

Check against delivery

Sergeants' Central Committee Chairman's Speech to Conference 2013

Conference,

Good morning to you all and welcome back to Bournemouth.

Sadly, it's been another year where the police service has been under continued attack from this government. Pay continues to be cut, workloads increased, resources decreased and thousands are losing their job. Is it no wonder that police officers throughout England and Wales feel utterly demoralised and morale is at an all-time low? These days a police officer's lot is not a happy one!

Surely, the first duty of any government is the protection of its citizens. But let's be clear from the outset, any further cuts to policing budgets will inevitably lead to less protection for our communities despite our officer's best efforts over, above and beyond the call of duty. Priority has to be given to protecting frontline public services such as policing, not just those parts of policing which the public sees at work in our communities every day, but also the less visible but equally critical policing work that goes on behind the scenes supporting the operational frontline.

Back in March, we announced the results of the ballot on whether our members should seek industrial rights. Many more officers voted in favour than against, but because the turnout of 42 per cent was lower than the 50 per cent threshold that was set, there was no official mandate to pursue this further. However, the result sent a clear message to government and showed concrete proof of our members anxiety, frustration and concern about pay cuts, pension increases, budgets slashed, detrimental changes to officers' terms and conditions and the dire state of morale.

The very fact that around a third of Britain's police service voted in favour of industrial rights shows that our members feel angry and disappointed. Police officers are being overstretched to breaking point and the continual attacks on their pay and conditions are grinding them down, as never before. Indeed, this low morale was reflected in a recent Police Officer Survey conducted by the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. The survey received more than 14,000 responses. Two of the most alarming results found that over one half of respondents said they were giving serious consideration to leaving the force and only 1 per cent felt supported by the current government. Also, more than 102,000 people signed an e-petition calling on the government to halt changes to police pensions, demonstrating the wide discontent felt within the service.

These are extremely difficult and challenging times for most police officers. Like so many other public sector workers, they are caught in the midst of a pay and increment freeze and facing increased pension contributions; albeit, we were recently informed there will be a cost of living increase of 1 per cent from September. But this is well below the inflation rate, where the CPI figure is 2.8 per cent and RPI figure is 3.3 per cent.

There are already 11,500 fewer police officers than at the time of the last general election. It is anticipated that in two years those losses will have grown to around 16,000. And the trend is set to continue in the coming years as the government continues to tighten the public sector purse strings. As a result many police stations are being closed altogether, or to the public. Already, some forces are in a precarious state: a report last year by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary warned that some might eventually be faced with an inability to provide a “sufficiently efficient or effective service”.

As we all know only too well, the government is in the midst of the most radical reforms to policing in England and Wales that has ever taken place. In the autumn of 2010, the Home Secretary Theresa May announced a comprehensive review of police officers’ terms and conditions, to be overseen by Tom Winsor. He reported back in two stages: Winsor One, focussing on short-term alterations, appeared in April 2011, and Winsor Two, a package of much deeper changes, followed a year later. At which point, all hell broke loose and battle lines were drawn, and we, quite rightly, claimed the proposals threatened to “undermine the very foundations of British policing and the public we serve”.

Winsor has since been appointed to the role of HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, and most of his key reforms are being introduced. Disgracefully, the starting salary for a police constable is being cut by £4,000 to £19,000. How will this motivate the brightest and the best recruits into the service? The competence-related threshold payment is being phased out. Higher ranks will be opened up to direct entry for outside candidates, meaning that some senior officers of the future will never have served their apprenticeship and mastered the craft of policing on the beat. We have lots of talent within the service and can ‘grow our own’; we don’t need to look outside the service.

There are also plans for compulsory severance, for the first time giving chief constables the power to make police officers redundant. If introduced this will have a huge and detrimental impact on the Office of Constable, something even our detractors concede is a fundamental pillar of British policing. For this fine organisation of ours that represents the membership without fear or favour, this issue threatens to turn constables into mere employees, imperilling the principle that – to quote the renowned judge Lord Denning – they are “answerable to the law and to the law alone”.

These are not the only elements of the Home Secretary’s reform drive of British policing as we know it, or should I say knew it. English and Welsh police forces are now overseen by 41 elected Police and Crime Commissioners, but with a weak and tenuous public mandate. In

February, the home secretary announced a new regime to safeguard police integrity built around an official code of ethics and an expanded and strengthened Independent Police Complaints Commission. Meanwhile, some forces are still trying to cut costs by outsourcing elements of police work to private companies. And there was more bad news last month, when the Home Secretary confirmed the Home Office's intention to implement a Police Pay Review Body. Subject to parliamentary approval this will be implemented in autumn 2014; So much for the unique employment status of police officers.

Amid all the pandemonium surrounding enforced change to the future of policing, one thing is blatantly obvious: the view of policing by this government as "the last great unreformed public service", first suggested by David Cameron back in 2006, and much of the media has focussed on this ever since. But we know, as do many members of the public, that on a daily basis throughout the length and breadth of the land many hard working and committed police officers do lots of good and heroic deeds, whilst on and off duty, in serving the public, but little if any of this ever gets reported in the media. I say to the media, please look to find and report on much of the good, that we, as police officers do and not just some of the bad. Let's have more balance, perspective and objectivity for we're not the bad guys you often portray us to be.

