

Chairman Steve Williams' Key Note Speech to Police Federation Conference 2013

Home Secretary,
Conference,

Can I extend a very warm welcome to you all as we gather here together for our 89th annual conference.

I want to begin by saying what an honour and a privilege it is to be addressing you here today as your Chairman.

This has been a particularly difficult year for the Federation.
That is why I believe it is all the more valuable that we have this time every year.

A time when we can come together and reflect on why it is we do what we do.

Be honest, how many of us at some point in the last year has had the thought 'why do I do this job? Why do I put myself through this?' Whether you are a hard-working cop out on the street, a long-suffering Fed Rep or even a tough, uncompromising Cabinet minister.

There are times when things get difficult and problems seem to arise at every turn.

When everyone around you seems against you and that's when you start to lose sight of why it is you do - what you do. I've certainly had those thoughts!

Well, my aim today is to remind you, not only why you do your job but also why you should be proud that you do it.

Conference, sometimes we can forget that we have something that fundamentally binds us all together.

We are all police officers and should be proud of that.

We may be from very different backgrounds, have very different outlooks, different cultural tastes or if you take a look at my music collection no taste at all!

But one thing remains.

We've all been that bewildered rookie cop out on a rainy street on Saturday night.
We've all put ourselves in harm's way and encountered violence in all its ugly forms.
And each one of us has witnessed deeply tragic events that in our quieter moments we do better not to dwell upon.

We've all been there.

We all remember our first day in the job. We all remember our first time being out on patrol by ourselves for the first time.

I certainly remember mine...

There I was, admiring myself in a shop window, so proud of wearing the uniform and so proud to be a police officer.

When suddenly, a taxi driver came over to me and said 'officer there has been a car accident on the Promenade' – three girls had been mowed down in the street by a drugged-up driver in a stolen a car.

As I arrived at the scene I saw the car on its roof. Blood was all I could see and screaming, screaming everywhere. It was all I could hear. I tried to resuscitate a girl who was lying in the road. I put my hands to her chest. They went straight down to the ground. It was clear there was no hope. I'd never seen a dead body before.

After a couple of hours, the Sgt said 'get yourself back to the nick and get yourself cleaned up. Have a cup of tea lad'. He was aware that I was in shock. I started walking back to the station.

On my way back a man opened his front door and said 'officer quick, my wife is having a baby'. I went inside the house and his wife was on the sofa. I could see the baby's head already starting to emerge and that's when I knew I had to keep calm and reassure her that everything would be OK. It was already very clear to me then that people just see the uniform whether you are one day in or 10 years in you are expected to respond in exactly the same professional way.

The woman asked me how many times I had delivered a baby and I naively admitted that this would be my first time! Her eyes opened wide in fear. Despite having only watched a training video, I managed to help deliver the baby boy safely.

I asked the mother what she was going to call him and she said to me that they were going to call him John Stephen, and I said that was remarkable, my name being Stephen John.

I left the house and continued walking back to the police station, the cup of tea now completely out of my mind.

When I got there, one of the girls who survived the car accident was in the waiting room. The Sgt pulled me aside and asked me to take a statement from her, which I dutifully did and when I came out he said 'she doesn't know her mate is dead, you're going to have to tell her'. I went back into the room and I had to deliver the terrible news. I'd never had to do that before.

However, looking back on that day, what also stood out was that there was no requirement to arrest anyone, or use my physical strength to chase or detain anyone.

It just showed me that policing is about so much more than detecting crime and catching villains - a mistaken belief held by many. And it's not just about uniform patrol. It goes far beyond that. The frontline of policing is not always visible. It's not about putting on a uniform and telling people what to do. Policing takes every skill and emotion you have as a human being.

I'm sure every police officer will have tales of days similar to mine - days when you never know what you will be asked to do. Days you discover strengths and abilities you didn't know you had. That's what makes it such a remarkable job. But it also makes the people who do it remarkable, and that's why our members should be rightly proud of the work they do.

Being there.

Changing lives.

Protecting people.

Helping to make society function.

I am proud of them, and I am honoured to represent them.

Conference,

When I look out here at all your wonderfully attractive faces, I see people who want to make a contribution and a real difference to policing. I see people who want to make things better. Not only for members, but also for the British Police Service as a whole.

