

## **Address by Liam Kelly, Chair, Police Federation for Northern Ireland**

Minister, Chief Constable, distinguished guests, colleagues, a very good morning and warm welcome to the 54<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland.

We meet in the midst of serious challenges for the people we give a voice to and the Service that has a solemn duty to each and every citizen and which still finds itself on the ropes.

The 4<sup>th</sup> November this year marks the Silver Anniversary of the creation of the PSNI and I take no pleasure in saying to you today that the outlook has never been as bleak or filled with as much foreboding.

Let me deal first of all with what happened in Dunmurry and Lurgan.

Lurgan set the scene – what quickly followed at Dunmurry was a disgraceful attempt to kill or injure our colleagues.

It was done by a self-important and delusional bunch of cowards.

These thugs want to catapult us back to the dark, dismal days of the Troubles.

They want us on edge....

To make people think twice about a career in policing or, if they already serve, to consider exiting the organisation.

They must not be allowed to hold the policing family and this entire community to ransom. In the past they have previously tried to intimidate our officers and their families. They failed then and I can tell you today they will fail again.

The terrorists seek to undermine the hard-earned gains and advances we've made as a society.

Their pathetic agenda is based on ignorance, backward warped thinking, and violence.

In short, as Dunmurry graphically illustrated, they don't mind threatening the lives of innocent people in the fruitless pursuit of trying to harm our colleagues.

A piece of footage captured on an officer's body worn video stands in sharp contrast to the hopeless practitioners of evil.

An officer is seen running towards the hijacked vehicle as it explodes. He turns but what happened next is nothing short of exemplary and courageous.

As the car exploded, he turned in shock to protect himself but then changed direction and, instead, once again ran towards danger. To alert families in nearby houses. To protect defenceless vulnerable people and guide them to safety.

He and his colleagues uphold the very best traditions of policing. When I spoke to them all, they were embarrassed with all the attention they were getting. They viewed what he did as 'just part of the job.'

Well it was more than that – their actions were selfless, professional, and brave and we collectively owe them our unequivocal appreciation and gratitude.

Colleagues, the men and women you represent on your Boards are the very best in policing, anywhere in the World.

The silent, vast majority of our officers go about their work with diligence, professionalism and resourcefulness.

They don't shirk or shy away when their intervention is sought or required.

There is no thinking twice in often challenging situations.

Their instincts are to help, protect victims and save lives.

I know stories abound of where our colleagues do heroic work.....

By pulling people from a blazing house fire.....

By jumping into a fast-moving river to save a drowning individual.....

Or by investigating harrowing complex criminal cases.....

We have unsung heroes everywhere in the Service.

And it's for that reason, I'm delighted to announce that, later this year at the PFNI Bravery and Excellence Awards, we will again honour those colleagues from the federated ranks who go above and beyond in carrying out their duties.

Now, more than ever, it's important to get the balance right.

And, in this respect, the work done in the recent six-part ‘Peelers: The PSNI for Real’ programmes gave the public a front row seat into what officers do every day to keep us safe..

Seven officers formed the backbone of the series.

Seven men and women who set their anonymity aside to allow the cameras to ‘shadow’ their every move, every incident they responded to, and then deliver frank, front-of-camera interviews on the work they do.

For them, there is no routine. No two days the same.

This was raw, gusty, challenging and compelling television.

The public saw what it was really like for officers to handle a violent street situation; an edgy protest in a housing estate; the tragedy of drug use; a road accident and being the subject of appalling verbal and physical abuse.

The seven officers - Tom, Anna, Adam, Nigel, Jade, Dave and Perri – are to be congratulated for stepping up, and for giving this entire community a glimpse into what it’s really like to police our streets.

The programmes were the brainchild of Stephen Nolan and although ordinarily he doesn’t hold back when criticism is levelled at the Service, I must say he has made a series that has justifiably topped the viewing charts and has been very positive for PSNI. The programmes have been such a success that BBC have already announced a second series.

As well as our Bravery and Excellence Awards in the Autumn, we will also be marking the Silver Jubilee of the coming into being of the PSNI.

Twenty-five years of momentous change.

In November 2001, there were around 7,500 full-time officers, serving a population of 1.69 million people.

Today, with a population now exceeding 1.93 million, the actual number of officers disgracefully stands at **6,315**

When you remove student officers from this total, the figure slides down towards 6000.

In its first quarter of a century, PSNI have had six Chief Constables.

Change was – and still is - everywhere.

There was the controversial instrument of 50-50 recruitment to address under-representation...

new uniforms and livery...

innovative evidential and protective tools such as taser and body worn video....

an expanded Air Support Unit based at Aldergrove....

creation of new departments, Regions and dedicated units....

and all this whilst being under the most intense scrutiny of any police service in Europe.

Stop-start political institutions haven't helped. Shrugging of the shoulders and a blind eye was turned to falling police numbers.

Increased workloads have led to unacceptable pressures on officers. Injuries on duty became part of the norm including colleagues suffering from a range of debilitating psychological injuries.

