

Keynote speech: 20 May, 2015

Steve White, Chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales

Home Secretary. Colleagues. Guests.

Well, I don't know who is more surprised you're here. Me? Or you, Home Secretary?

It's like a scene from Groundhog Day.

You're addressing us at conference for the sixth year in a row. And, as the lyrics to a well-known song go....Here we are again. Happy as can be? All good friends and jolly good company?

Well, you are in very good company. You are in the company of frontline police officers who, day in and day out, protect the very laws, the very freedoms that enable us to have a democracy.

You are in the company of ordinary men and women Who do an extraordinary job.

You are in the company of proud holders of the independent office of constable.

And 'all good friends'?

Well Home Secretary, we are not good friends, but neither should we be.

There should always be a healthy tension between politicians and us.

But just because we aren't friends doesn't mean we have to be enemies.

Because, frankly, it has been an extremely difficult year.

A difficult year for policing. A difficult year for our officers. And my God; a difficult year for the public we serve.

This week we are debating key issues in policing, and we are debating how they impact on our members and the public.

The Police Federation always takes British policing seriously. And, Home Secretary, the current situation is deadly serious.

So you need to listen. You seriously need to listen.

And do not make the mistake of dismissing what you hear. Thinking - here they go again - the Police Federation, moaning and scaremongering.

No.

Here we are again. The Police Federation. Telling it like it is.

And scaremongering?

Well, if the public aren't scared, perhaps they would be if they knew just how few cops were on the night shift while they slept last night.

So if you genuinely care about policing, if you genuinely care about the security of the citizens of this country. Listen to us. Between us, we have hundreds of years of experience. We represent the frontline. The thin blue line. The ever thinner blue line. The opaque blue line. Stretched to the limit. The Police Federation **is** the voice of policing. The real voice of policing.

So this week, we are not shying away from telling home truths. Telling the truth about the consequences of budget cuts to policing.

We are not shying away from making the public aware of what they have lost so far.

Making them aware of what they will lose in the future if cuts continue.

We are not shying away from saying how police officers - ordinary people doing an extraordinary job - have been pushed to the absolute limit. Run ragged. Jeopardising their own health and wellbeing. Trying to do more far more for the public with far less.

And we are not shying away from telling you, the government, where things have gone wrong, and how you must put things right. Because as police officers, we never shy away from a challenge.

The only thing you get with less is less.

Home Secretary: cuts really do have consequences. And we see them every day.

We see the shocked, traumatised faces of the victims of crime.

We see the tears of people who feel rushed, passed over, dismissed, as fewer officers try to deal with the number of emergency calls.

Police officers forced to run from job to job, at the expense of being able to provide the highest quality service to those asking for help.

We share the heartache of the public who tell us we are a service, not a business.

A service that they expect to be there when they need us. A service that doesn't say no.

But the cuts are now making that impossible.

And that's government cuts, Home Secretary.

And we're not the only ones raising the alarm.

You know who else fear the consequences of further budget cuts?

Many Police and Crime Commissioners do. Your flagship policy.

If they are that important, when are you going to listen to them?

Instead, what has the government response to cuts been?

Usually to blame someone else.

To hide behind the age old excuse that these are operational policing matters.

That it's the responsibility of chief constables.

What complete and utter nonsense.

It's not chief officers who have decided to cut police budgets in excess of 20%.

They have not decided to take £1.9 billion out of policing.

And it's not chief officers who are wiping their hands of responsibility and wiping the equivalent of nine police forces off the map by next year.

And privately many are telling me enough is enough.

But to make matters worse, some chief officers are talking about changing the structure of policing to cope with the cuts.

Reassessing who should have what power for what role.

Effectively reducing the number of actual police officers even further.

And handing out warranted powers to others as and when they are needed.

The result is inevitably to confuse different roles. And if we find it confusing, what hope is there for the public?

But make no mistake. If we begin handing out powers willy nilly, we risk losing the fundamental ethos of the police - our very professionalism.

A police service based on anything other than politically independent and personally accountable officers is no police service at all.

Call it re-structuring.

Call it privatization.

But don't dare call it a police service.

Because there is no such thing as cut-price policing.

No such thing as EasyCop.

If costs are the problem, changing the status of policing and police officers sure as hell isn't the solution.

Police officers are the bedrock of resilience and flexibility, and they have been since policing was founded by Sir Robert Peel back in 1829.

