

Police Federation Speech, 17 May 2016

Thank you for that introduction.

It's a pleasure to be with you here. But it's fair to say that I haven't planned this day well at all.

Straight from here, I am heading to play in a charity football match in East London against a team from the Metropolitan Police.

So, depending on how this afternoon goes, I may have to stop off en route to get some reinforced shin pads!

There is no doubt that the last few years have been testing for you and for the Police service in general.

We are now in the sixth straight year of cuts to Police budgets.

These cuts come when the challenges of the job are greater than ever before and when the pressures on you are increasing all the time; at a time when crime is changing, becoming more sophisticated, and starting to rise again; when the terror threat is growing; and when the Police are increasingly being left to pick up the pieces from cuts to other public services as the service of last resort.

So your job is getting harder and, if this wasn't bad enough, there have been a steady stream of revelations about policing practice in the past.

So morale is low and no wonder.

The question for this Conference is simple: where do we go from here?

I have not come here today to point the finger. Things go wrong in all institutions and in all professions – as we MPs should have the humility to be the first to admit.

The question is how to respond when they do.

In the end, blame and defensiveness get you nowhere.

Instead, we need to build common cause on the goal that should, at the end of the day, unite us all – how to build a trusted and resilient police service for the 21st century?

That is the question before Labour's policing policy review that is now underway and is what I want to talk about today.

I see three elements to it: first, police funding and powers; second, structure and organisation; and, third, culture and leadership.

I will take each of those three issues in turn. But, before I do, I want to put it in context.

The theme of this year's conference is "Believe in Blue".

That's quite a provocative call for an Evertonian at the moment.

Because it has been a bit of a struggle to do that this season.

But when it comes to the Police, I have no hesitation in saying that I do. I believe in blue. I believe in you and what you do.

I know that there are thousands of your colleagues out there right now as I speak putting themselves out to keep others safe.

British policing remains the best in the world - of that I have no doubt - and I was reminded of it when I had the honour of attending last year's Police Bravery Awards.

I know the public feels the same.

Just look at the incredible outpouring of respect and sympathy for Merseyside PC David Williams following his death in service last year.

I remember him today, as I do WPCs Fiona Bone and Nicola Hughes from my own force in Greater Manchester who are still in our thoughts.

I also think today of the five officers from South Yorkshire who put themselves in harm's way during a recent attack and, in particular, Lisa Bates who is recovering from being hit by an axe. She has our best wishes.

These incidents remind us of the risks that you and your colleagues run every day.

That is what sets policing apart from other professions and is why politicians owe you a particular duty of care and support.

The best way we can express that is not through warm words but funding.

When I took on this job, the police service in England and Wales was staring down the barrel of 20%+ cuts in the Spending Review.

I immediately through everything I had at the campaign to oppose them as cuts on this scale, on top of the cuts in the last Parliament, would have been disastrous for the Police.

It would have sounded the death knell for neighbourhood policing – the bedrock of British policing that I am proud to say was built up by the last Labour Government, with 17,000 extra police officers and 16,000 PCSOs.

Sadly, it is slowly being hollowed out – with 18,000 police officers, 12,000 of them operational front-line officers, lost in the last Parliament.

And as officers have gone, those left to pick up the pieces have found their workloads soaring and pressure intensifying. Over a quarter are now working more than 49 hours a week, beyond the legal limit.

Things can't carry on like this. Something will have to give.

I am proud to say that, working in partnership with police colleagues, Labour forced a last-minute U-turn. I want to pay particular tribute to the Shadow Police Minister Jack Dromey who played a blinder for you, using all of the tricks for his trade union days.

To show how far this went to the wire, we're told it was agreed the day before Osborne stood up in the Commons. And it seems to me that all the details weren't worked out as what he said hasn't been delivered.

The Chancellor's exact words were George Osborne said this: "there will be no cuts in the police budget at all. There will be real-terms protection for police funding."

I have been in Parliament long enough to remember a time when, if a Chancellor made a promise to the Police at the Despatch Box, it would be honoured.

Not any more.

I have had to refer Mr Osborne and the Government to the UK Statistics Authority. They have confirmed that all forces have seen real-terms cuts in Government grant this year and those cuts have not been filled by the local precept.

Let's just be clear about this – this Government made a promise to you in the House of Commons and they have broken it.

As a result, the police service in England and Wales is on course for a decade of cuts. I believe that is both irresponsible and dangerous.

The Federation asks the right question today: how can we be sure that we have enough officers – and in particular enough armed officers – to keep people safe in the event of a terror attack, particularly one outside London?

