

Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Annual Conference

Speech by Angela Smith MP at the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) annual conference on 9 May 2007.

Thank you Mick [Shaw]. Congratulations on your new post as president and good luck. And thank you all for inviting me to speak today. It is a great honour to be here.

I believe I am the first Minister to address the Annual Conference for some years - and probably the first female Minister ever.

There is no denying, that we have had our differences in the past and I am sure we will have them in the future. But I believe we do have a great deal of common ground - and that is why I was keen to accept your invitation to come here today.

As Fire Minister I have met many of you over the last year. However my interest and links with the Service go back much further. Before entering Parliament, as an Essex county councillor, I was on the Fire Authority and decided to go through a training course - so I had some idea of what I was talking about. Not **that** unusual for a politician!

Believe me, your colleagues in Essex did not make it easy! What's more, every word was recorded - including some fairly unParliamentary language in the more testing parts.

For some reason, the management at the Essex Brigade would not allow me to drive a fire appliance. Some dreams go back a long way! I had to wait until I was Fire Minister in Northern Ireland to learn to do that. So now I am proud to say that I stand before you as the holder of a certificate of competence in driving a fire appliance.

I know these are small achievements next to those of all you here. But I hope you will take from them that I am prepared to roll up my sleeves and find out what it's all about. I did begin to understand how tough the job can be, even in controlled situations - let alone out in the real world.

Indeed you have been reminded this morning of the firefighters who gave their lives to save others. Michael Miller and Jeff Wornham at Harrow Court, Stevenage, in February 2005. And Brian Wembridge and Geoff Wicker at the Festival Fireworks Depot in East Sussex, in December last year. Thankfully such deaths are rare but nonetheless a terrible loss for colleagues and communities. I met East Sussex FRS after the deaths of Brian and Geoff. I was able to pay my respects and talk to their colleagues.

When fire services from all round the country combined to tackle the biggest fire in peacetime Europe at Buncefield, there was no loss of life. That is altogether a remarkable achievement by Britain's firefighters.

Can I assure you that I am determined to work for the future of the Fire and Rescue Service. To help what is a great public service today, become an ever greater one in the future. Along with childhood dreams, that is one ambition we definitely share.

The Government's top priorities are pretty much the same as yours too:

- We want to see safer communities everywhere.
- We want to build up our national resilience in case of with major events, whether manmade or natural.
- We want to see the safest possible ways of working, for firefighters. And that means having access to the right training to do the job.
- We want the Service to offer jobs that people enjoy and are proud to do. Further they should be able to use and develop their talents to the full.
- We want a more diverse workforce that reflects the community it serves. That is the only way of reaching many of the people most isolated and at risk in their community.
- We want to see the Service right at the heart of the local community, building on the work that is currently being done on prevention, community safety and fire safety.

This is the agenda we need to share and we want to work with you on this.

Let me start with a few home truths. We all know that employment relations could have been better over the last few years. It has been a bit of a rocky road at times.

I believe we have a joint interest in promoting a period of constructive stability in employment relations.

We need to focus on better engagement at every level and we have just not put enough effort into this. Certainly it needs to improve at Government/ national FBU level. But it also must improve at local level, with local management.

I also believe we could do much more to improve communications as poor understanding has not helped - both between you and us, and, indeed, within the Service itself. There is no doubt that poor communications has led to myths and misunderstandings getting out of hand. Sometimes this has been divisive and at other times a real barrier to progress. And this is both ways - we need to talk at the early stages.

Today let us set a course for making the FRS a model of good employment relations at local level and positive relationships at national level. Let us build trust as well as stability, let us speak plainly as well as listen carefully, and let us work in partnership as well as make more effort individually.

I hope you can see my determination and that of the Fire and Resilience Directorate in Communities and Local Government to be more open with you and to engage more with you. I am not suggesting that this will resolve all areas of disagreement, but it will provide us with a framework to look at challenges facing us. Let us look at what we have already achieved.

Last year we recorded the lowest number of fire deaths since 1959. Fire deaths and injuries in the UK are falling. We need to look at sustaining this trend, as further reductions will become harder to achieve.

The incidence of deliberately started fires has also fallen - by over a third since 2001. These are a real blight on life in our communities. The majority are started by young people and the Service has not only tackled the problem head on with its partners, but it has also helped to tackle the underlying social problems.

