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POLICE FEDERATION SPEECH: 3 JUNE 1997

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for your warm welcome and your good wishes.

I am delighted to be with you here this morning at what I hope is the first of many such occasions and particularly as the RUC celebrates its 75th anniversary.

Thank you Les for giving me a comprehensive and stimulating speech to respond to.

I think the good news for the audience is that your speech was longer than mine will be!

You began by comparing me with Roy Mason.

I have to say that I go from venue to venue in Northern Ireland and - depending on the location - find myself being compared to either the last Labour occupant of this position, Roy Mason, or my predecessor in opposition Kevin McNamara.

I hope by now it has become clear that I am neither of these.

At the weekend I attended your 75th Anniversary concert at the Waterfront Hall.

It was a great occasion.

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Alice Collins was there. I thought of her bravery and was delighted to see how well she is recovering from that cowardly attack.

I saw there the pride that exists in the force among so many existing and former members.

But it is tinged with a deep sadness for the many sacrifices that have been and continue to be made.

The murders of Darren Bradshaw and Greg Taylor fill me with utter disgust.

Prior to my appointment as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, but more especially since, I have had many contacts with the RUC and never fail to be impressed by your courage, professionalism and dedication to duty.

Mr Chairman, in your address to Conference you raised a number of what you term "domestic issues".

I would like to begin by responding to these directly.

I was pleased to hear how much you have appreciated the strength of co-operation which exists between all of the parties in bringing police officers within the scope of the health and safety legislation.

It is only right that it be approached in the spirit of co-operation and that has paid dividends; the RUC and the Police Authority are in the forefront of the health and safety drive.

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We will soon have our own police health and safety order to mirror the GB Act and my officials will work in tandem not only with the Home Office to maintain parity but with the RUC, Police Authority and not least with the Federation and other staff associations. A lot has been achieved, yet more remains to be done, no effort will be spared and together we will maintain the momentum.

You mention also some fundamental policy issues, relevant within the whole of the UK, such as working time initiatives and the European social chapter.

I would like to make clear at the outset that we are not 'unconvinced about the implementation in its entirety of the Social Chapter'.

The Social Chapter only contains two provisions at present - on works councils and parental leave - which are the best practice of many employers already.

For the future, we will use our participation in the Social Chapter to promote, employability and flexibility not high social costs.

As to the working time directive, that is not part of the Social Chapter and was accepted - albeit reluctantly - by the previous government.

We fully support the principle that no one should be forced to work more than 48 hours per week. If they choose to work longer - that is a matter for them.

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In all cases we will continue as we have to address these issues with common sense, sensitivity and determination to do what is right in the national interest.

Mr Chairman,

You have referred to the mechanism employed for the negotiation of your members' pay and allowances - the Police Negotiating Board. You quite rightly described its advent, on the recommendation of the Edmund Davies Committee, and how well it has served as a negotiating body for all of its constituent parts.

It has been in commission a long time and I hope it will continue to provide a useful and credible debating and negotiating forum for the years to come.

Yet you are disappointed that in three particular areas the last Government did not, at once, ratify agreements reached between official and staff sides within PNB. Two of those issues, injury on duty awards for those falling within 23 and 25 years service and the continued accrual of pension entitlement during periods off pay, are matters which do not fall to any one Secretary of State but to all three.

It is obviously not for me to second guess the last Conservative Government's attitude to these issues but I can assure you that the agreements have not "failed to be ratified"; they are under consideration at the centre.

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The agreement regarding pensionability for short term auxiliary constables is however now a matter directly for me. I believe that there has been no lack of understanding, by officials, of their position and a wish to move on their pensionability, but, challenge to the retrospective element of pensionability for the Full Time Reserve has led to legal advice that a decision on the position of auxiliary constables should, for the time being, be withheld.

That has been the case for quite some time; let us both hope to see the Full Time Reserve issue settled in the Courts soon so that we may move on this.

Mr Chairman, let me now turn to the vexed issue of money. This Government has been elected on a platform of financial rectitude, and in Northern Ireland I am tasked with taking difficult decisions about the priority to give competing programmes. The Law and Order programme, of which policing is a major element, has always, rightly, had a high priority.

That will continue under this Government. This Government is as committed as any to the fight against terrorism and to the preservation of the public peace. It will provide accordingly.

Nonetheless, this Government, in common with your members and the police service more widely, has as its objective an efficient and effective police service. That means the search for better and more cost-effective ways of doing things must continue, and provide a very real challenge to us all.

