

Questions From "Campaign"

The Editor gratefully acknowledges permission by the editor of CAMPAIGN to reprint the following article.

Ian Fry in Canberra followed up the Steve Schmidt interview (Campaign Issue 55, p22) by approaching the Australian Federal Police for their views on both the Schmidt case and gays in general. The former Australian Capital Territory Police to which Schmidt belonged until eighteen months ago, was incorporated with the former Commonwealth Police, and became the Australian Federal Police, on October 19, 1979. Ian Fry approached the Director of Information of the AFP who in turn arranged for a senior officer in the Force's Personnel Department to answer his questions. The following is an unedited transcript of the conversation.

Was the Steve Schmidt case an isolated example?

To be fair, that is a loaded question which I would put in the same category as the old one which goes: "when did you stop beating your wife?" An example of what? If you are referring to Mr Schmidt's statements in the media, then, yes, his case could be described as an isolated one.

However, leaving aside Mr Schmidt's public comments about his sexuality, I would not describe his resignation from the former ACT police as an isolated example. Let me make it clear that Mr Schmidt resigned and was not dismissed. Let me also make clear our policy on discussing such cases. I'm sure you would appreciate that for very strong and very significant reasons we will never make public comment about the circumstances of the resignation — or dismissal — of a former police officer unless that person expressly wishes us to and gives his authorisation in writing to the Commissioner of Police. Our reasons, of course, are to do with the privacy of the individual. The police — more than most people — have a very real appreciation of the right to privacy of members of our community, whether they be individuals or family groups.

Is there any chance that a similar "dismissal" could occur today?

Again your question is somewhat pejorative, and the best way I can answer it is to repeat that Mr Schmidt resigned from the former ACT Force.

Are there openly gay members of the police force? Are there gay police whose sexuality is either accepted or tolerated by superiors or fellow officers? Is sexuality ever seen as an issue within the local force?

To answer your first query I can only say no, not to my personal knowledge. We would also give the same answer to the other two parts of your question. Perhaps it might be pertinent to repeat at this stage some points that the Commissioner made recently when he was asked by a journalist whether he (the Commissioner) had a firm policy on the sexual preferences of the members of his force. The Commissioner replied that he did not because his over-riding policy on such matters was that the private lives of all members should be just that. Private. He saw no justification whatsoever for a Commissioner of Police to seek to make members' private business his own business. He said the only exception would be in the case where the private interests or pursuits of a member detracted from that member's efficiency as a police officer, or from the efficiency or standing of the police force as a whole.

In my view, this policy recognizes that while the police have an exacting, often difficult and very responsible work role, the individual member in his private life has exactly the same right to privacy as any other member of the community. And who is to suggest that he or she should not?

What was the reaction by the hierarchy and the rank and file to the recent bout of Steve Schmidt publicity?

I'm a bit mystified by that one. There was no "reaction" to speak of among the so-called hierarchy. For what it is worth, I was told by our Information Officer that the only media to ventilate the matter were one television show on one occasion

and a Sunday newspaper. The latter rang us to comment and we made our comment much along the same lines as my answers to you, but perhaps for the reason of keeping the story alive, the newspaper did not choose to use anything we gave them.

Could you give a general description of the relationship that exists in Canberra between the gay community and the police?

The simple and straight answer to that is that while you might perceive a separate importance for this relationship, the police do not. We are here to serve the community and as far as we are concerned every member of our community is entitled to have that service, irrespective of any social distinction that might be accorded to a person or group of persons within the community.

I will go so far as to say that because the community policing service provided in the ACT strives to be part of the community and not apart from the community — and I suggest that this is manifestly true — you could conclude that the police view reflects the broader community view. In the case of the ACT this does not strike me as being more discriminatory or less enlightened than other modern communities.

When do gay people, as gay people, come into conflict with authority in Canberra?

Probably when their speedo creeps past the 80 kph mark and they suddenly come across an amphotometer. Seriously, I would suggest that your question implies that gay people might not be as law abiding as other sections of the community. Our records would not support this.

Apart from the realities of the Canberra scene, do you think the concept of gay recruitment is a sound one? (Refer to the Lex Watson submission to the Lusher Enquiry, pp. 5-6/550.)