Police officers understand their role is to serve the public. They are not private security guards or box-ticking functionaries because they do more than going through the motions. They are committed professionals trained to go the extra mile.

Real police officers can be deployed to deal with whatever is thrown our way.

Our professionalism means showing toleration even in the face of provocation.

We learn to put up with the criticism.

The abuse. The jeering and dirty looks. The scowls of anger and derision.

And that was just from you at our conference last year, Home Secretary.

But we also don't hold grudges.

Hours after the government was elected, we dealt with angry, unplanned protests outside Downing Street. And with chaotic scenes at the very heart of government, is it any wonder that officers insist on keeping the Downing Street gates closed.

Wide-open, you could drive a juggernaut through them, let alone a bicycle.

And talking of push-bikes and Downing Street, on that score our conscience is clear.

When it comes down to it, the principle of policing is really very simple.

Ensure those who need powers in policing hold the office of constable.

Train them; value them; give them the skills they need.

Use their knowledge, ability and experience.

Whether uniformed patrol or detective investigation, the office of constable should be the core around which the police service is structured, not just one role among many, to be chopped and changed according to what budgets allow.

Let's look at the real costs of cuts. The human cost to my colleagues. Colleagues who have to deal with the stress of leaving one job half done to get to the next emergency call. The cost to their own health and welfare. The low morale officers feel. Undervalued. Unappreciated by government.

When you look at the national budget, the amount we spend on policing in comparison to other areas, such as overseas aid, is peanuts.

So what else do you expect us to cut?

We have responded magnificently over the past five years, but it has come at a cost.

We are down to the bone.

Having to decide - neighbourhood policing or 999 calls?

Neighbourhood policing. The foundation of local confidence, trust and reassurance in communities that the police are there.

That the police will be there when needed.

Policing with their consent.

Neighbourhood policing. The source of so much information that stops the public from becoming victims of crime. That keeps people safe. That prevents terrorist attacks on our country.

And neighbourhood policing is just one of the endangered species in the new stream-lined barren policing landscape.

We know that 30 out of 43 forces are downgrading or reviewing their neighbourhood policing teams.

Less than a third of people say they now see police officers on patrol in their local community.

And it's a figure that is falling fast.

A generation of young people is growing up never seeing their local police unless they are unfortunate enough to experience a serious crime.

Is that the type of police service the public deserve?

Remote.

Faceless.

Their only contact with police, an online tick-box form.

Policing is about building relationships. Not statistics.

Not “Computer says no”.

Not “Chancellor says no”.

The Conservative Party manifesto ahead of the recent general election said you would ‘transform the relationship between the police and the public’.

Well, you are certainly doing that.....but in the wrong way.

Home Secretary, cuts have consequences.

Some are easily seen and measured, many are not. The paradox is that the better the job the police do, the less necessary they appear.

We are the goalkeepers of the criminal justice system - and you don't drop the goalie because the team isn't letting in goals...

Sir Robert Peel said, and I quote ...

“The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder ... not the visible evidence of the police action in dealing with them.”

Home Secretary - often, you don't know what you've got until it's gone. Our everyday successes rarely make the news. Yet, rare failings are headlines.

And if we think the cuts are biting now, just imagine what the prospect is if there are more cuts to come....

[VT of Consequences of cuts shown here]

Home Secretary; is this what you envisaged five years ago? Because this will be reality. Unless proper funding is in place. Unless policing is adequately resourced and structured.

You tell us that overall, crime is down.

Well, Home Secretary, we rarely hear you shout about the other things that are down.

Police stations - down.

Police numbers - down.

Resilience of the service - down.

Police morale - down.

But don't fret. Some things are on the up.

Cyber-crime - up.

Sexual offences - up.

Violent crime - up.

Terrorist threat - up.

Well, Home Secretary - time is up.

You know full well, the first duty of government is the protection of its citizens.

Well, government is failing to do that.

It is not just the public that has been let down.

Police officers have been badly let down too.

Home Secretary, at your first Police Federation conference, five long years ago, you said that you would always support us, that you would always back us, that you would always be there for us.

Well, it certainly looks as though you will always be there!

As for the other two...we are still waiting.....

We knew that in a period of austerity our jobs would become even harder, so we expected a period of what you - and your government colleagues - call 'fiscal budgetary restraint.'

And the rest of us call 'cuts'.

But the cuts for police officers feel personal. The job officers signed up to has changed significantly. They are expected to do much more with far less.

