

Distinguished guests, fraternal delegates, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

You are all welcome to this, our 45<sup>th</sup> annual conference.

What you've just seen on the screen illustrates the daunting challenges facing policing in Northern Ireland in 2017.

One Officer is awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for tackling and subduing a knife-wielding attacker. Sergeant Mark Wright sustained dreadful head wounds in protecting a number of vulnerable people.

In an under-stated way, Mark said he was.....just doing his job.

His actions epitomise the very best traditions and qualities of a Police Officer....traditions that are replicated hundreds of times a-week across Northern Ireland.

Where officers place themselves in life-threatening situations so that others can remain safe.

The second Officer you heard from was lucky to escape with his life in a cowardly and reckless terrorist gun attack at a filling station forecourt on the Crumlin Road in Belfast.

He received a serious gunshot wound from an AK47 assault rifle. It's a sad reflection on where we are that in 2017, we're still expected to police

in an environment where such lethal weaponry is being used against Police officers.

I'm pleased to be able to report that our young colleague is making a steady recovery at home, but has already undergone many hours of painful surgery and rehabilitation.

I'm sure conference will join with me in extending best wishes to this officer....and our heartfelt congratulations to Sergeant Wright on his Queen's Gallantry award.

The attacks were different. The aim was the same: to inflict as much damage as the attackers could manage on Officers who place themselves in harm's way to protect the public they serve.

The men and women I'm proud to represent are under daily attack.

They are assaulted on the streets when they try to restore order.

They are assaulted in homes when they try to protect the vulnerable.

They are also under attack from a Government that refuses to acknowledge that continued austerity and the denial of essential resources will have such a damaging effect on policing and society that it could take generations to restore.

The Chief Constable is staring at a 3% reduction in his budget. That's about £20 million. Since 2004, cuts totalling almost £390 million have been implemented. Officer numbers have fallen by more than a quarter, and six out of ten stations have been closed.

So, in 2017, we find ourselves heavily depleted and under-financed at a time of rising demand, a continuing severe threat from murderous dissident groupings and more complex crime.

Neighbourhood Policing Teams will continue to be reduced with less and less contact and engagement on the ground. The emphasis will be on being reactive rather than proactive.

More stations will be earmarked for closure and proactive work that combats all levels of crime will undergo a marked decline.

The challenge becomes all the greater next year, given that over 700 Officers will be eligible to retire. That figure doesn't take into account the number of Officers who are already eligible to go. Not all of them will exercise their entitlement, but it's fair to assume that a significant proportion will leave.

By the time we gather for our conference next year, there's a very real possibility that the PSNI will be downsized to below the worrying figure of 6,600 recently quoted by Mr Hamilton.

Colleagues, losing that number will have dire consequences. We're all painfully aware of the way in which Officers already plug gaps in the

service. Bad as these pressures are now, they are set to worsen with hundreds fewer on the payroll expected to do the impossible by propping up a service that is grossly under-funded.

We're now beyond the point of warning of a crisis. Right now, we're in the middle of a crisis.

What's needed now is for our politicians from all sides to make a stand against this madness of continuing austerity. They must make policing one of their main priorities and campaign as never before to get the Government to re-think its disastrous policy.

This crisis will cause real hardship in communities desperate for professional policing and not the type of justice meted out by thugs and terrorists. They want the reassurance only the Police can offer.

The desire to build strong and lasting relationships with communities will be seriously undermined, and that means efforts to bring about change in attitudes will suffer serious reversal.

It makes no sense at all to continue to deplete and degrade the service. Continue down this road, and officer numbers will shrink to unsustainable levels with a marked deterioration in service resilience, and levels of service the community has a right to expect.

## **Pay and Austerity**

Police officers have borne more than their fair share of austerity. Seven years of no or negligible pay rises have resulted in pay falling by **15%** in real terms. And, as you know, it was the second part of a two-pronged attack with our pensions caught in the eye of the storm.