The Service disgustingly remains languishing at the back of the queue when it comes to funding and having effective resources.

Any meaningful forward planning is impossible to do because of a devolved Executive that fails to treat policing as a major priority.

An effective three-year budget is what's required, but given the scale of political in-fighting, there's as much chance of that happening as there is of Executive Ministers and MLAs turning down their inflation-busting pay rise.

Our first twenty-five years have also been marked by tragedy. We've had officers killed whilst on duty; two officers murdered by terrorists, and many colleagues severely injured both physically and psychologically.

The threat level may have been reducing as we make painfully slow progress towards a normalised society, but our men and women must remain vigilant and mindful of the desire of so-called dissident republican terrorist groupings to cause us harm.

Challenges abound, not least when it comes to recruitment and steadying an organisation that is all too often buffeted by strong political head winds.

We have been, and remain, a political football. It's a situation that's corrosive and demoralising.

Of course, the Service could have more from a Catholic background in its ranks, but if there's an indifferent political approach taken by some parties, combined with community opposition and a terrorist threat to those who take the brave decision, it's little wonder there's a reluctance to raise heads above the parapet and come forward.

To re-introduce 50-50 would be an arbitrary and rather crude attempt at social engineering.

The merit principle must prevail in favour of something that would build in bias and one-sidedness. 50-50 is no panacea.

There regrettably remains an unhealthy focus on the religious background of our officers that is not replicated in any other sector.

In line with all other public services, our officers should be selected on the basis of their skills and attributes to do the difficult job.

Their religious background is not only irrelevant to them but also to the public when they are responding to calls for help and service.

It would be a backward step to re-activate 50-50 and lead to understandable resentment. Engineering the figures would be a lazy way of trying to fix a societal problem.

From this platform today, I join the Chief Constable in saying bluntly that its time everyone did their bit in a more vocal and assertive way to promote a career in policing.

Those applicants from a Catholic background in particular have to be given specific reassurance from nationalist politicians and church leaders that there is no impediment or threat to them becoming police officers.

Politicians and church figures and, yes, leading writers in prominent publications, cannot have it both ways.

Too often, there's a rush to criticise, but when it comes to giving wholehearted encouragement and unequivocal endorsement of a career in policing, quite a few usually vocal spokespeople develop a case of laryngitis. Their silence is deafening.

It's one thing to only be heard when bemoaning, criticising and condemning.

It's another thing entirely to be part of the solution and take the principled step to end half-hearted support for policing.

It's time for all of them to get off the fence....

Do what's right....

and make a stand with us and for us.

Present-day policing continues to be poised on a precarious cliff-edge.

Financial crisis follows financial crisis.

We've seen services pared back to the bone and yet there's no let-up or respite.

Right now, the Service is facing another three years of projected budget deficits.

This relentless onslaught could see this year's deficit hit £65 million.

In 2027-28, the shortfall is expected to reach £96 million.

And in Year Three, the deficit could soar to £106 million.

These numbers are frightening.

The total projected deficit is mind-numbing.

The books simply cannot be balanced unless policing becomes a totally different service to the detriment of our officers, victims and communities.

A different service where all but the most serious crimes are investigated.

Where victims of crime are routinely given a Crime Number, and little else.

Where policing our roads, streets, communities and fulfilling an essential counter-terrorism role are impaired and curtailed to unacceptable and dangerous levels.

We're staring at a financial meltdown and, Minister, it must be averted with policing put on a stable and reliable financial footing.

Our political leaders must share most of the blame for this crisis.

One year from now, we'll have come through an Assembly election and will know the composition of the new Northern Ireland Executive.

We'll have put behind us the present Assembly and Executive Committee that has miserably failed to deliver.

Policing has struggled to make it on to the agenda in any meaningful way.

We witnessed dithering and delay over the PSNI Recovery Plan, but the promised three-year budget to give us a chance to implement growth in a structured manner hasn't materialised yet.

We are expecting to be left with an unsatisfactory one-year, hand-to-mouth budget.

Westminster, too, has abandoned policing here as a priority. The Secretary of State has washed his hands of us, arguing the budget is a matter for the devolved institutions.

Devolution was meant to be a boost, a better way of delivering accountable government.

In our experience, instead of being a positive step, it has been disastrous.

We have London and Belfast passing the parcel of blame in a game of unedifying brinkmanship.

We have Belfast complaining of insufficient financial resources. The police budget is squeezed where continued constrained one-year financial settlements are an obvious barrier to forward-planning.

Despite the promise of ring-fenced funding, the PSNI Recovery Plan, which should have delivered an increase to 7,000 officers by April 2028, is in grave doubt.

By April 2026, the end of year 1 of the Recovery Plan, we were supposed to grow by 150 officers so we would have 6,500 in service.

Despite the belated funding we're currently at 6,315 – 35 officers less than where the original baseline was drawn in 2025.

It gives me no pleasure to highlight that this federation warned exactly about this when our politicians were indecisive and delayed the recovery plan funding and ongoing commitment.