In the absence of industrial rights, officers signed up to a deal offering fair pay and a good pension.

And they were prepared to contribute significantly more to it than other workers.

But we feel government has reneged on the deal.

Personal cuts to pay and pensions, on top of the increased workload as police budgets were cut has resulted in police morale hitting rock bottom.

For the third time in recent decades, police officers have seen changes to their pension. Changes to the scheme they signed up to.

The law gave us protection for our pensions and what did you do? You changed the law, you moved the goal posts.

And bucking the trend of less means less, we have seen officers put in more and get out less. Absolutely crazy.

Many police officers thought we could stop the changes being imposed to our pensions. We tried very hard. With the Police Federation taking the brunt of criticism for a government imposed scheme.

But there is no negotiation over pensions.

It seems that government imposes what government wants.

When government wants to.

And it just pays lip service to those it affects.

Well, Home Secretary - police officers are angry.

Police officers shouldn't be held to ransom by government.

It's nothing short of blackmail to say to police officers that 20% and perhaps more needs to come out of policing. Take a real term pay cut and a drop in pensions or more of your colleagues will have to go. That is an outrage.

We have lost 17,000 police officers and 16,000 police staff since you came to office.

Some said the only way to manage this was to make officers redundant.

Sir Tom Winsor said it.

Many Chiefs said it.

The Home Office said it.

We knew the cuts would mean losses, but we never agreed that officers should be made redundant to make it easier for this travesty to happen.

It wasn't necessary then. And it isn't necessary now.

And, should it ever be reconsidered, need I remind you of the decision of the independent police arbitration tribunal. A tribunal whose decisions the Prime Minister himself said should be binding on both sides.

Ignore that at your peril.

So. What do we have?

A reduced workforce.

Increased workload.

Greater private sector opportunity.

Can you see where this is going?

It would appear that the cuts have been nothing more than a smokescreen for ideological change.

Change government wanted to make across the public sector.

We made clear to the new Pay Review Body that when the economy improves, we expect to see the pay of police officers improve too.

Well, now the economy is improving.

The government has said soso...it must be true?!

You can't have your cake and eat it.

This is about fairness.

It's about valuing police officers and all we do.

It's about ensuring the police service continues to attract, recruit and retain the very best people. The very best people who put the interests of the public ahead of their own.

Because that is what we do.

Day in.

Day out.

Home Secretary - police officers are **never** off duty.

We run towards danger when others can run away. And in the last 12 months we have faced increased threats - including the specific threat of international terrorism.

And sadly, we sometimes pay the ultimate price.

We make the ultimate sacrifice protecting our communities.

Since last conference we have lost three of our colleagues on duty.

Three police families have lost a loved one.

Colleagues have lost a team mate.

Friends have lost someone dear to them.

I ask you all to stand as we reflect, remember and pay tribute to our fallen colleagues.

[VT of fallen officers' montage shown here]

We will always remember them.

I have talked about the impact the cuts are having on the service we can provide to the public. The impact the cuts are having on police morale, motivation, health and wellbeing. But, Home Secretary, what of the future?

You have the ability to put right some of the wrongs of recent years.

And we must be part of that conversation.

It's essential you listen to us.

We take no joy in telling government, we told you so.

But we told you so.

We predicted the riots in 2011.

We predicted the rise in cyber-crime.

We saw the changing face of crime.

We know what works and what doesn't work.

And we have a long-term interest in getting it right.

While some politicians may be short-sighted, only thinking in five-year election periods, our vision goes much further.

So let me offer two possible futures.

If we face more cuts, the future will be one of more strain on the service.

Poor morale.

Unacceptable conditions.

And ultimately - the collapse of the police service as we know it.

Already, we've got to a point where the police service is often propping up other public services that have been cut too. But we are the service of last resort, which means we can't say no.

But if you're seriously ill and needing urgent medical attention, how would you rather be transported to hospital? In a police vehicle with a police officer with a basic first aid kit? Or in an ambulance with a trained paramedic with the latest medical equipment to hand? Not a difficult question to answer, is it?

And yet we can still cite examples where police officers are running patients to hospital in police vehicles.

903 times in the Metropolitan Police area alone last year.

That cannot be right.

And with dwindling resources that is not something the police should be doing - or can do any longer.

Where will it end?

Do we have to watch someone die on the street in front of us before government sits up and listens?

That is not the future any of us wants.

So, our solution - our starting point for a better future, as we have been saying for more than a decade, would be for an independent review that actually takes account of what the public wants - a review of the entire criminal justice system.