The Government has failed to provide a convincing answer to that question. And that should worry us all. They are crossing their fingers and putting an ideological commitment to austerity before public safety.

We already know that England and Wales has fewer police officers per head of population than our neighbours and it is likely to get worse.

The justification for these further cuts is that crime is falling.

But is that true?

When online fraud and cybercrime are added to the crime survey of England and Wales later this year, it will show a very different picture.

The Government's alibi for its cuts will be gone.

So I have got a simple message for Theresa May - the cuts cannot just keep on coming. They have got to stop.

You made a promise to the Police and you should honour it.

The only real answer that she has come up with is to merger with fire services and expanding the role of volunteers.

On the former, we have serious concerns about the proposal and will continue to oppose it.

The proposals on volunteers raise a whole host of issues about the future of policing.

The Home Secretary told the BBC website earlier this year that people with IT or accountancy skills were in "particular demand", and that they could "work alongside police officers to investigate cyber or financial crime, and help officers and staff fight crime more widely".

I'm sorry, Theresa, but a Dad's Army of retired accountants does not amount to a vision for the future of policing, nor an answer to the complex challenges of online crime and fraud.

Where is the credible and costed plan for policing, the 10-year vision?

In the absence of it, people will continue to feel uncertain about where the police is heading and morale will continue to sink.

The Home Secretary needs to do much better than this and we will continue to hold her to account on that.

But let me be clear: in this job, I will not pursue opposition for the sake of it. I will challenge the Government when they get it wrong.

But where they get it right, I will say so too.

One area where they are right is in updating the law on investigatory powers.

In the digital age, police need to be able to shine a light into the online world and keep people safe.

So, let me give you this assurance today: we will not play politics with the Investigatory Powers Bill.

Yes, we want to see stronger safeguards in the Bill. For instance, we do not believe that people's Internet Connection Records should be able to be accessed in respect of any crime but only more serious crime.

But it is in the country's interest that there is new updated legislation on the Statute Book as soon as possible and, as long as the Government listens, we will work in good faith to achieve that.

On other powers, I note the call that had been made about tasers. Of course, before any expansion, proper safeguards and training will be needed. But I am certainly open to a discussion about this.

Let me turn now to structure and organisation.

This is an area that Labour's policy review will rightly need to consider again including the sustainability of 43 forces in England and Wales.

But I want to assure you that I my instincts say that that an imposed top-down reorganisation is not the way to go.

Instead, a better way to approach it might be to consider what policing functions would better sit across a number of force areas and then invite collaborative approaches to achieve it.

The offer today is to work with you to get this right. I don't think we can turn our face away from sensible structural changes that might improve the service to the public. But I would rather those ideas came bottom-up rather than top-down.

There is certainly more than can be done to build common support services across the 43 forces, with IT being a prime example.

But, in looking at questions of organisation and structure, the big mistake to avoid is looking at policing in isolation.

The real gains to be had in the future are in thinking how policing might in future work at local level alongside other public services.

If we really want to target the small number of individuals and families that are responsible for most crime in any given community, then I would say we need to break down the silos between the public services and develop new approaches that will break the cycle of crime.

An innovative approach to joint working is currently being piloted in Platt Bridge in my own borough.

I have been interested to see how police colleagues are amongst the most enthusiastic it as they clearly see how more of the same in public services, and continued silo working, just ends up with more local failure and pressure on the police.

The MASH model in safeguarding seems to me to be a good innovation and I think we should build it out into all areas of policing.

Changing structures only takes you so far. So let me turn finally to culture and leadership - probably the biggest question facing policing today.

As you may know, I have worked closely in recent years with the Hillsborough families.

There can be no doubt that their 27-year fight for justice, and the revelations about policing practice along way, has shaken the faith of many in policing.

It needs a proper and considered response - not just from politicians, but from the police too.

Of course, the police force of today is not the police force of the 1980s and 1990s.

I do draw the distinction between officers serving then and now.

But it's too easy to say draw a line under it because it's all in the past. It's not.

Old habits persist – as I saw for myself to some disbelief at the recent Inquest.

The cover-up continued right up until a few weeks ago – and because of it, so did the pain of the families.

I don't think anyone should minimise that.

In places, that old culture of "defend the force - right or wrong" still persists. That applies not just to complaints from the public, but can also apply to police officer who blow the whistle and find themselves ostracised.

And that is where things go wrong, not just for the public but for the police too.

Arguably the biggest losers from a poor leadership culture are the rank and file – expected to fall into line behind decisions that they don't support.

But when, finally, those issues hit the public domain, everyone's reputation and morale is damaged.

