

Theresa May's speech to the National Policing Conference

Tuesday, 29 Jun 2010

The Home Secretary delivered this speech on 29 June to the Association of Chief Police Officers and Association of Police Authorities National Conference in Manchester. This version is as written, and does not include changes made on the day - therefore it is checked against delivery.

Not many people understand the weight of responsibility that rests upon the shoulders of a police chief constable. Like chief executives of large private sector companies, you manage multi-billion pound budgets, lead thousands of men and women, and devise strategies to succeed.

Except, being a chief constable isn't like being a chief executive at all.

On Wednesday 2 June, Chief Constable Craig Mackey of Cumbria Constabulary went to work and found himself leading an armed police response to Britain's worst mass shooting since 1996. Just days earlier, his officers had dealt with the tragic school coach crash near Keswick. And at the end of last year, it was Craig Mackey's men and women who came to the rescue when Cumbria was devastated by floods. Being a chief constable is a job like no other – and I want to start by paying tribute to Craig and to all of you for the work you do.

And let us not forget the work of the members of police authorities up and down the country. We might have our differences about the future of accountability in policing – and I'll come to that later – but we all recognise the importance of listening to local communities. And I salute you for the dedication and sense of duty with which you serve your communities.

Budgets

I stand before you today as a new Home Secretary in a new government and I am about to tell you something that no Home Secretary has ever said before. I take no pleasure in that fact, because what I have to say is tough.

Our country has the worst budget deficit of any major economy. The public finances are in the biggest mess that any of us have seen in our lifetimes. And as you saw in the budget, that means the Coalition Government is going to have to take tough action.

Like almost all of my colleagues in the cabinet, I have to cut spending in my department. The spending review has not begun yet, so we don't know the exact figures, but I must be clear. We are not talking about a spending freeze, or a reduction of one or two per cent. The cuts will be big, they will be tough to achieve, and cuts will fall on the police as they will on other important public services.

In the Home Office, I will be ruthless in cutting out waste, streamlining structures and improving efficiency. But these practical measures can only go so far, and together we have to make sure that – despite the cuts – policing must remain visible and available to the public.

Value for money

So we are going to have to make sure that every penny of your budgets is spent in the most useful possible way. As I told the Police Federation conference last month, we will honour the existing pay deal for police officers negotiated with my predecessors. And we will stand by the deal for other police staff too.

But we have to be realistic about what we can afford, so we will also undertake a review of police terms and conditions. Let me be crystal clear from the beginning: police officers and staff need to be ready, along with the rest of the public sector, to make sacrifices and accept pay restraint. It cannot be right, for example, that police overtime has become institutionalised. We may not win popularity contests for asking these difficult questions, but it is time for them to be asked.

I want to work with you, the leaders of our police forces and members of police authorities, to make sure we get value for money wherever we can. I've said before that I don't want to run the police, and I don't – but there is no need to do everything 43 different ways.

So in tandem with our reforms to make the police more accountable to their local communities, I am considering what matters should be delivered for the service nationally. For example, does it really make sense to buy in police cars, uniforms and IT systems in 43 different ways? Where central procurement is consistent with our desire to devolve responsibility and accountability downwards, and it saves money for the taxpayer, we will encourage it and facilitate it.

I know that some of you have argued for mergers between police forces. I understand the operational advantages of large forces, particularly in relation to the most serious forms of criminal activity. But let's get one thing straight: this government believes strongly in building strong local communities and giving the people who live in these communities a major role in the planning and delivery of the public services they use. In keeping with this belief in local democratic accountability, police force mergers will not be allowed to happen unless they are voluntary and unless they have the support of local communities.

But of course, there is a lot that police forces can do in terms of sharing back office functions and procurement. And, to that end, I welcome ACPO's offer to produce a national plan for the way the service does business. I'm eager to hear over the coming weeks from ACPO and the APA what progress has been made in putting together a project to meet the financial challenges of the future.

I want that plan to look at what other matters are best reserved and what essential functions – such as criminal justice units, call handling and training – can be delivered more cheaply and effectively with other forces or partners. And I want that plan to identify where collaboration can strengthen the police response to terrorism, organised criminality and threats to the public that cut across force boundaries.

We need to understand too the potential benefits of outsourcing, and not just in areas like human resources and finance. Some forces have already shown substantial savings in things like custody management.

The ACPO plan will need to look critically at the size of these functions and the number of officers deployed. I am determined that frontline availability should increase even as budgets contract. I acknowledge that increasing the visibility and productivity of officers, PCSOs and other staff is a major challenge. But I firmly believe that it is a challenge that chief constables can – and must – meet.

The matter of deployment and availability will be examined by HMIC in their value for money inspections later this year. And we will make sure that the review of remuneration and conditions of service recommends ways we can give chief constables more discretion over how to use their workforce flexibly and cost-effectively.