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I hope you will join in that battle. It is not a glamorous issue, but one which has a very real impact on the public purse across the board. Efficiencies which can be made without damaging the overall level of service can provide for more public service whether in the field of policing, health or education. Like all public services, the police are expected to prioritise activities to enable them to live within their budgets.

The police budget has risen this year as a consequence of the ending of the IRA cease-fire and the potential for public order difficulties. That money could otherwise have been used to fund social and economic programmes. But it would be wrong to blame all reductions in social and economic programmes on increases in the police budget. And it is a fact that the amount of money available to the Northern Ireland Block is planned to decline year-on-year in real terms, reflecting a broadly similar pattern for comparable programmes in Great Britain. It is that combination of factors which has created problems for some programmes.

There are initiatives already in train which should assist in producing a more effective and efficient police service. The Fundamental Review led by your Chief Constable is one such example. I welcome the comments you made in that connection. I can assure you Mr Chairman that this Government will not denigrate the RUC nor will any downsizing take place without proper consultation and consideration for the welfare and financial future of ex-officers.

Another tranche of the efforts to enhance the Police Service are the Government's reform proposals.

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Mr Chairman, my use of the word reform is not an attempt to adopt the moral high-ground.

It is a practical response to what we all want - as you say - a Police Service capable of commanding province-wide community support well into the 21st Century.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary has an impressive record of service and I am only too well aware of the great sacrifices, including the ultimate sacrifice, that of life itself, which have been made by its officers over the last 28 years of policing in Northern Ireland.

In saying that I am mindful that yesterday was the third anniversary of the terrible tragedy at the Mull of Kintyre when RUC members and other colleagues so tragically lost their lives. This is but one of a large number of anniversaries which you and your members properly recall.

However, even the best police service must change and evolve in response to changes in technology, in society, and in public expectations of the police service. It is the clear duty of everyone involved in policing Northern Ireland to constantly seek ways of improving police efficiency, enhancing police effectiveness, and increasing public confidence in the police.

I therefore intend to bring forward legislation which will clarify the roles of the Government, the Police Authority and the Chief Constable in policing Northern Ireland, and introduce a number of measures to increase police accountability and public confidence.

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These are not changes introduced for the sake of change; they are a carefully crafted package of measures as proposed in our paper - A Police Service for All people - of May 1996.

They are being introduced following widespread consultation, and have received public endorsement from a wide spectrum of opinion in Northern Ireland, including the Chief Constable.

As you say, Mr Chairman, the 'debate about what kind of Police Authority Northern Ireland should have is still ongoing.

We believe that our proposals recognise the excellent work that the police authority has done. We seek to build on its strengths, but to respond to criticism about, for example, the present system of appointments.

Another main change will be the Police Complaints system, where I propose to introduce arrangements for the independent investigation of complaints in line with the recommendations of the Hayes report.

I intend that the detailed planning work for the new system be taken forward in partnership with the ICPC, RUC, PANI and the police representative bodies, in advance of its establishment, so speeding up implementation.

I believe the RUC has nothing to fear from independent scrutiny; indeed, quite the reverse. The independent investigation of allegations against police officers is your guarantee that the good work that you do cannot be undermined by ill-founded or malicious criticism.

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There is no point denying that are problems with community identification with policing in Northern Ireland. That is why we think action is necessary.

And if I may say so, Les, to be plain speaking too, I don't accept that the language of zero tolerance when talking about this issue is helpful.

It is unfortunate that so much of the debate on this issue has focused on names and symbols.

They are of course significant matters, but we believe now is the time to concentrate on the future structure and style of policing.

Taken together, our proposals represent an effective response, appropriate to Northern Ireland, to growing public expectations of what the police service can deliver, which have been seen UK-wide and beyond.

I hope they will prove effective in continuing to enhance the already high standard of service the people of Northern Ireland receive from the RUC.

To use your own words, Mr Chairman, the RUC has evolved over the 75 years of its existence to meet the changing circumstances of modern policing. I see the changes I have just outlined as a continuation of that process.

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And of course we will continue discussing policing matters with all interested parties in Northern Ireland - both inside and outside the talks.

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. If there is one wish we all share this morning it is for a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland, a permanent end to the bombings and killings, the punishment beatings and the arson attacks. I am not going to pretend that a solution can be easily achieved but this Government is fully committed to reconciling the two traditions in Northern Ireland and to a political settlement which can command the support of all sections of the community.

You and your colleagues in the RUC have a large part to play in achieving that solution. I know you will rise to the challenge as you have consistently done over the years. Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. May I congratulate you reaching your 75th Anniversary and may I wish you every success as you proceed towards your centenary.