

Welcome to our conference Home Secretary.

Thank you for coming here on only your twelfth day in office and thank you for agreeing to take questions.

I'm sure you've found time for some research on me and I've done a background check on you.

Some of the police files from your colourful student days have gone missing!

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But I was more struck by your recent career.

Secretary of State for Defence, Health, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Leader of the House of Commons and Party Chairman. All in just seven years! That's quite a pedigree.

Jeremy Paxman describes you as an "attack dog."

Can I recommend that one of the first problems you get your teeth stuck into is the criminal justice system and the foreign prisoner fiasco.

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Not for the first time police officers are clearing up the mess left behind by others.

You will know that one of those wanted in connection with the cowardly shooting of Sharon Beshenivsky was reportedly let back onto the streets when he should have been deported.

Many officers feel intense anger at having lost a friend.

Others are exasperated at yet another disaster in communications.

We are bewildered at how this could have happened in Britain in 2006, when we're supposed to have a joined up criminal justice system.

BEWILDERED that the chief suspect for Sharon's murder is believed to be hiding in the very country it was considered too dangerous to send him back to in the first place.

And bewildered that the justice system appears so skewed that we value the rights of criminals over those of ordinary, law abiding citizens.

We've seen too many unbalanced interpretations of the Human Rights Act. Where are Victims' rights?

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Home Secretary, a staggering 53% of frontline officers say their lives have been in serious danger during the last two years.

Their willingness to continue to work despite this threat reflects the indomitable spirit of policing.

Nisha Patel–Nasri had this spirit in abundance and her brutal murder underlines the tragic regularity we lose police officers.

This week we all mourn her death and our thoughts are with those closest to her.

Nisha may have only been in uniform for several hours a week but she never considered herself off duty.

She was a SPECIAL constable in every sense of the word.

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On the subject of bravery, there is a piece of unfinished business.

Your intervention, even at this late stage, would address a grievance keenly felt throughout the service, and especially in the Greater Manchester area.

I am referring to the unjust decision not to recognise the gallantry of DC Stephen Oake with a posthumous George Cross.

As I said in my letter to the Prime Minister in February, we fully understand that the George Cross is an extremely rare accolade – awarded once in a generation.

Stephen was a once in a generation officer.

He went beyond the call of duty knowing the full risks that he was taking.

Yet some anonymous officials decided that this selfless act did not meet the criteria.

This decision is nothing less than an insult to the memory of an extra-ordinary officer, and an affront to all police officers.

I, we, the whole police service implore you to right this wrong.

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Now as you know there's no such thing as a quiet year in policing.

Since our last conference, we've witnessed a terrible atrocity and the very best of British policing.

The terror attack that killed so many on the 7th July was not just, in those ever enduring words of President Roosevelt, “a day of infamy” – it was a day of heroism.

Whether it be dashing down staircases into the unknown; the 140 degree heat in the train wreckage, the dust and asbestos; or flooding the streets to reassure the public – every single police officer and every single member of the emergency services were heroes.

The amazing speed and efficiency of the operation to catch the failed suicide bombers of the 21st July was a credit to modern policing and detective work at its best.

The Stockwell Shooting, on the 22nd of July, was a tragedy for all concerned.

The death of Jean Charles de Menezes has put into sharp focus how we police this new, unparalleled threat.

I’m not going to go into all the specifics of the case now as the investigations are ongoing.

But I want to say this. Officers volunteer to carry firearms, and I salute the courage of any officer who has to face the hardest decision anyone could imagine.

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Without the resolution of firearms officers the streets would quickly become impossible to police.

Yesterday, we heard a moving account from Neil Sharman of the extreme pressures officers face.

The overwhelming feeling of conference is that police officers must be indemnified from prosecution, provided they are operating in line with their instructions and training.

We are not confident that the Independent Police Complaints Commission understands or acknowledges the context in which we operate.

We are the most accountable police service in the world.

The same cannot be said about the IPCC.

They have the luxury of hindsight. We do not.

The IPCC reports must be fair; balanced; and above all, impartial.

WE will settle for nothing less.