Hillsborough must mark a watershed moment for our policing and criminal justice system.

A moment when we come together to create a more open and accountable police service, that does not tolerate a closed-shop culture.

If we can achieve that, it will in the end will be better for public and police officers alike.

If we are to learn from the past, we must first be open about it.

That is why I repeat my call for the Government to institute a public inquiry on what is known as the Battle of Orgreave and the policing of the miners' strike.

Though this was 30 years, deep scars remain in mining communities about this period.

A former Chief Constable has recently spoken of the Police being used as an “army of occupation”.

If we want a police service for for this century, then we first need truth about how we were governed and policed in the last.

I am disappointed that the Home Secretary failed to address this issue today.

Theresa May has shown a commendable to face up to the truth about our past and to follow where that truth takes us - which is now, undeniably, to Orgreave.

Home Secretary, former mining communities have waited long enough for the truth. What possible justification can there be for denying it to them? I call on the Government to make arrangements to give it to them – without further delay.

This is just the start. After truth and justice comes accountability.

Shortly, the Policing and Crime Bill will return to the Commons for its final stages.

I am proposing a package of changes to that Bill to strengthen victims' rights and police accountability.

I am not doing this on a narrow, partisan basis but by reaching out across party political lines and I invite the Federation to work with us to get it right.

One of the crucial reforms we need to make is to the treatment of bereaved families at inquests.

It cannot be right that police forces are able to spend unlimited sums of public money on lawyers when families, often raw with grief, are thrown into a court room with no ability to match it.

This is why I am pushing an amendment that will put an obligation on a PCC to fund the legal representation of a bereaved family, or families, at the same level as that police force where both sets of parties are interested parties in an inquest.

The public interest should lie in finding the truth. It follows that public money should be spent on that aim rather than on protecting vested interests in public bodies.

[As an aside – hear that HS – HRA/Bill of Rights]

The second amendment I have proposed seeks to remove the time limit on the period after leaving a force that a retired officer can be investigated for misconduct. My intention is that this power would apply retrospectively.

I applaud the Police Federation for supporting the current government proposal, in the Policing and Crime Bill, to allow gross misconduct proceedings to be taken against an individual in the twelve month period after they have left the service.

But why the arbitrary time limit?

The government's proposal is a step forward, but surely the main lessons of Hillsborough is that there must be no arbitrary time limits on justice and accountability.

It can take much longer than 12 months for wrong-doing to come to light.

I don't think there should be any limit. I also believe that, if gross misconduct is proved which would at the time have led to someone losing their job, and therefore wages and pension contributions, then surely it is right and proper that pensions should be able to be deducted to reflect that?

The idea that retirement can be used as an escape route to escape misconduct is something that damages the standing of the police service in the eyes of the public.

I note that the Police Federation has expressed “serious concern” about this proposal. I would of course be prepared to talk about it and take views on board. But I think this is an area where reform is long overdue.

The third area where change is needed is on strengthening the independence of the regulator.

I want to give the IPCC power to direct forces to implement findings and sanctions following investigations into officers and forces.

But, in making these proposals on accountability, I want to make clear that, if done in the right way, they could be as beneficial for police employees as they are for the public.

Part of a stronger IPCC might include a more independent whistleblowing function for serving officers to use.

I say this because I do not believe that we have yet got right the culture around professional standards in the police.

It seems to me that the pendulum has swung too far and towards a blame culture where the situation facing officers under investigation escalates too quickly, to suspicion or even criminal charges.

Steve was making this very point on the radio today with regard to incidents involving firearms.

Sara Thornton, Head of the National Police Chiefs' Council, was also right to say last week that we need "an environment in which officers at all levels are encouraged to be honest about errors so that they are not repeated. I don't think we've got the balance right yet."

If we are to get that balance right on our reforms on accountability, then they should be as beneficial to police officers as they are to the public.

In conclusion.

This is an important moment for policing.

It's in the country's interests that we work together to get the response right.

I truly believe that the changes I am proposing will in the end strengthen trust in, and support for, our police service.

Since the Hillsborough verdict, I have lost count of the number of serving police officers who have approached me to say that it was right to pursue the truth. And that in turn reassures me that my belief in blue is not misplaced.

I know that this organisation has shown itself open to reform in recent years and that journey should continue.

But in the end there is a deal that needs to be struck here.

Just as the Police need to be open to culture change, so politicians need to accept that you can't keep cutting the Police and expect crime to fall or the public to be safe.

If we move forward on that basis, then we might just be able to build that 21st century police service.

Thank you for listening.