One of the problems that would worry us in relation to this proposition arises from the need for the police to have the complete confidence and acceptance of the community in order to do their job properly. Sir Robert Mark, the top

British policeman who recommended the creation of the Australian Federal Police in the Mark Report, calls this "policing by consent". I would say the question should be: Is our community by and large able to accept an openly gay person in the role of a police officer?

Keep in mind the type of work a police officer does and the perception that the public has of that officer in each specific task. I think we are both old enough to realise that there would be some people who would find it hard to accept the idea of admitted homosexuals undertaking police tasks. Therefore it follows that our norms — and our attitudes — are dictated by the community. Until such time that it becomes obvious that a large majority within the community would accept a

change in our current position, it is reasonable that we do not seek to alienate sections of the community.

It is a fact of life police are more conservative than most bodies, and I would make no excuses for this, given the realities of the situation we are in. Police may be different things to many people, but from where we stand we are primarily servants of the community. So the best approach for us is to be careful to satisfy that intangible requirement of "contemporary standards" in such a way that we remain accessible to one and all.

What are the arrest figures in the Australian Capital Territory for the past twelve months for offences relating to gay matters?

There were two arrests and convictions, arising from a complaint

about two male persons in a public lavatory in March of this year. The 1976 amendment, known as the Law Reform (Sexual Behaviour) Ordinance, 1976, did make a difference to our figures for this sort of offence. However it goes without saying that a public lavatory could not be regarded as "private" under the provisions of the Act. In a related area, the incidence of assault where the victim is a homosexual has fallen to almost nil since the Amendment became law, and, naturally, the police welcome this.

Ian Fry would like to thank the Federal Police for their efficiency and co-operation in the preparation of this article.



Good luck, Mike!

Detective Senior Sergeant Mike Phelan, the officer-in-charge of the Australian Federal Police Currency Branch left on 14 September for the United States to attend the F.B.I. National Academy in Virginia.

While in the U.S. Det. S./Sgt. Phelan, 38, who has a Diploma in Criminology from Melbourne University, will study organized crime operations in Honolulu and Los Angeles.

He will also study witness protection with the United States Marshall's Service in Virginia and counterfeiting operations with the United States Secret Service.

NEW CHECK ON CHEEKY CHEQUES

from Roy Eccleston of THE AGE.

For too long the Federal Police cheque fraud squad in Melbourne had been "plodding along" with members working individually on separate files.

But a meeting of the nine-man squad under the control of Southern Division CIB chief, Detective Chief Inspector Neville Elkington changed all that. The men threw around ideas and came up with a successful plan which boosted the detection rate by 400 per cent on the first outing.

As one detective put it: "It was a chance to put our ideas up, instead of being told what to do."

For Mr Elkington it is a victory for the time he spent as a chief inspector in police management at the Australian Police College in Sydney.

"I like to give the men a say in how we do it," he said.

Consultative management is all about getting the workers to suggest new ways of getting the job done

—and the results have proved worthwhile. The first weekend 15 arrests were made, compared with the usual four.

Naturally Mr Elkington is not about to give the details of this new plan. But he does say: "It's so simple we wonder that we didn't think of it before."

"Over the years we have been plodding along taking one case at a time," he said.

"Now we operate as a unit in a given area. We hit it with a thud, using all the squad in a purge."

He said there were three main categories that offenders fell into.

- The person who steals a cheque sent to someone else, forges the signature and cashes it.
- The person who is entitled to a cheque, cashes it, and then claims it was not received.
- The person who claims social security or unemployment benefits when he or she is not entitled to do so.

There are some cunning tricks the detectives have to deal with. One persistent fellow would follow the postman, and steal cheques almost immediately they were delivered.

And it is not a case of a thief stealing a cheque and leaving it at that. One person stole \$9000 worth of cheques in nine months, committing 84 offences. On just one day that offender took 15 cheques worth \$463.

Mr. Elkington, a former British policeman, is also an accountant. With 3000 frauds a month worth \$30,000 his skill with figures could come in handy.

"Our method is secret," he said. "But it is a time-saver that gives us quick results."

Whatever the method, not only has it proved beneficial to catching crooks but also, probably as important in the long run, lifted the morale of the men by getting them involved.