If policing is to continue to recruit and retain officers, then the Government must realise that the 1% public sector pay policy is unsustainable going forward.

Police pay is independently assessed by a Pay Review Body and there's now an onus on them to show their independence in the light of stark economic evidence of how pay is being eroded, and not just follow blindly the pay policy set by Government.

If we are to have confidence in this pay mechanism as a truly independent body, then we need assurance that the evidence is being looked at in the wider economic context.

Like other public servants, Police officers expect and deserve a pay rise that at least matches inflation. Unlike MPs, we are realistic and do not expect 11% of a salary hike, but we do expect a pay rise which, at the very least, keeps abreast with inflation, and not one which sets out to merely fit in or rubber stamp a 1% government diktat.

Both the pay review body and the Government have to face economic realities. One must recommend, the other must accept the case and sanction a realistic increase.

## **Direct Entry**

Under the thin veil of workforce modernisation, the concept of direct entry to policing at Superintendent rank has been suggested as a way of bringing fresh thinking into the organisation at a senior level. This Federation opposes Direct entry at this, or any other management level.

I would contend that such a move would be detrimental to policing and not enhance it. There are senior leaders within the PSNI who do not, or do not need, to hold the rank of Superintendent.

I would ask: what is the Chief Constable trying to fix with such a proposal?

This Federation holds the view that the role of Superintendent should only be bestowed on those who can bring policing experience to the role.

If the service needs specialist senior managers, then recruit them as such and not create the potential for a senior police officer to be appointed to a role that requires critical decision-making based on his or her policing experience.

Any funding set aside to recruit the one or two officers being suggested would be better used developing the existing ranks of Inspector and Chief Inspector for senior roles.

Experience is vital in a policing leadership role, and to veer away from a tried and trusted progression sends a worrying and wrong message to

the many competent and capable officers who hold middle management ranks.

We would call on the Department of Justice to kick this idea into touch and follow the example of the Justice Secretary in the Scottish Government who shares our misgivings and has taken the step to consign this proposal to the bin.

### **Physical and verbal assaults**

In 2017, we also have to contend with the cowardly actions of people who consider our officers fair game for physical and verbal assaults.

Official PSNI statistics, show that between 2012 and 2016, there have been, on average, 3118 crimes of assault against a police officer. This is a shocking figure, made worse by the fact that the conviction rate for those reported for such assaults has fallen from 52% to 42% over the same period.

The Police Federation has just concluded a Survey on assaults on officers, which quantifies the frequency of these attacks and the way officers feel about the daily gauntlet they run.

Here, for the first time, we've been able to quantify the extent of the menace, and what officers have to contend with on the streets and in Custody Suites.

Eight out of ten officers said they'd been a victim of a verbal or physical assault in the previous 12 months.

They reported a total of 120 assaults per officer over the course of a 12-month period.

There are more than two verbal threats per officer per week!

Violence against officers was widespread with 91% reporting unarmed physical assaults including wrestling, hitting and kicking incidents.

Forty-seven percent had to deal with being threatened or assaulted with an offensive weapon such as a stick or a bottle, and 13% reported assault with a deadly weapon such as a firearm.

### **Introduce Spitguards now**

Nearly three-quarters of the surveyed officers highlighted the disgusting act of being spat at while they did their job, and reported an average of six spitting incidents each.

It is vile and disgusting behaviour, and it's high time our officers were given adequate protection.

It's a particular problem in Custody Suites or during prisoner transfer. There's something perverse in the fact that Officers who look after the



safety and welfare of detained individuals end up on the receiving end of such reprehensible behaviour.

This Federation has long campaigned for the introduction of spitguards to counter this sickening practice.

From this Conference, we demand the immediate introduction of spitguards to afford adequate protection to Officers. To those who think that spitguards is a violation of a human right, we would ask: How much a violation of an officer's rights, is it if they have to endure such obnoxious assaults on their person?