By standing up for others, speaking out on their behalf, supporting them through the tough times.

That's why I became a Fed rep. I became a rep because having worked in Professional Standards Department I saw a lot of malicious complaints being made. I saw the effects, not only on the officers, but on those who loved them. I could see that someone needed to intervene so that officers could get on with their day jobs and that's when I could see the value I could add being a Fed rep.

But who'd be a Fed rep? Loved by nobody, a thorn in everyone's side. But it's so crucial to be that thorn.

To ask the difficult questions.

To bring to light matters that others would rather keep in the dark.

To challenge assumptions with facts.

Standing up for our colleagues.

Standing up for the police service as a whole.

Helping to make sure that it works in the best way possible for everyone involved.

We are not barriers to change. We are the brokers that can make change happen. We can bring about better conditions for officers. But we can also save money from the public purse by resolving matters locally before they can escalate and end up in an expensive tribunal court. Every Fed Rep's aim is to find what is best for our members but also what is best for the service.

The Federation has a long and proud history dating back to 1919 - apparently Johnny Giblin remembers it well - an era when the main form of 'social media' was a natter over tea and cake, when digital processing meant counting with your fingers. And the days when an I-pad was something a doctor attached to your head with a piece of elastic. Since then, our society has changed almost beyond recognition and policing has changed with it too.

As I said, this has been a difficult and challenging year for the Federation, but it has also been a challenging year for me personally. Being called a dictator - hardly the highlight of my career!

To be honest, I had been told that there was going to be a strong possibility that I would be booed when taking to the stage this morning. At least that would put me on a level with the Home Secretary at last year's Conference. Something that we would all agree we would not wish to see repeated.

My question to you is: are we currently fit for purpose?

Do we have a Federation in which we can be proud and that reflects the modern-day police service?

Do we have a Federation that reflects the views of all its members rather than just certain individuals?

It is vital that we do. Otherwise we become irrelevant and not only would that be a terrible indictment for our organisation, but we would be letting our members down and the service down as a whole.

Reform and change are always feared. Yet, we cannot bury our heads in the sand and ignore what is going on around us. People have competing interests, but we should not

be working against each other but working with each other to build a Federation that we can be all be proud of.

That is why it is my job to be clear about what I believe we should be doing, and far from dictating a way forward I see it as my responsibility to show leadership by taking us down a path whereby we can all contribute to the review of how we do business. That has made me popular with some and unpopular with others. I accept that. I accept that because that is part of my role. As I said, I know that I cannot please all of the people all of the time and for a new Chairman, this does take some getting used to. But, simply trying to please people means that I would not be focusing on the job that I was elected to do and that job was to lead this organisation to a place where it is match fit:

- * match fit to represent members at a local level our most important role in my view

- * match fit to sit at the table with those who make the big decisions on policing and to be a key consultative body at that table whilst influencing their thinking

- * match fit to show that we have done the research and explored the policies. Federation work is not just about officer pay, terms and conditions. It is about developing a police service that is fit for the 21st Century with all the challenges that brings and to ensure our members have the best possible structures in place to support their work, and I believe that we have much to do in this area.

Some of you fear the on-going Independent Review, many of you have accepted that it needs to be done and the majority of you accept that we need to change.

I want to see outcomes and not aspirations in our Annual Report.

I want us to see evidence that we have impacted on the policing debate both locally and nationally and made a real difference.

I want to stop fighting within ourselves and start fighting for the good of the British police service.

I want Chief Constables to see the value that being a Fed rep can bring to an officer's career.

I want to see feedback from partners and stakeholders that acknowledge and recognise the hard work we do and see our involvement being constructive and not destructive.

I want us to be recognised for the professionalism and dedication that is shown locally in every Force our true & vital 'front of house' presence as a Federation.

I do not want us to be disregarded as militant and self-interested, where we are applying our own agendas rather than those that will benefit the Federation and its members. I

want to do away with the canteen culture that has developed where people are frightened to make decisions or challenge inappropriate behaviours or question “why change?” because that's the way it's always been. Because when we lose the fight on all these counts, it makes it easy for our detractors to write us off and to see us as trouble-makers. It makes it easy for members to feel we are out and not in touch with what they really want, which is to do a professional job in difficult circumstances, with 100% commitment. Policing is the best job in the world and we need to recognise that the vast majority of our members feel this way. Let's celebrate this commitment and professionalism. Of course, we will fight for the right to their pay and their conditions. But we will not be responsible for giving anyone the impression that our members are self-interested. They are committed to protecting the public and this must not be lost in the way we present ourselves as their representatives. I want to see us not as an organisation that's stuck in the past but as an organisation that is looking constrictively to the future.

