

CHAIRMAN'S SPEECH
CONSTABLES' CENTRAL CONFERENCE BOURNEMOUTH
TUESDAY 12TH MAY 2009

Conference it is my pleasure to address you as the newly appointed Chairman of the Constables' Central Committee.

Today, I'd like to keep my remarks brief; Barack Obama I am not, but open and frank I would like to be.

I have to admit that it's under unusual circumstances that I find myself in the position of Chairman.

However, I am clear about the job in hand and it's my honour to represent you, your interests and all the constables of England and Wales at a crucial time for the police service.

But it is important that we do this united as one team and focused on the job in hand and that is to protect our terms and conditions and maintain the number of officers which the government has promised to maintain.

Conference, you don't need me to tell you that we are operating in a time of huge economic uncertainty. And we are in potentially one of the deepest recessions we have seen for a generation. We as a service have to respond to the challenges this situation poses.

But the worsening economy and the tighter budgets it brings are not the only challenge facing us this year. We must continue to fight against the senseless levels of bureaucratic form filling that ties us to our desks; And we must continue to argue for the correct balance to be struck between effective risk management and risk aversion; and we must continue to make our voices heard by the NPIA, ACPO and the government as they press ahead with their workforce modernisation programme.

Indeed, where we are with the economy, heightens the importance of workforce modernisation and getting it right – which is why we have chosen workforce modernisation as the theme for this year's Conference.

So I am clear on the challenges we face and the options open to us.

I would like to touch on each of these challenges today, offer my thoughts and discuss the solutions we are proposing.

I shall start with the economy as it provides the context in which we will be operating this year. There isn't a constable in this room who hasn't been asked to do 'more with less' over the course of his or her career. This year will be no different – it is likely to get worse.

Despite the difficulties, however, we acknowledge that as a service, and as police constables, we need to do our bit to curb waste and to help drive efficiency. Our recommendations to government and the NPIA have always been about value for money – that will not change. We have always made clear that an “outcomes oriented policing policy” must favour police constables – especially in the bad times.

But, Conference, defending the Office of Constable won't get any easier in the midst of ever tighter budget rounds. That is why I'm asking all of you to contribute to weeding out waste in our service.

Much will be reduced naturally if our proposals for cutting bureaucracy are taken up. Now is the time to put the budgets under the microscope, not take an axe to them.

Yes we need to weed out the expensive, inefficient practices but we also need to make sure that we continue to invest in what works; sworn, well-trained, career police constables.

Reducing headcount shouldn't be the default cost-cutting measure – at the moment it is and that must change. But it will change only if we actively win the argument.

The most important point to push is that a leaner service does not mean a fitter one – especially in troubled times.

We must focus on value and not just price. And constables represent that value. We must find ways to make the most of resources to make sure officer numbers are maintained.

Last year, as you know, we secured a three-year pay deal. My predecessor, Julie Nesbit and Ray Coster, the current General Secretary, whose steadfast campaigning and hard work on the PNB helped secure the deal, are to be congratulated. We thank them for their contributions.

This deal must be defended and the Committee will fight long and hard to defend a fair deal and to retain our right to negotiate through the Police Negotiating Board.

I now turn to the issue of bureaucracy.

Part of the solution for us as a service is to co-operate, wholeheartedly, in the work being done to curb wasteful bureaucracy – bureaucracy of the sort we all know hinders us in our jobs and wastes our time.

I must refer to the good work that the former Chair of the Police Federation, Jan Berry, is doing to find solutions to the issues of bureaucracy. Her interim recommendations make Interesting reading.

In Jan, police officers have a reliable and insightful representative to government and we should all appreciate the effort that she is putting in on our behalf.

As an example, the situation regarding CSOs and bureaucracy is simple – it is back-to-front. Currently CSOs spend most of their time on the streets whilst police officers spend increasingly less;

A greater proportion of our time being allotted to form-filling, administration or awaiting Crown Prosecution Service decisions.

Patently this is wrong; we have said time and time again that effective community policing means that police officers should spend the vast bulk of their time on community policing – and it's no good CSOs being the 'eyes and ears' of constables if constables are tied up in red tape and never see the light of day.

The basis for reductions in police bureaucracy should be to allow us to do the job we signed up to do. It's a bizarre situation where the people brought in to support us end up doing our jobs while we do the office work.

The clear direction should be for support staff to support... and police officers to police.

Conference, I would now like to turn to another area which is extremely important - risk aversion.

Risk is something which officers face every single day – indeed it is what differentiates our job from others.

We all know how frustrating it is to be restricted from taking action due to the misinterpretation of health and safety legislation. We urgently need an open and constructive dialogue about best practice – not the simplistic and unhelpful put-downs about the ‘health and safety taliban’ as referred to by the press. And we cannot allow politicians to play political football with an issue on which our members' lives hang.

The current situation is untenable for officers and bad for the service – How can it be right that, through dynamic risk assessment, pressure is being placed on officers to bear all of the responsibility for assessing the riskiness of each individual incident, while managers try to bear very little, if any at all.