Spitting isn't the same as suffering a physical injury or bruise, but it is every bit as bad, and every bit as unacceptable. The message must go out that if you don't want to wear a spitguard, then you shouldn't spit at Officers!

The introduction of spitguards is backed by the Home Secretary, and we see no reason why there should be any further delay in their introduction.

Our survey also showed that almost half the Officers injured in work-related violence required medical attention.

For many, it meant days off work recuperating at home.

All of which has a knock-on effect on an already badly stretched and under-resourced service.

Despite being subjected to such a wide range of assaults and attacks, where possible, officers try to carry on and do the job. While they would expect to experience occasional violence, the frequency of attacks is quite frightening.

There's a mistaken perception that this level of violence is 'part of the job' or 'par for the course'. I can assure you that if this level of assaults was taking place elsewhere in the public or the private sector, it would not be tolerated for one second.

No one, no matter what their job, should have to experience violence at the workplace as a matter of course.

### **Tougher sentencing**

Many of our Officers highlighted the absence of robust deterrents. They would like tougher sentencing by the Courts coupled with a greater willingness to take assaults on police more seriously.

These findings are an appalling indictment on those who would carry out physical and verbal assaults, and on those who don't view them as seriously as they should.

Once again, this association is calling for a fundamental reappraisal in sentencing – where mandatory custodial sentences are handed out for more serious assaults. The Government can no longer view attacks on officers as less serious than assaults on members of the public. An inability or reluctance to hand down meaningful sentences will merely

serve to further undermine the rule of law and damage society as a whole.

Beyond the steps of the Court, society generally needs to re-examine attitudes towards the police.

Creeping acceptance of violent behaviour will not serve us well. We as a society have to call a halt to indifference and build an acceptance of the view that an attack on a police officer is an assault on society and will no longer be tolerated.

### **Officer numbers and budgets**

To enable effective policing, the Police service has to be adequately resourced. Officer numbers are at an all-time low, and are being depleted on a weekly basis. Budgets continue to be savaged.

The reality is that we're now in the region of 300 fewer officers than the 6,963 figure which the Chief Constable had assessed as being a realistic number.

We have had impressive results curtailing terrorism, and reducing crime in some areas, but that effort shouldn't be at the expense of other areas of policing.

We can't rely on a ready stream of mutual aid to assist at times of operational surge. To redeploy officers from the rest of the United Kingdom is costly, and quite frankly not sustainable. Unlike the rest of

the United Kingdom, there is no operational or political appetite to deploy military resources in response to an increasing terrorist threat from whatever quarter.

Our instincts are to get on with the job, but there's a limit whenever we're so under-staffed. Something will give under the strain, and maybe when that reality comes crashing home, those who argue that we can do more with a lot less, or those who acquiesce to cuts, will see the folly of their ways.

There's still time to fix what needs fixing, and do what's right not just for us, but for society as a whole.

Eight days from now, we head to polling stations to elect the 18 MPs from Northern Ireland in the snap General Election. As we exercise our franchise, as a region, we will remain locked in political stalemate.

No Assembly. No Executive. No Ministers to fight our corner. No Minister here today to respond to this address. There's a very real prospect of the imposition of Direct Rule which could last some considerable amount of time.

Whoever is in charge must realise the lasting damage that is being inflicted on policing by continued and unsustainable austerity.

**PONI**

The concerns the Police Federation have with the absence of credible accountability within the Police Ombudsman's office have been well documented.

Can I put one myth to bed however?

We are not fundamentally opposed to the function of the Police Ombudsman, in relation to the independent investigation of genuine complaints from members of the public.

The need for the community to have confidence in such a body is obvious.

However, this has as to be balanced by the need for police officers to have confidence in the investigative competence of the office, and that it takes into consideration the environment in which policing operates.

It gives me no pleasure to say that, unfortunately, there is very little officer confidence in relation to the operation of the ombudsman's office. The credibility of the office is also seriously questioned.

