



# “Self-praise is no praise at all”

**T**hese words are perhaps the most simple analysis of the recent publication of the report ‘Transforming An Garda Síochána 2018-

2024.’ While corporate communication, media launches and the use of social media by statutory bodies are nothing new, the publication of the report and the use of precious operational Garda resources to promote such a blatant, subjective example of correcting one’s own homework, marked a new threshold being crossed. The timing, content and manner of the report’s publication was yet another example of the disconnect and denial, if not hypocrisy, that has become embedded in the management culture of our nation’s police service.

Transparency and accountability are cornerstones of ensuring that policing maintains its legitimacy and credibility in any democracy. The Garda Commissioner has a statutory obligation to produce reports and appear before a number of forums to justify and account for decisions made in relation to the management of the organisation. It has been stated in the past that the level of scrutiny and obligation to satisfy the myriad of layers of oversight had the potential to distract a commissioner from the important business of managing the essential service that policing is. Monthly reports are supplied to the Policing and Community Safety Authority which are discussed in both private and public meetings; annual policing plans are published, and the Garda Commissioner and senior leadership team appear before the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. The decision to commission an unsolicited report outside of any statutory obligation or independent scrutiny of its conclusions, raises questions about the motivation and credibility of the exercise.

The launch of the report was an impressive

spectacle to the casual observer. The national media were assembled, millions of euro of equipment and vehicles were on display, with members of specialist units paraded in tactical and protective equipment. What went unreported, and perhaps unnoticed, was a fundamental and seismic shift in policy and culture for an unarmed, human rights underpinned, community-based policing service. An Garda Síochána, the people of Ireland were assured, “Will succeed not by force of arms or numbers, but on their moral authority as servants of the people”. Generations of gardaí have espoused these core values, which have traditionally been evident in organisational decisions as recent as the commission of bespoke covers to conceal retractable batons from public view or the debate that surrounded the piloting of Armed Response Units in 2008. Yes, the world is changing and policing has evolved as members face increasing challenges, dangers and indeed violence but when was a century-old tradition and policy abandoned in the pursuit of short-term media exposure?

The decision to use newly acquired water cannons and vehicles adorned with metal riot grills as a backdrop, with members dressed in boiler suits, helmets and shields simulating the discharge of a large capacity incapacitant spray does send a very clear message; whether that message is appropriate or reflective of the core policing values of An Garda Síochána is debatable. Media reports covering the launch of the report also carried an image of uniformed gardaí standing holding long-barrelled automatic firearms. While the context and nuances may be different, the publication of a photograph in Northern Ireland where police officers are routinely armed, sparked a major controversy that resulted in a public apology from the Chief Constable and an in-depth review of policing. The jurisdiction may be different but the sensitivities and

connotations surrounding the carrying of firearms or the message it conveys seem to have been completely overlooked in the most crass of fashions.

The report which purported to outline a period of transformation and growth for the organisation since 2018 emerged at the same time that the details of the treatment of a serving member during that same period. Despite the absence of evidence to support allegations, a serving member found themselves being investigated, suspended and prosecuted as part of what can only be described as a purge against wrongdoing that never occurred. In what has become an alarmingly not uncommon tale, individual members have had their lives, careers and reputations destroyed and endured lengthy suspensions, to subsequently be found to have done nothing wrong. Such cases have created a paralysis in decision-making and a culture where fear to act has depleted and blunted the effectiveness of policing across communities.

What is very clear is that An Garda Síochána has indeed been transformed between 2018 and 2024. The transformation has been from a community-based, visible and accessible policing service to something that bears little resemblance to the ideology, ethos or ethics espoused by generations of gardaí.

**The deployment of operational resources away from the frontline in order to support the corporate image and message is indicative of where the energy and focus of senior leadership has become focussed. It is this mindset that needs to be transformed during the next period of change within the organisation.**