At the Home Office, they believe that their reforms to policing are working and crime is falling, and policing continues to be a well-paid career. The Home Secretary believes changes to policing add up to the most radical overhaul to policing pay and conditions for 30 years, built on the idea that they need to bring management practices into line with those elsewhere. But where ignorance is bliss it is foolish to be wise.

In 2019 we celebrate our centenary and, can quite rightly say, our success as an organisation since 1919 has been impressive, but just think of what more we could achieve if we seize the moment and evolve so as to be ready to face the challenges of the next hundred years.

Over recent years discussions have taken place at our annual conference, and at a national and local level on the need to review certain aspects of the structure and operation of our organisation. The 'Mitchell' affair was perhaps a catalyst for the calling of an independent review into our organisation, but there were a number of wider factors which influenced the decision. Given the pace of economic, political, social and technological change that is taking place, it is indeed pragmatic and wise to have a review into the way our organisation operates so as to ensure it can deliver more effectively at all levels into the future, if we wish to continue to remain the only credible voice of police officers on the frontline.

It was Charles Darwin who said, "It is not the strongest or the most intelligent species that survive, but those that are best able to adapt to change".

The policing landscape and environment is changing at an unprecedented rate and whilst recognising there are many wonderful things that our organisation does on behalf of its members on a daily basis, we are not immune to the forces of change, and better that

change to our structure and organisation comes from within as opposed from without. History shows, that organisations which fail to embrace change atrophy, wither and die. We cannot let that happen to our fine and proud organisation.

Our organisation can and must adapt to change, so we become even more effective and efficient going forward representing, influencing and negotiating in the best interests of all our members in matters surrounding welfare and efficiency. It was a brave decision that our national chairman, Steve Williams made when he called for an independent review of the Police Federation of England and Wales, one which showed true leadership, direction and vision. The Sergeants Central Committee were fully consulted and involved from the very start as were the Constables and Inspectors Central Committees. We fully support our national chairman and the independent review going forward.

And our rank, the rank of sergeant is not immune from all this change and upheaval to the policing landscape and environment that is taking place. Our numbers are decreasing significantly and those that are left are being overstretched to breaking point. As forces come to terms with funding cuts many of those able to recruit are opting to axe higher ranks in a bid to free up cash to take on extra constables.

As we know, the sergeant rank represents the first tier of management within the police service structure. We are able to draw on our experiences as a constable when managing operations and are therefore crucial and indispensable in supporting and bolstering the front line of operational policing in the fight against crime. We are the ones who ensure the highest standards in policing are delivered to the public on a daily basis irrespective of post code 24/7. We've done the job and are doing the job. Sergeants are the first line managers within the police service that provide the front line supervision to officer teams that they lead. We are the 'golden thread' to the success of the British policing model that has served this country well since its beginning. However, our numbers are falling but the job is still there to be done and we are expected to provide the same level of service. Something has to give and there will be consequences.

We believe, that the knock-on-effect of the reduction could be a lack of direction when police units are called to critical incidents.

In 2008 a HMIC report examining the role of the frontline sergeant outlined a series of recommendations for ACPO and the NPIA, which has since been replaced by the College of Policing.

Disappointingly, few of the key recommendations in the report, published prior to the government's proposals to reform the police service, were followed through, resulting in a vital tier of police leadership being lost. Disgracefully, the report also identified that 64 per cent of the sergeants who were new to role had not had any training specific to their rank, which begs the question, if you've not had the right training how are you supposed to do the job?

At this time few forces are promoting constables to the rank of sergeant, and in some cases temporary sergeants are being appointed to cover several roles. There are also fewer officers with the authority and confidence to monitor possible poor performance and disciplinary issues or the strain on police teams. All of this reduction to the first line of police management will have an effect on the delivery of service to the public.

There are problems in policing at this time, but to every problem there is a solution. Having sufficient properly selected, trained and equipped sergeants in place leading teams could be the solution to many of them, whereupon, we'll all be the beneficiaries. Sergeants as the guardians and custodians of excellence in service delivery are the fundamental essence of policing and we ignore that fact at our peril. It is the critical link in the policing chain.

Without question, this is the most difficult and challenging period in the history of both the police service and Police Federation of England and Wales, as the wind of change blows relentlessly and remorselessly through both organisations, leaving transformation and change in its wake. I am only too aware of the anger felt by many of our members at this time, an anger that manifested itself through the ballot on the right to take industrial action. I am also conscious of the frustration many members have with the Federation itself.

However, now more than ever before, it is imperative that this anger is not turned inward towards mutually assured destruction, but is outward facing confronting our real adversary's, and we move forward together as one into the new policing landscape united in unison and in common cause. It is not just our rank, but all those federated ranks that hold the proud Office of Constable. All have a stake in the preservation and perpetuation of not just the finest police service in the world, but the finest police staff association too. We have much to gain, but so much more to lose. Our motto should be – united we stand and divided we fall, it's all for one and one for all! Bring on the next hundred years. And as our great and much lamented former leader Paul McKeever often said, "Stay proud – Stay strong".

Thank you Conference.

John Giblin

Chairman SCC

May 2013

