

Sunday Herald Article – Published on Sunday 6 February 2010

By John Watson, Amnesty International UK's Programme Director for Scotland.

One of the strengths underpinning quality of life in our society is the system of policing by consent – where the authorities sign up to respect and engage with the public rather than preserving order through an overwhelming use of force. Operating in this way provides extra challenges for the police. I salute those who do it, and I would even suggest that our police forces set the standard when it comes to policing around the world. I don't believe that our individual officers are different or inherently superior so I have to attribute this to the culture and policies of engagement and consent under which they operate.

I accept that Tasers have a part to play in that picture. Carried only by highly trained firearms officers, and used only to disarm and defuse very violent and potential life threatening situations, they already do. So far Taser use in Scotland has been limited and I am aware of no cases that could be considered abuse of the weapons.

Yet I am dismayed at the enthusiasm shown by Strathclyde Police for giving Tasers to non-specialist officers. Tasers are dangerous weapons, giving one person the power to inflict excruciating pain on another and are familiar to Amnesty researchers as the preferred tool of the torturer's trade. Our recent report into Taser misuse by US police officers identified at least 50 cases where medical examiners and coroners have concluded that Taser shocks caused or contributed to death.

Ordinary beat officers supplied with Tasers will receive considerably less training than firearms officers, who are locked into a system of ongoing scenario based training on the use of weapons. Learning not to use a Taser is harder than learning to use it. They will carry these weapons on ordinary duties on Scotland's streets and into the thousand and one messy interactions which characterise public life.

Amnesty has produced detailed research about the extensive abuse of Tasers seen in countries such as the USA and Canada, where they have become a routine part of policing and are now commonly used to ensure compliance and not just in defusing violent and life threatening situations. Taser abuse clips are a mainstay of Youtube and other websites and I have seen stories of a man Tasered for double parking and one elderly gentleman who simply refused to take his hat off.

We will be reassured that this is scare-mongering and that all Taser use will be carefully regulated – but that is exactly what we hear from the US and Canadian authorities. If officers here are also fallible human beings and when the current guidance on when it is appropriate to use the weapon is vague and its training regime is considerably relaxed, this is exactly the

circumstances where Tasers are likely to be used inappropriately for non life threatening situations.

Police officers do have to deal with violent situations and assaults are all too frequent. But officers have a large and growing range of powers over the public, and there are specialist trained units, including firearms officers, available when the situation demands it.

Culture shift does not happen immediately, and I am unsure how a six-month pilot can look for signs of it. The equivalent pilot in England and Wales was considered a success, but two years down the line worrying stories are starting to appear – a 14 year old boy Tasered in Wales, an 84 year old man in Hampshire, a Nottingham man Tasered two or three times while being punched on the ground. These are still thankfully very rare incidents

Tasers give police officer a power over the public that upsets the delicate balance in our society. We have a system that works, and evidence that other systems do not.