I want us to maintain advocacy for British policing. To speak up for our members but also to speak up for our public who rightly deserve a police service that's the best in the world.

Fed reps all have a part to play in sharing that vision. They should be proud of the work they do. And I want them to work for an organisation they can be proud of.

You know, I find it hard to talk of pride and not think of my predecessor Paul McKeever. This stage is one that he made his own, speaking up so eloquently for the service and it is hard to believe that he is not here in person although I'm sure he is with us in spirit.

Home Secretary,

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for taking part in Paul's memorial service earlier in the year. It was a remarkable event.

Paul's wife and daughter have asked me to thank you on their behalf and let you know that they are so grateful to you for taking up their invitation to give a reading at the service. It meant so much to the family and friends of Paul.

Home Secretary,

You have shared this platform with Paul on several occasions. You've each had some difficult messages to deliver.

Last year you said that you've always believed it is important to tell it like it is, not how you'd like it to be and

I couldn't agree with you more.

So in that spirit, and in my role as representative, I want to tell you how it is, currently, for our members.

We are often told that you have had to make some tough decisions. Well, Home Secretary, on a daily basis our members are having to make tough decisions that protect the public, restrict people's liberties and undertake our work under the public spotlight. Yet they do this whilst budgets are shrinking and their terms and conditions are constantly scrutinised. We understand the financial realities.

The police service has taken its share of the pain, some would argue more than its fair share. But what has not helped is that at times it has felt more like a punishment rather than an exercise in frugality.

That rather than a cut brought about by fiscal difficulties, it feels like a penalty, a punishment for 'bad behaviour' and inappropriate conduct. Too often the behaviour of a small minority of officers is held up as that of the majority. So often we have heard the mantra that the police service is the last unreformed service and that is why we have had our pay, pension, conditions in fact - pretty much every aspect of our working lives held up for change.

The result is that officers feel totally dejected. An unintended consequence maybe, but the fact remains that I am Chairman of an organisation which saw 34% of its membership - some 45,000 warranted police officers - voting to give us a mandate to pursue the right to take industrial action, in other words, to give police officers the right to strike. A position the majority of police officers would never imagine finding themselves in and that the public would find abhorrent.

The Police Federation is not militant and neither are the vast majority of its members. This goes against the grain for them.

It goes against the very principles that drive the service. To walk towards danger when others are running away, to be the listening ear when everyone else has gone silent, to provide reassurance and comfort when others are distraught and distressed, and to make those tough decisions that no others are prepared to make. And, yes we do this 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

But they felt they had no other way to express their anger and frustration concerning the situation they find themselves in.

Home Secretary, we can't ignore this strength of feeling, and to do so would be wrong. I think that we can both agree that we now need to build on this situation for the greater good of policing. I want us to move forward. Not to gloss over our differences but to continue the positive process of working together, which is now very much underway.

There is one thing that forms the basis of any civilised society and the structures which operate within it, and that is trust. We need to trust what you say and you need to trust what we are telling you. If trust breaks down, relationships are damaged and I'm sure

nobody wants that. I need to tell you how it is because I would be failing in my duties and responsibility to my members if I didn't. What they are saying in loud and strong terms is that they feel let down by a government that supposedly puts law and order at its heart. And that is regrettable. That needs to change. So let's continue working together to find a way to start changing that perception. Let's keep looking at how we can continue to rebuild that trust together.

And let us start with engagement.

We are the voice of the police service. Our members can tell you about what is going wrong on the ground and suggest ways of putting that right. Prove to them that you value what they do by taking what they say seriously and listening to them. What you want to change might not be those things that we want to change but let's at least discuss the issues rather than things being imposed upon us. Let's find the areas that we can agree on and identify the areas where we can't. Let's have a meaningful, timely dialogue and let's accept that we will not always agree. We want to be in at the start and help shape the police service and how it develops and delivers on its crucial role to society, not at the end when the debate has finished.

