drop Service from the name in 2002. Costa and Iemma's fiddling with the name were pre-emptive strikes intended to stymie any Liberal Party attempt to gain the moral high ground on law and order politics.

The decision to bring back the 'Force' last year was widely applauded by those who claimed that, finally, NSW Police could again get tough on crime. These pundits argue that police in NSW have been hamstrung by a label more befitting social workers than crime fighters.

Force or Service? This is not a question asked only by woolly headed, soft-on-crime academics. It is the title of a 1981 book written by then Assistant Police Commissioner, and later Commissioner, John Avery.

Avery understood that modern policing was going through a fundamental change in its relationship with the citizens it serves. A more educated and wealthier community wanted to work with police to collaborate in crime prevention. The greater emphasis on a community focus also made good operational sense. Despite media images of intrepid sleuths following mysterious clues, most crime is solved by criminals being dobbed in by civilians.



Thanks to [emo](#).

Good relations with the public are essential to ensure the continued flow of information needed for arrests and convictions — particularly as the old practices of beating confessions out of suspects or ‘[verballing](#)’ false confessions have been all but eliminated. And if police are to respond effectively to possible flashpoints of urban tensions they must have the confidence of community leaders.

The shift to ‘service’ was then, and continues to be now, part of a global trend. Last year I attended a US Department of Justice workshop for police chiefs titled ‘Hiring in the spirit of service.’

The workshop encouraged police departments (no US law enforcement agency has the word ‘force’ in its title) to re-brand recruitment campaigns to emphasise service to the community rather than firearms and fast cars, and to cultivate a service culture among its officers.

The introduction to the Department of Justice course materials justified the service orientation in the following terms: ‘The [other] orientation, that involves resorting to intimidation, inevitably produces a distancing from the community and creates negative stereotypes that result in the all too familiar *we/they* syndrome.’

But NSW has decided to go in the opposite direction. It now has the only Force in Australia. Only one State, Queensland, currently has a Police Service. Other States have simply Police, but Victoria Police and South Australia Police are divided into Service Areas.

In fact, NSW is probably the only jurisdiction in the developed, English-speaking world that still calls its law enforcement agency a Force, and certainly the only one in 20 years that has returned to that

name.

There are already consequences. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many officers are reveling in the return to the more 'macho' image and are resorting to more aggressive tactics.

The long-term consequence may be that those who might give information about crime will refuse to talk to a Force they regard with increasing hostility. And when the next Cronulla, Macquarie Fields or Redfern riot occurs, community leaders may be even less inclined to dialogue with a Force to help calm the tension.

Does NSW really need a Force?

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**About the author:**

**John Casey** is co-editor of *Police Leadership and Management* published by Federation Press.

He has recently been appointed as Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York. Formerly he was a Senior Lecturer at the Australian Graduate School of Policing, Charles Sturt University.

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