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Like any frontline, the fight against crime requires foot-soldiers.

One year after the General Election we still have over 140,000 police officers. This is to the government's credit.

Let's not forget that officer numbers have risen by ten percent over the last five years though you will appreciate that this compares unfavourably with the 20 percent increase in nurses.

However we hear disturbing reports from Chief Officers that they think they can police this country with 25,000 less police officers. This cannot be done.

Your government said that PCSOs were supposed to be supporting police officers - not replacing them.

It is outrageous that Chief Officers are even harbouring such thoughts. The public will be put at risk. This is cheaper policing not better policing.

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We did have 142,000 officers. In some areas, numbers are already falling and we heard this morning how policing has been affected.

Herein lies two dangers.

First: we fail to value the versatility that only fully-sworn police officers provide.

Second: we fall into the same old pattern of wild recruitment cycles. Cycles that put impossible strains on probationer training and create the dire shortages that we have seen in the sergeants' rank.

Home Secretary, every single police officer lost is a cause for celebration for the criminal fraternity.

Every police officer gained is a celebration for law abiding families.

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From mathematics to geography – or rather force amalgamations.

The whole process has been a curious debacle.

No one honestly believes that if we were to start from scratch tomorrow we would replicate the 43 force structure of today. And very few believe the status quo could continue indefinitely.

HMIC's Closing the Gap report stated the service does not have the capacity to deal with level two crime. It highlighted that in order to provide protective services, force boundaries may have to change.

There was a readiness to change.

So why is it that something, theoretically, so eminently sensible could go so catastrophically wrong in practice?

The answer's simple: Consultation without comprehension – comprehension of what would be the best for policing and what would be best for the public.

For example why integrate North and South Wales when we all know the criminal markets are miles apart.

Let me be clear.

These mergers must be driven by how we can best deliver policing for the public - not the demands of election timetables or regional government boundaries.

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We must also not forget that structural reform is not just about forces merging.

Home Secretary, the Police and Justice Bill introduces the most radical changes to Basic Command Units in the history of the police service.

The Home Office claim that the changes will merely assist local partnerships and ensure BCUs share the same boundaries as local authorities.

But the legislation goes much further. Sir Chris Fox, the then President of ACPO, said the Bill is a fundamental constitutional shift and he couldn't support it.

The Association of Police Authorities have grave concerns that the bill brings local policing under greater central control.

Police stations, unlike schools or hospitals, cannot stand in isolation.

Every day prolific offender units work across BCUs and across force boundaries and every week BCUs share resources to police football matches.

They are reliant on each other, they work together, they stand together.

WE ARE ASSURED that there is no planned power-grab by central government – but we've heard that before.

We fear that power-hungry mandarins and, yes, Ministers will use these changes to micromanage and finance BCUs direct from Marsham Street.

Our experience has taught us harsh lessons about the competence of the Home Office.

In light of recent events perhaps its time to trust us more – and your officials less.

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As in politics, perception and reality are very different beasts in policing.

The service has once again come under attack from some in the media and Parliament for malingering.

Debates have centred on how to sack the unsackable and how to cut sickness.

We do not deserve that reputation.

It is our responsibility as a staff association and, if I may say so, your responsibility as Home Secretary, to correct these outlandish claims.

Let us lay to rest the myth that police officers can't be sacked because of police regulations. Police officers CAN be sacked. It's just down to Chief Officers to do their jobs properly.

Let us lay to rest the myth that the service suffers from chronic sickness absence. The reality is that police officers' sickness rates are lower than police staff; lower than CSOs; lower than the public sector average.

And may I add one last comparison a little closer to home – the Home Office to be exact – where the days lost a year are higher than police officers.

Yes police sickness rates are marginally higher than the private sector averages.

But let's compare two jobs.

The average office worker has to cope with colds, paper cuts, burns from the coffee machine – possibly even the unwanted attentions of a Deputy Prime Minister!

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The average police officer operates in the most challenging of environments, taking everything criminals throw at them; behaving in the sort of way we saw in the bravery video.

Just ask Sharon Beshenivsky's husband.

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When David Blunkett was last in Bournemouth I described the incoherent police reform programme as a mystery coach tour.