Next, there's respect.

Our members feel that society has been given the impression that police integrity has gone out of the window. This is utterly unfair. There has been much talk of integrity of officers. We have always defended the service against those who serve to bring it into disrepute. Let me be clear. Those people are not wanted or welcome in the police service and we will always strive to work with management to get rid of them. But, the reality is that often it is our representatives who have to step in and say the unpopular things. To act boldly in order to tackle these issues head-on when some Chief Constables appear reluctant to do so and this is where we can help you.

Home Secretary,

Please don't hang your reforms on the reprehensible behaviour of a handful of officers.

Speak out about the good work that the vast majority of officers demonstrate on a daily basis and judge them by their actions and not their words.

Government oversight and responsibility in policing is not just about efficiency and savings but ensuring the service serves the public in the best way that it possibly can. It is what they expect and what they deserve.

That is why Home Secretary, we look to you for support on these key issues;

* We ask you to continue to work with your ministerial colleagues across departments so we can finally close the gap in the service for those people with mental health issues. People who do not belong in a police cell but end up there because it's out of hours or because there is no alternative means of keeping them from harming themselves or the public;

* Neither is a police car a suitable replacement for an ambulance but officers are increasingly having to step in and use patrol vehicles to get seriously injured people to hospital when NHS resources are stretched beyond their limits;

* Another area I'm sure we can agree on is the difficulty officers have in getting offenders from overseas deported to stand trial in their own country. I know many of my colleagues emphasised with your efforts regarding Abu Qatada;

* We also hope that you will continue to work with us to help ensure that the police service is more reflective of the population it serves through ensuring working practices are as family-friendly as they can be and to do all we can to encourage those whose sexual orientation or ethnic origin is under-represented in the service to join up and to progress their careers;

* And finally I ask you to preserve the constitutional position of officers by taking compulsory severance off the negotiating table or at least delay the decision until there can be a strong, proven case for its necessity. The power for Chiefs to sack officers undermines the very foundation of policing, namely the Office of Constable. The ability of officers to make independent, impartial and accountable decisions, free from political influence or management pressure is fundamental and to change the face of British Policing forever is not something that should be done away with at the stroke of a pen.

Conference,

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the police service is currently undergoing some of the biggest structural changes it has seen for a generation. But while these changes go on, the day-to-day job of policing does not stop and our officers will still strive to do everything that they can to protect the public, to maintain order and stability in our communities and to help people in difficulty and distress and it is up to us as the Police Federation to do all that we can to support our members who are finding it tough, to keep them informed, to speak up on their behalf and to ensure that they have what they need to deliver the best possible service to the public. Surely that is a goal we can all agree on and one we all want to achieve irrespective of our political differences. The Federation has been proud of its long history and how it has adapted to change to do what we do best; protecting the public, keeping them safe and being seen as the envy of the world when it comes to delivering effective policing.

I want this organisation to have a clear sense of purpose, a clear sense of direction and a clear message. I am the first one to admit that often things can get lost in translation and

that reminds me of this story when I was a young DS in Caernarvon North Wales working with three detectives. One day I was in the office on my own and someone came running up and admitted to killing a little girl. He said his name was Zborski and I said why have you done and he said in a strong Polish accent, 'I have done a wicked thing. I have killed her'. I asked him what had happened and he said 'At the back of the cathedral, I strangled her'. I asked 'where is she?' and he replied 'I put her in bin behind the cemetery'. I said 'Mr Zborski, what did she look like?' He said 'she looked like all the others'. To my horror I thought we have a serial killer on our hands! I said 'What do you mean?' He said 'She have big wings, flap, flap, like all the others a sea gull'. For weeks afterwards my wonderful colleagues gave me an envelope addressed to DS Williams every day and I opened it up and it had a seagull feather in it.
... conference, that really is a true story!

Conference, our vision should be that we are the best police service we can be. A 20/20 vision of policing, one that preserves what's best, loses what doesn't work and introduces measures that will make the service better for the future. Making sure that we as representatives continue to do the best for our members so they can continue to deliver what the public want. So let's not lose sight of our common goals, our common experience and our common passion for policing. Let's rise to the challenge and develop a service which we can all be justly proud but let's do it together.
Yes, let us all unite in policing the future together!