



Chief Constable's opening remarks - Gasyard Féile – 'Uncomfortable Conversations'

26 Aug 2015

I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to take part in this event and indeed to the audience for attending this evening. I know there are people who have questioned the appropriateness of me being here tonight but I firmly believe it is the right thing to do. I will not shy away from talking about difficult issues.

It goes without saying we have a troubled past. There are so many people, some of whom are in this room, who have heart-breaking stories to tell about the hurt and loss they have suffered as a result of our dark history. For many, that pain is still very real today in all communities including within the Police family. I express my sincere sympathy to all of you who continue to suffer loss and grief due to our difficult past.

This event is called "Uncomfortable Conversations" and I believe that having such conversations help ensure a better future for our children and future generations. It's not easy, but we must be brave, open and honest with each other to ensure we do everything we can to provide a safe, peaceful and confident society for the generations to follow.

Indeed, as Chief Constable it is often my responsibility to have uncomfortable, difficult conversations. I recognise that my role is an integral part of building and maintaining the peace but I will not allow that to fetter or restrict my ability as a police officer to enforce the law without fear or favour.

Last week, we made public our line of enquiry that members of the Provisional IRA were involved in the murder of Kevin McGuigan. We accept that our assertion on the continued existence of the Provisional IRA is contested even though we assess its purpose has radically changed so that the primary focus is now promoting a peaceful, political Republican agenda.

I also repeat the fact that I accept the bona fides of the Sinn Fein leadership regarding their rejection of violence and pursuit of the peace process and I accept their assurance that they want to support police in bringing those responsible for serious crime to justice.

As I have said before, I will not allow political commentary or even political consequences to influence police investigations or undermine my operational independence.

Just a few weeks ago, I participated in the Féile in West Belfast with Martin McGuinness when we talked about some of those difficult issues from the past which continue to impact on today.

At the event, I was asked a number of challenging questions and I have given my assurances that I will look into the issues raised, review our position, and respond to those who asked the questions. I am more than willing to do this and will undertake to do the same in relation to any issues which are raised here tonight.

But it is important to recognise that the Police Service does not hold all the answers. I have committed to doing all I can to support those who are suffering but I will not compound peoples' pain by giving unrealistic expectations of what I, and policing in general, can deliver.

Be in no doubt, I am committed to ensuring PSNI does everything it can to help us achieve a confident, safe and peaceful society and to help those with questions get the answers they deserve but I must work within the legal framework that exists today, acknowledging ongoing legal processes such as inquests, Police Ombudsman investigations and civil litigation.

One of the main challenges for us is the present arrangements for legacy inquests. We are dealing with 53 legacy inquests involving the deaths of 86 people and the delay in disclosure of information is a chronic feature of the system.

This delay not only increases hurt felt by families; it also erodes trust in the PSNI's ability to deal with the past; and causes huge damage to public confidence in policing today.

The absence of prioritisation for legacy inquest cases is a critical issue. If there was some degree of prioritisation, it would assist greatly in a more effective process with less frustration and annoyance for families.

I believe the Stormont House Agreement, in particular the establishment of the Historical Investigations Unit, is a

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genuine opportunity for all of us to make a real difference.

Every section of our society suffered pain and loss during the troubles. So, there is a challenge on every section of our society to find some way to respond to this loss.

We cannot continue to sit on the past. We cannot opt out. We have to face it. Perhaps as a society we need to lose our fears; we need to try to understand, not just our own story and experience of the past; but the story and experience of others.

Fear, while understandable, gets us nowhere. Fear does not make peace. Courage, optimism and belief make peace.

We need to be brave, courageous and optimistic. We need to be determined and resilient. We need to face the differences and contradictions between our competing narratives of the past and maybe even the present as the last week has shown.

Let us believe in a safe, confident and peaceful society. To do so, we have to go beyond our comfort zones; to be selfless; to be gracious and generous; to be ready to listen and to have challenging but respectful conversations.