I'm proud that our police service in England and Wales is one of the bravest and most effective in the world but it frustrates me that it is being portrayed that rank and file officers are not doing their job when the reality is that management are casting blanket bans on certain practices, rather than putting in the resources and training to let us get on with the job in hand.

If the service and politicians are serious about community and officer safety then we need to make a change away from the blame culture towards a learning culture.

Our communities will be policed safely so long as those who interfere take time out to understand what they are talking about instead of trying to make political mischief.

Police officers are not just public servants – they are mothers, fathers, sons and daughters who put their lives on the line every day. Obviously, we do not want to endanger our members or the community unnecessarily and so health and safety guidelines and training are crucially important.

It's too easy to apply a blanket ban on any seemingly risky behaviour and it's too easy to pass the responsibility onto officers in the field.

How can we possibly agree to chief constables abrogating their responsibilities by devolving risk assessments down to the frontline officer without giving them the basic training needs and then expecting them to deal with dynamic situations?

They have to learn that they retain responsibility so long as officers carry out their policies correctly.

For too long now we are seeing chief officers trying to distance themselves from introducing a safe system of work by attempting to introduce changes to primary legislation or introducing policies to protect themselves.

The simple fact is that operations are complex and, if you will, dynamic which makes them difficult to assess accurately in the heat of the moment. This means that best practice should be in place well before an incident and all officers should be trained and made aware of the procedures— this is how every successful business organisation works and it should be no different in police work.

The fact is, forces are passing the buck down and trying to absolve themselves of responsibility. Let me tell you, Conference – no police constable would invent these practices as they currently exist.

Part of the definition of a constable is to protect life and property, it is the cornerstone of the way in which we police. Constables will go in where others are running away. But give us the tools to do the job and we will.

The answers are not as simple as the media often allege – they are complex problems and they warrant serious and well constructed solutions.

Your Committee is representing your views to the NPIA and to ACPO. We are asking to enter into an informed and open dialogue on risk where we hope to achieve a safer working environment for all.

So to turn to the theme of this year's Conference – Workforce Modernisation.

It is important to make clear from the start that we, as police officers, understand that there are elements of the service which urgently need reform – many of them I have already touched on. The fact is the government appears to want to turn the clock back to a time before Edmund Davies changed the face of police recruitment and retention.

Let's be clear – we cannot go back to the disastrous situation of the 70's when the relationship between officers and the government had broken down catastrophically.

We've heard a lot recently about the Home Secretary's television viewing habits but it would appear that she has spent far too much time watching 'Life on Mars'.

Many of the reforms, (a term much used and abused) being trialled by the NPIA simply do not work: 2 out of the 9 participating forces have successfully pleaded with the home office to end their trials.

It is clear that in almost every case the main thrust of the proposals is to introduce policing in silos. To 'compartmentalise' the role of police officers.

Now there are, undoubtedly, benefits to specialism – however, there are also I fear worrying drawbacks. Let's take the example of statement-takers. The Home Office wants professional statement-takers – a job that, let's face it, is likely to be performed initially by retiring career officers.

I'm fine with that – that sounds like a good idea. But what happens when they retire from statement-taking? Who will fill their shoes? – not police officers, I can tell you that. They won't be deemed to have a suitable range of skills and they'll be too expensive.

It'll be the problems we have with CSOs and HATOs all over again. Under-trained, under-supported, lacking in crime-fighting experience and, ultimately, ineffective without the support of constables.

But here's the broader problem. I didn't join the police service to be an infantryman; to be a member of a UK civil guard. No; I joined because I wanted to make a difference to people in my community. And that means actually spending time with them.

Conference, I tell you, if our role as constables becomes a totally specialist one where the only contact we have with the public is during riots, or on drugs busts and early-morning raids – then we have lost touch with a crucial element of what it is to be a constable.

Is this what people want from a police service?

The new policing pledge means nothing if it isn't backed up by action. The public want to see police as citizens in uniform – not members of an elite and aloof corps.

As I said earlier, however, there are positive steps being taken by way of reform. Later we will show a film on the successful steps Essex police force has taken to save money without cutting services.

I'm pleased to welcome Roger Baker, the Chief Constable of Essex, to Bournemouth and for consulting with the local Police Federation on project Apex.

Thank you, Conference for listening. Effective representation is never easy – opinions are diverse but the goal is the same.

The Office of Constable is and should remain the absolute bedrock of modern day British policing.

The omni-competent police constable may be expensive as a unit – but it is by far the most cost effective and efficient crime fighting force we have in Britain today. A fragmented workforce operating in differing silos becomes disjointed and will lack cohesion.

I hope you enjoy the discussions and we welcome a lively debate. The next time we meet may be in the heat of a general election campaign.

So Conference – Let's make sure we get it through to all the politicians that we don't want to go 'back to the future',

Policing works with police and communities need constables.

Thank you.