For example in Essex we have the FireBreak scheme where the Service, alongside other agencies including the Youth Offending Team, is working with young people from sometimes difficult backgrounds. Re-offending rates have plummeted among these young people and local communities are safer as a result. I have seen many similar schemes in other parts of the country.

Across the country the Service is leading the way in building local partnerships and reaching out into communities to reduce risks.

Over 800,000 Home Fire Risk Checks have been carried out and over one million new smoke alarms fitted, improving the safety of those most at risk.

Within the Service there is the development of the IPDS system, the new Leadership Centre at the Fire Service College, and proposals for a Centre of Excellence on which we will be consulting soon.

Government support through grant for local government services, including the Fire and Rescue Service, has increased by 39 per cent in real terms since 1997.

We have a Fire and Rescue Service today with world class professional skills and knowledge. This is now supported by world class equipment. We have invested over £200 million through the New Dimension programme, including urban search and rescue capability and high volume pumps - and the training to go with the equipment.

New Dimension was born out of the increased threat of terrorism but it has resulted in firefighters being well equipped and trained for natural as well as manmade disasters. The floods in Boscastle, Carlisle and Glastonbury and the scaffolding collapse in Milton Keynes prove the point.

For some years specially trained and equipped firefighters in the UK Search and Rescue Teams [UKSART] have provided support in the aftermath of earthquakes around the world. But, of course, we have earthquakes nearer home, like the one in Folkestone recently. Mind you, we should have seen that coming because they strike that area pretty regularly every two hundred years and this one was overdue!

The serious point here is that the Service is facing an increasing range of threats and challenges. Just look at very recent incidents.

There are the traditional types of fire - like the Manchester and Oxford Street incidents. There are the fires with additional hazards such as the gas cylinders, including acetylene cylinders, in the Deptford fire. And then there are the unexpected, like the Folkestone earthquake.

Climate change brings new challenges, like flooding and heathland fires.

And terrorists will go on plotting to perpetrate atrocities in ways we can only - but must - imagine. We have to expect the unexpected.

So while we are seeing the welcome reduction in fire deaths and injuries, we are also seeing an increasing demand for FRS services.

The scale is also changing and increasing.

Equipment needs to work across Brigade boundaries and co-operation is crucial. I know co-operation has traditionally been a strength of the Service. But now the boundaries need to be wider still, given the nature and scale of the challenges. For example New Dimension equipment must be used across Brigade boundaries.

Let me say, categorically, that the Government has no plans to force or lead the merger of fire services. But we do need to see fire services working closely together and I am pleased to see that kind of co-operation.

Local leaders are best placed to understand the risks and priorities for their own place. However much more can be achieved through working together in partnership, at whatever level, than through working in isolation.

I have already said something about areas of agreement. I think I should now say something about the areas of disagreement.

Firecontrol is not in isolation but is part of the massive investment in equipment and tools to provide the best service possible. I truly understand your concerns raised - both in professional and in public addresses. I hope you will work with us on staffing issues in particular.

Let me highlight three major benefits of Firecontrol.

- It will build up national resilience for incidents where a national response is called for.
- It will enable Brigades to co-operate nationally in a timely and effective way, as well as act locally.
- It will improve systems and equipment, bringing advantages such as up-to-date risk information direct to screens in fire appliances.

Having made the investment and agreed the strategic direction, the Government is, quite rightly, not responsible for the day-to-day running of the Service, nor for issues like pay or co-responding. Where we are responsible we are making progress.

On pensions, we have agreed that Continual Professional Development (CPD) payments will be pensionable. There are still ongoing discussions about the details and we'll be consulting with the Firefighters' Pension Committee before making the changes. However they will be retrospective to 1 April.

I will finish with three key messages:

First on how we engage. We need to up our game and want to respond positively. We will never agree with each other over 100 per cent of the time, but I've referred to the kind of framework, nationally and locally, that I believe will be more effective.

Second, alongside traditional challenges, there will be many new issues, some even more difficult. We need the equipment, training and the will to work together to meet those challenges.

And finally, whatever we sometimes think and feel, there is more that unites us than divides us. Where we agree let's move forward, where we disagree let's keep talking. Thank you.

Speech by Angela Smith MP on 9 May 2007.