It is often viewed as nothing more than a pawn in a political game, one where it revels in publicising minor indiscretions and attempting to balance this with evidence of officers doing their job competently in an extremely challenging environment.

We all acknowledge that mistakes do happen, but we need to move to a culture more akin to organisational learning than blaming individual officers.

The recent revelations about a firearm in a drawer and the theft of the most sensitive of information, demand that the Government must redefine the role of the office to ensure that the men and women I represent are not the victims of a 'witchhunt', and are not hung out to dry without the benefit of an appeal process.

Reform is not so much desirable as essential. There is an obvious need for an independent avenue of appeal, whereby officers will have meaningful redress against malicious complaints and inept investigations.

The Ombudsman is with us today and I say to him that this isn't about you, but rather the legislative architecture of the system you preside over. If your office conducts itself with the high standards you demand of police officers, then surely you have nothing to fear from such accountability.

### **Role of the PPS**

In addition, the role of the PPS in recommending officers for prosecution as a result of PONI reports is also questionable. Several cases against officers were dismissed immediately by Judges when the evidence had been presented.

Examples of failure to produce relevant additional CCTV evidence which would explain an officer's lawful actions, or to take fully into account the operational context, only add fuel to the fire that officers are being reported for prosecution for matters which fail to take into account their unique role in society.

Police officers have a legal obligation to protect society and, as such, often need to resort to the use of force, to either defend themselves, vulnerable people or victims of violence.

The same threshold for prosecution should, therefore, not apply to a police officer lawfully carrying out their duty, as would hold for a member of the public who uses violence or force.

## **LEGACY**

Last year, the Federation set out its position on legacy in forthright and unequivocal terms.

We seek fairness and objectivity. We want justice for the hundreds of officers who were murdered.

What we don't want is to have anything that is handled using the prism of political expediency or pandering to those who would re-write history.

That would deliver a massive disservice to all of those who deserve better.

We argued that there should be no devaluing or demonising the role of a distinguished police service at a time of unparalleled political and social upheaval.

We made the case for properly constructed legacy institutions which demonstrated balance, but which didn't lean towards one side in order to placate and mollify the other.

We would be implacably opposed to any attempt to equate the actions of terrorists with the heroic and selfless efforts of officers to protect the wider community.

As we look back at what transpired, there's a tendency to ignore the context in which officers operated where, on occasions, there were dozens of murders a-month coupled with bomb attacks and pro-active policing operations which prevented much greater loss of life.

Our view was, is and always will be that if there's substantive evidence of criminality, then that individual, irrespective of their role, must be brought before the courts and not merely made the subject of innuendo and baseless speculation.

### **'Collusion'**

Within this context, there needs to be a relevant and legal definition of the word 'collusion'.



Up until now, 'collusion' has been taken to mean criminal conspiracy. In fact, there is no agreed definition of the word 'collusion' in policing or in our courts.

This dangerous word is ideal for a headline, but it does a monstrous disservice to the thousands of men and women who had to deal with a sustained terrorist campaign.

Without it defined in statute, this word 'collusion' could also serve to cruelly reopen the wounds of families in the mistaken belief that it would provide them with legal closure.

## **Closing**

On a number of fronts, policing in Northern Ireland is under attack. At a time when it should be strengthened to deal with complex crime and terrorism, it is being eroded.

This undermining will have knock-on harmful consequences both for officers and the public they serve.

The Government can remedy a lot of the ills. We can enhance resilience to cope with the ever-changing demands placed upon the service. But to do that, we must have a change of heart from the top.

Austerity has inflicted great damage on policing in Northern Ireland, and it must come to an end.

In the world of government finances, policing is a low-hanging fruit. It's short-termism at its worst and demands a different approach.

Do what's right, and not what's easy.

Think of the consequences of your actions.

And instead of a fixation with budgets and cuts, think of the men and women who are out there day and daily policing a society that is still fractured. A society that is crying out for a visible police service delivering for each and every citizen who wants nothing more than to get on with their lives and live in peace.