But no government seems brave enough to ask the question.

Too expensive. Takes too long.

Complete nonsense. It's just government running scared.

So. In the absence of a proper review, let me give one example of the kind of thinking that might lead to positive change.

We currently have over 43 police forces operating in England and Wales.

Who does that really benefit? To the public, the police are the police are the police.

They don't distinguish between cap badges.

To them the structure is irrelevant.

What matters is when they need help, they get it.

What matters is feet on the beat.

Cops investigating crime.

Shouldn't we at least be having a conversation about structure?

A look at how many forces we need.

Home Secretary; yesterday I asked delegates here, whether we should consider moving to a one-force model.

By a show of hands, an overwhelming majority are up for the conversation. And if money is an issue, surely this is worth exploring, rather than just tinkering around the edges of reform. Or cutting back on fair pay and pensions.

I don't have the answers to all the questions this conversation brings.

But I do think we need to look seriously at a model of service that delivers what the public need and protects them.

A model of policing that ensures police officers are afforded the best possible protection and the support to deal with the increasing demands we face.

Home Secretary, I can give you an even more concrete example of something we know will help us do our jobs, something that protects officers and the public.

You will have seen recently that we called for the greater rollout of Taser.

The reason? Because we know it works.

This is more than an operational decision for chief officers.

This is about the government showing you care about cops.

So I ask you today.

Will you ensure the resources will be there for additional protection to those officers who are protecting the Home Front?

Will you give chief officers and PCCs confidence that they don't need to sell off yet another police station to pay for Tasers?

To pay for the protection of officers and the public?

Taser is a piece of kit we know from experience makes a difference.

We are all for making better use of new technology.

But the technology that matters is equipment like Taser that helps police officers do their jobs.

Technology can't take the place of police officers.

Some have suggested technology is the key to efficiency savings. It is part of the solution but it's not the only solution.

Because remember: during the summer disorder in 2011, it wasn't a handful of computers that went out and quelled the riots.

In London alone, it was 16,000 police officers.

So it should give pause for serious thought that a similar number of officers have been cut in the last four years.

Home Secretary; we, the British police service, the Police Federation of England and Wales, stand ready to be part of the solution.

Stand ready to be part of the conversation.

It's about listening to our members and representing their interests.

It's about putting the public first.

And we have to consider all options to ensure they get the level of service they deserve. I mean, why stop there?.

Every five years we face the prospect of more change.

Every few years we find out if policing will have more money, less money, or no real term change.

Why not take a more long-term view of the future?

Why not consider a 10 or 15-year strategy?

Why not put the structures in place that allows the police service the opportunity to look at the long-term?

Current funding is at best confusing; at worst, downright unfair.

We need funding that gives chief officers the mechanism to plan with a certainty of money and resources.

To put in fiscal measures to take account of the overall economy.

Surely, this makes good economic sense?

And it could deliver an even more efficient and effective service for the public too.

But it requires you to take a bold step so that the protection of the public comes first.

We are not asking you to put your life on the line as so many police officers do every day. But we do ask that you act for the long term.

Home Secretary, after five long years in office, you know the Police Federation has never been an obstacle to change.

We have shown you we are changing ourselves. We have actively sought change.

But change that is considered. Change that is long term.

And change that is for the good of policing and the public we serve.

You must listen to us.

We don't want false plaudits.

We want you to show that you are genuinely concerned about policing.

We want you to show that you value what we do.

That you will fight for us, not against us.

Fight to ensure we have the resilience and capacity to protect our communities.

The British police service is the very best. Admired across the globe.

It is made up of the finest men and women. Men and women who care passionately about policing. Who care passionately about the safety and security of the communities they serve.

The Police Federation is a can-do organisation.

The police service is a can-do service.

Police officers are can-do people.

However, our task is becoming impossible.

But it's not too late.

It really isn't.

But no more cuts, Home Secretary.

So, as you and the Prime Minister consider a new Bill of Rights, don't forget the Old Bill. Those who protect the very rights and freedoms that allow us to disagree.

Those who protect everyone's democratic rights in England and Wales, and enable democratic elections like those just two weeks ago. The very elections that have brought you back to join us once more...!

The Old Bill is the friend of every freedom loving law abiding citizen in this country.

Search your conscience.

Do the right thing.

I care about policing.

We care about policing.

Home Secretary, do you?

Because if you do, then show us.

Here.

Now.