The next staging post in April 2027 projected we would have 6750 officers in post. That would require a growth of 435 officers in year.

On average PSNI conservatively lose around 350 officers per year, so recruitment would have to be in the region of 800 officers to just catch up.

Let's be honest – that is now simply not going to happen. Even with the best will in the world, the knock-on effect to get to 7000 officers by April 2028 has effectively evaporated.

As we all know, even this 7,000 target is well below what is actually needed and runs a coach and four through the wishy-washy Programme for Government commitment of getting to 7,500 officers.

This is a crisis. We're not crying wolf or scaremongering.

We're being straight with our political masters and the general public and it's a crisis that has to be acknowledged and rectified, not with warm words, but with credible actions and funding.

The time for intervention is right now.

We're facing stagnation caused by intolerable pressures. This is having a shocking and corrosive effect on our men and women who are working above and beyond what's required to keep the show on the road.

They can only do so much with a Service that is creaking under the weight of seemingly constant criticism and political indifference.

To date, what passed for intervention has been half hearted words of support and window dressing.

No financial lifeline.

Just the usual delay and guff and bluster.

We have effectively been left to wither doing an enormous disservice to our colleagues and the communities we serve.

Legacy issues continue to be a millstone around our future viability and drag on our scarce resources.

Without much-needed changes, the PSNI must pick up the bill for some 1,150 civil cases stretching right back to the seventies.

The total bill could top £875 million with a significant amount of that expected to be going into the coffers of legal firms.

The new Legacy Commission will expect to call on the Service to do the spadework in searching for old files, if they exist, at an estimated cost of £24 million a-year.

Money that would be better spent on recruitment and bolstering our officer cadre!

As the BBC 'Peelers' series showed, every day our men and women continue to endure the attentions of people intent on harming them.

The figures are appalling.

Between 2021 and last year, there were 3,778 assaults on officers. The total that sustained injuries stood at 2,039.

Injuries included bites, fractures, bruises, head butting, cuts and abrasions, not to mention the vile and disgusting practice of being spat at.

The price officers pay for doing their job and safeguarding this entire community is far too high. They are often singled out for brutal, unprovoked and unwarranted attack by thugs.

Our award-winning 'Let Them Protect' campaign in June last year highlighted the extent to which officers are targeted. We said then that on average 9 of our men and women are assaulted every single day.

Thankfully, in the last year, that daily average total has reduced to around 7 a-day. It's a slight improvement but there's still a long way to go before we can effectively tackle and reverse this worrying trend. These figures remain intolerable and unacceptable.

What these figures show is the clear need for a zero-tolerance, no-nonsense approach by the courts and the Department of Justice. We have called 'time' on assaults on our officers, and we look firmly to our courts and legislators to have our backs.

We're of the view that certain penalties, and how they are applied, should be re-visited and refreshed to maximise the deterrent effect.

Without the clear consent of the victim, potential out of court disposals should not be used in cases where there are injuries inflicted on our officers.

We welcome continued involvement in the consultation on sentencing guidelines. However, repealing the assault on police legislation and amalgamating our officers into a wider group of public facing workers could have an unintended negative impact.

All assaults are wrong but, with the greatest respect, we strongly feel that an assault on, for example, a retail security guard, cannot on any level be legally assessed of being equated with attacking a police officer doing their duty. We will not let up and will continue to maintain strong and consistent messaging on the seriousness of assaults on our police officers.

This year we saw the retirement and departure of the Police Ombudsman.

It is no secret we had a difficult, tense relationship, specifically with her, and we eagerly await the appointment of her successor to see if those burnt bridges can be rebuilt for the benefit of our members who find themselves subject to external investigation.

On a somewhat brighter note, your Federation legal team successfully delivered a welcome outcome on the 2023 data breach.

Payments are being made to thousands of our colleagues without incurring any cost to them.

Work's still progressing on the long-standing holiday pay and pension issues and we remain focussed and hopeful that both can be finally resolved this year.

On annual pay, we continue to argue for timely, realistic annual settlements. Each year gets tougher to retain pay parity but we will do all we can to make the case to maintain the core pay link with colleagues in England and Wales.

The 'Peelers' series has shone a light on what we do, and how we go about our work. All too often, there's a lack of understanding or a damning headline that gives a misleading impression.

PSNI have issues in the workplace – the most recent cultural audit and staff surveys have shone a light on specific areas of concern.

We're human.

We're not perfect.

We make mistakes.

The recent Langdale and Katie Simpson review findings make for uncomfortable reading and we must do much better to eradicate such behaviours and strive to provide a better police service both internally and externally.

Despite these challenges and failings we can be proud that our Service still stands head and shoulders above many others.

It is used to scrutiny, change and innovation.

Used to dealing with societal tensions and everyday challenges.

Used to combatting thuggery, crime gangs, drug dealers, terrorism and everyday crime.

So even though we remain dangerously under-strength, with little or no prospect of a political u-turn on funding and numbers, we remain committed to a better future and will continue to do our best....for this entire community.

Thank you.