Two years on, the metaphor is redundant.

The coach has morphed into a juggernaut and it's out of control, hurtling downhill at an alarming pace.

That's why we need a driver who knows when to apply the brakes.

That's why we need a coherent vision for the future.

In the last 12 months we've seen on display the inherent flexibility that only multi-skilled, multi-trained, multi-purpose officers can offer.

At the G8 summit, officers demonstrated huge skill and judgement in complex crowd control.

In London, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, officers worked round the clock to reassure a traumatised public.

Most recently we have seen strikes by some police staff.

Look at how their roles were covered.

Whose rest days were cancelled?

Who covered on the front counters?

Who kept the custody suites up and running?

Police Officers – every single time.

Home Secretary, show me any member of the public who resents a multi-skilled police officer in a time of crisis and then let's have a discussion about elements of your policing vision for the future.

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Whatever the direction of that debate there is one forum that is wholly inappropriate to determine the future of policing: the Police Negotiating Board of the United Kingdom.

I fully appreciate that you won't have been fully briefed on the details, history or nuances of the PNB.

So here's a side of the argument you may not hear from your civil servants:
Fair pay and conditions are vital for the welfare and effectiveness of the whole service.

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The service's greatest asset is its officers and their experience, so police pay must attract and retain; it must encourage those officers who wish to specialise; and it must encourage officers with the desire and potential to seek promotion.

It doesn't matter whether you are policing in London or Glasgow, Cardiff or Belfast, we police together; we must continue to negotiate together.

And let's not forget about the uniqueness of policing:

Our personal restrictions on political activity;

Our 24/7 accountability for our actions or inactions;

And finally, unlike teachers, university lecturers, firemen and train drivers - our unbroken 87-year guarantee not to take industrial action

That's why our pay must reflect wage changes across the private sector. Our financial security is protected so long as our current indexing arrangements are protected. And that's why officers are so worried.

We know the Treasury's purse strings are tightening and we know force amalgamations may lead to deficits.

But these costs must not be recouped from the pockets of police officers.

You may ask why we are concerned because the Official Side of the PNB haven't even tabled their proposals.

That's precisely why we're concerned. The Official Side have had since last October to table their proposals on pay and indexation. I dare say there's an embargo on the top of their report: "Not to be published until after the Police Federation Conference".

Well I've got a note to add to that: "Not to be published by this new Home Secretary."

Let me make it clear: Our current indexation arrangements are sacrosanct.

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Problems run deeper than mere pay alone.

PNB is supposed to negotiate pay and allowances. That's its job. That's its expertise. And it has stood the test of time – the new pension deal is a testament to that.

But PNB should not negotiate the future of policing. PNB should not be used as a tool to re-engineer the workforce.

The Official Side has been promoting Advanced Constables and Direct Entry.

These are not issues for the PNB and police officers WILL not tolerate workforce modernisation through the backdoor.

Conclusion

Home Secretary, you arrive in your new post with a record of strong leadership and decisive action.

You were popular with the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

You understood that army officers on the streets of Basra and Kabul needed the instinctive support of Ministers.

Police officers fighting crime on the streets of London or Manchester need that same unequivocal backing.

We appreciate support of that kind.

You have a mandate from the Prime Minister to tackle the failings of the criminal justice system. And there are many.

You have our support for that too.

However the Prime Minister has also urged you to 'speed up' the pace of police reform.

This is where the views of politicians differ from police officers.

Events of the last few weeks have demonstrated that your most immediate priorities may lie elsewhere.

But police reform is still in a mess and needs urgent attention.

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I'd hazard a guess that each officer in this room has on average 15 years policing experience.

That's the best part of 20 thousand years experience between us, so we have some idea when to stand up and say "enough is enough".

We share your determination to protect the public and make Britain a safer place.

But rash change is never the answer.

The Home Office is trying to do too much, too quickly, and in the wrong order.

Micromanage our work, threaten our pay, fail to respect our commitment and toy with our political independence and you risk undermining everything you seek to achieve.

Home Secretary, let's not fight each other, let's fight crime together.