Policing in the technological age

In an address to the Centre for Australian Public Sector Management at Griffith University in Queensland on 'the impact of technology' on July 2 this year Assistant Commissioner Jim Allen dealt with the relationship between modern policing and modern technology. *Platypus* presents an edited version of that talk.

The conference theme was - "Contemporary Policing: Un-Peeling Tradition."

FIRST, let me say that some among you may think it curious that one who is neither a scientist nor technologist heads the Australian Federal Police Science and Technology Department.

The AFP makes no apology for that situation. Rather, it is seen as a means whereby the application of several distinctly different disciplines : information technology, electronics and forensic science, can be viewed objectively, and individually as well as collectively with the aim of getting the best dollar value for and from each.

In 1991, the then Justice Minister, Senator Michael Tate, said that police services had recognised, in a dramatic way, that they need to be smarter than the criminals, resulting in a commitment to technology rather than throwing more manpower at the problems.

In the 1960s and 1970s, information technology was all about data collection and aimed at improving productivity. Only in the 1980s did we start to take all this collected data, summarise it in reports and give it to management in support of our productivity. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s with the proliferation of personal computers, spreadsheets and bar charts, we now have executive information systems which summarise all the data.

Systems change

In the AFP we are not only moving to open systems technology, an industry-wide trend fostered by government, but having become a much flatter organisation and, therefore, a much less bureaucratic one, the AFP has itself become an open system.

With fewer barriers within, we are much more adaptable and therefore more susceptible and amenable to essential change. I believe we now have more of a chance of survival in an unstable economic environment that the impact of rapid change in technology has done little to assist.

What I want to do, among other things, is to share with you some of the obstacles and shortcomings which exist and which we have experienced, hopefully to present a picture of change and the prospects for a brighter future.

In the 1970s police management tended to seize upon computerisation with insufficient understanding of the significant implications involved. Many of us today, even those who have taken the plunge into the technological age, encounter some difficulty in getting anywhere near the comprehension levels demonstrated by so many small children!

Fifteen or so years ago we tended to leave, even abrogate responsibility for computing, to those whom we believed (better still - wanted to believe) possessed the qualifications and moreso, were interested in taking on a new discipline, one which to the average police officer was anathema.

Over the years, we ended up with an un-networked arrangement, some of which we no longer use, some of which we used infrequently, and some of which saw little use at all. The technology that is now vital to our existence is propped up in the twilight of its years, as we move towards the integration of open systems technology.

Don't misunderstand me, what we had was better than nothing at all. Faced with ever diminishing budgets, a particular difficulty in law enforcement whose structure is so integrated, and comparing it to those of the sundry large criminal enterprises around the world whose industriousness we are pledged to counter, however clever technologically we become, we must strive to achieve at the highest levels, albeit we tend to have less in the bank than they do.

Accreditation of skills

On the subject of forensic science, the day is not far off where, if a forensic laboratory is not accredited, the testimony of its scientists and technicians will be less compelling to the courts.

The AFP's forensic science laboratory in Canberra is moving toward accreditation by having the requisite capabilities both in terms of technologies and tertiary trained staff. We currently sponsor three tertiary level courses for our people.

A program to train legal practitioners in aspects of forensic science is being put together under the auspices of the National Institute of Forensic Science.

A wider awareness by the legal profession of the procedures and technologies which are forensic science must ultimately lead to demystification, leading hopefully to an improved, at least speedier, criminal justice system.

The new technology

The continuing impact of satellite technology on law enforcement in the discovery of drug plantations

and in tracking, cannot be over-estimated.

By the turn of the century the ubiquitous analogue mobile phone will be overtaken by digital technology. Undoubtedly, market forces will make redundant this 'toy' that so many in our community seem to find impossible to be without. That swing in technology, however, necessarily brings with it the need for change in law enforcement technology, and that is not without significant cost. Thus we focus again on the budget.

Planned obsolescence

I have with me some examples of technological change: a 1980s portable radio, considered top class in its day; the other, its state-of-the-art distant cousin, released just this past month.