Liberating the police to get officers onto the beat

Because we need to think creatively about how to get officers from behind desks and onto the streets. And I'm pleased to say that we have, in our short time in government, already made some progress.

We have long promised to scrap the 'stop and account' form in its entirety and reduce the burden of the stop and search procedures. I can announce today that these important commitments will be delivered by the end of the year.

In my speech to the Police Federation, I promised to return charging decisions to the police for a broader range of minor offences. And I can announce today that there will be a phased rollout of the new arrangements from November.

Essex, London, Thames Valley, Staffordshire and West Yorkshire have been testing these new charging arrangements. When they are rolled out across the whole country, up to 80,000 cases a year will be returned to the discretion of police officers.

And I can also announce today that I am also scrapping the confidence target and the policing pledge with immediate effect.

I know that some officers like the policing pledge, and some, I'm sure, like the comfort of knowing they've ticked boxes. But targets don't fight crime; targets hinder the fight against crime. In scrapping the confidence target and the policing pledge, I couldn't be any clearer about your mission: it isn't a thirty-point plan; it is to cut crime. No more, and no less.

I know that the Home Office hasn't been the only guilty partner in creating all this bureaucracy. The criminal justice system can waste officers' time, and I know that Nick Herbert, who is not only a minister in the Home Office but also the Ministry of Justice, is keen to hear your ideas about how to make it more efficient. Nick is going to be here all week, and is anxious to hear your views on this and any other subject that is bothering you. So please do make sure you speak to him.

But we have to face the fact that some of this bureaucracy also stems from the forces themselves. When times are tight, when we are removing red tape imposed by the Home Office, it simply cannot be right that this bureaucracy is reinstated at a local level. Nor can it be right for remaining paperwork to be goldplated by forces. So I call on all of you, chief constables and police authority members alike, to take the same, radical approach to cutting bureaucracy as we are taking in Whitehall.

The announcements I have made today are by no means exhaustive, and I want to hear from you about what else we can do to help you do your jobs more efficiently and effectively. Tell me precisely where bureaucracy is making your life harder for no benefit, and I will do whatever I can to change it.

But the truth is that if we are going to make the police more visible, more available, and more accountable to the public you serve, then we have to go beyond these changes. We have to look again at the driver of all this bureaucracy, and that is the top-down model of accountability imposed on police by government.

Swapping bureaucratic accountability for democratic accountability

That is government's way of doing things. Ask a bureaucrat to do something and he'll create bureaucracy. It's not really a surprise, is it? But we can't sweep away the targets, initiatives and paperwork and leave nothing in their place. The police, like every public service, have to remain accountable. But they do not have to be accountable to bureaucrats in Whitehall – they should be accountable to the people they serve in their communities. So we will swap the top-down, bureaucratic accountability for local, democratic accountability, as we promised to do in the Coalition Agreement, and indeed as was promised in the manifestos of both Coalition partners.

It means a directly-elected individual at force level, setting the force budget, agreeing the local strategic plan, playing a role in wider questions of community safety and appointing – and if necessary removing – the local chief constable.

It means publishing accurate local crime data, so that maps can be produced showing exactly what crimes have been committed where.

It means regular beat meetings for local communities to hold their neighbourhood policing teams to account. And I give you this assurance: none of these changes will compromise the foundation stone of British policing, your operational independence.

That is the deal I am offering to you. I haven't had time today to do more than outline some of its main principles. In the next few months, Nick Herbert and I will be in listening mode – and I urge you to use this opportunity to tell us how you think that these general principles should best be implemented.

Later this summer, we will be bringing forward detailed proposals and introducing the necessary legislation to be implemented in this session of Parliament. Some of you will no doubt argue that this timetable is too ambitious. Some have suggested that what we should do is set up a Royal Commission to think about these matters for a couple of years.

Frankly, these issues are too important to be put on the back burner. In this age of spending cuts and policing on a budget, our programme of police reform becomes more urgent, not less. So we will get on with the job.

Our vision is a bold one, with a totally redrawn national policing landscape: more collaboration between forces, a review into the role and remit of the NPIA, a border police force as part of a refocused Serious and Organised Crime Agency, and, of course, directly-elected individuals to deliver local accountability. And I want you, the senior police officers,

to think sensibly about a clearer and more transparent leadership role for ACPO in this landscape.

Conclusions

Times might be tough, and money might be tight, but there is no reason to check our ambition.

What I have outlined today is a real plan to cut crime and anti-social behaviour. It's not – as we've been used to – a bureaucratic checklist we expect police officers to follow. It's a plan that gives responsibility to the police, accountability to the public, and the clearest sense of direction possible: your job is nothing more, and nothing less, than to cut crime. And I will do everything I can to help you do so