A fundamental difference between the two, apart from their obvious sizes, is that, while the 1980s relic is still functional 10 or more years down the track, its smarter cousin is but another example of built-in obsolescence. In three years time its nickel hydride battery will inevitably fail and, just like our analogue mobile phones, will simply be cast aside. A result, I suggest, of the pace and change across a range technologies.

In that sense, too, it seems difficult to understand how we can escape the net that makes us so technology-driven!

New age relationships

Enough has probably been said by countless law enforcement officers, authors and academics, about the easy acquisition of state-of-the- art technology by criminals, whether they be members of large and wealthy criminal enterprises such as the notorious la Cosa Nostra in Sicily and the United States, or the Medellin Cartel in Colombia, or simply those involved in the street-level distribution of narcotics. It is well worth reinforcing the transparent reality that Jorge Ochoa Vasquez and his illegal organisation in Colombia, for example, have never been subject to the scrutiny of the equivalent of the Federal Department of Finance, The Australian Taxation Office, The Auditor-General, the Ombudsman, or for that matter, the Privacy Commissioner.

More and more, law enforcement is being called upon to produce results that can only be had through the latest technology, often large one-off items that are needed today. Significant is the fact that the crooks probably got it all yesterday!

This means that, on the international level - aided hopefully by the end of the Cold War and emerging new relationships, law enforcement must move even more quickly to develop mutually beneficial arrangements for the rapid exchange of information and intelligence. This may well see liaison at the international law enforcement level that heretofore has never been considered, as we move not just data, as in the 1980s, but knowledge and information around the globe.

Future shock

It is worthwhile reflecting on the suggestion of a possible data bank of criminal records on a worldwide scale, suggested a couple of years ago by Gene Stephens as a 21st century reality. Other things Stephens alluded to in his paper presented at a Futures Conference at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, in April 1991, included totally voice activated computers; huge data banks in a space the size of a desk-top computer with the capability of holding all the world's criminal records; and artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence has the possiblity of resulting in computers capable of processing mountains of network data at the speed of light, 'contemplating' its meaning and 'deciding' what action to take independent of human controllers. He also said that by the turn of the century nanotechnology should allow for the development of computers so small that they will only be seen with the aid of magnification.

Law enforcement in Australia today is buffeted by Toffler's third (or technological) wave, but tends to perform as if in the backwash of the second (the industrial) wave.

The sheer pressures that exist in policing today, and the consistency with which new and more challenging issues continue to invade one's ever-longer working day, tend to desensitise administrators to the extent of societal and technological change. There is also, as I said, a tendency to play the role that history has mapped out for policing.

Economic reality

Against an economic back-drop which portends some rough years before any significant improvement, it is understandable that the government is intent on reducing the deficit to 1 per cent of GDP by 1996-97.

As integrated an organisation as the AFP is, any significant reduction in budget allocation will clearly cause us some difficulties and the need to re-think priorities. On the other hand, with the kind of information technology we are acquiring becoming less expensive, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. However, pitted as we are against the well-funded criminal enterprise, the belt can be tightened just so far before economic pruning cuts damagingly into efficiencies and effectiveness.

The human element

Before closing, can I just reflect on the words in an article that appeared recently in the *Aspen Institute Quarterly*, an article titled 'Information and Power'. In the article author James O'Toole said, "The potential of the new information technologies is practically limitless, yet there is a caveat; technology can change everything but human nature."

He went on to say, "To date, no one has been able to eliminate people from the productivity equation."

And finally, "...in the long run a company cannot succeed unless it gives its employees the most productive tools available, yet, the tools alone, no matter how sophisticated, do not guarantee high productivity."

Never must the police officer, becoming as he or she is, more reliant on technology, lose those skills that make him or her the individual he or she is, with the ability to speak to and deal with people at all levels.

Moving with the surge of technology is one thing, but police must never lose the ability to attend to the needs of those in the wider community at whatever level their problem is pitched.

And I think it fair to say that the tough times that confront our wider community, particularly those of the economic variety, are still ahead of us.