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Leader of the Opposition

Safe homes, safe communities



SPEECH TO THE POLICE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Andrew Little

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Police Association delegates, Association life members and staff, representatives from overseas jurisdictions.

Thank you for inviting me here today.

The Police Association has become a strong and respected voice for Police officers and for policing in New Zealand. There is no doubt that frontline sworn and civilian staff are strongly advocated for.

At this point, speaking to you as representatives of your colleagues around the country, let me thank you for all you do keep our communities safe.

You and your colleagues are called on to deal with the hard end of humanity, with people at their most vulnerable, and to walk that difficult line between the enjoyment by citizens of their freedom and the protection of citizens against encroachment on their freedom.

Yours is one of the most important jobs in our country, and one of the most difficult. I applaud your commitment to your fellow New Zealanders.

Today I also want to show you my commitment, and Labour's commitment, to back Police with the resources you need to do your critical job of keeping our communities safe.

Section 1: Farewell Greg O'Connor

But before I begin, I want to acknowledge Greg O'Connor.

For 21 years, Greg has done an outstanding job as President of the Police Association.

As a former union leader myself, I have always admired the work that Greg has done in representing the interests of Police officers and standing up for the issues that are important.

I know the demands that places on Greg – to be available at all hours and to stand for issues sometimes that aren't necessarily popular.

Greg has stood up for the right to safe and decent work conditions for Police, for fair pay, and for the role of Police in our community.

His tireless advocacy helped secure stab-proof vests and tasers for officers, both of which have undoubtedly saved some officers' lives, and the lives of others.

He has helped lead important national debates – including his recent work with our Police spokesperson Stuart Nash to get an inquiry into how so many firearms are getting into the hands of criminal gangs.

I am sure Greg will continue to be a voice for justice. And we look forward to working with Chris Cahill as his successor as Police Association President.

Section 2: Police and the Kiwi dream

Today, I want to talk about why safe communities and good policing are vital parts of Labour's vision for a New Zealand that is a country of opportunity and where everyone can have a fair shot at the Kiwi dream.

The Kiwi dream is at the heart of Labour's ambition for New Zealand.

When I talk about the Kiwi dream, I'm talking about the aspirations so many New Zealanders share.

The chance to have a decent job. A decent shot at getting your own home. And, if that's not possible, a rental that's warm, safe, and dry.

A country where every kid, no matter their postcode, has a great local school nearby.

A country where the health system is there when you need it.

The Kiwi dream is about fair rewards for hard work. Kiwi families want good jobs that provide fair wages.

New Zealanders want to look out for each other, and make sure no kids are left languishing in poverty.

We want a natural environment we can all enjoy.

And strong communities are safe communities. We want a country where essential public services are there when we need them and able to do their job.

People have to be safe in order to live the Kiwi dream.

That means Police that are properly resourced, so that when New Zealanders need help, they can answer the call.

We need to ensure that families have the freedom and security to live in their homes, that businesspeople can have the freedom to go about their business with confidence, and that people have the freedom walk in the street without becoming victims of crime.

To give our people that freedom, we need properly funded and resourced Police.

Section 3: Equality before the law

We also need to ensure that all New Zealanders are treated equally before the law.

Many New Zealanders have told me they're disturbed by recent cases where people with wealth or privilege seem to get a preferential treatment in the courts.

When the son of a wealthy family can get away with community work for a serious assault on a police officer, something is wrong.

This incident underlines the dangers in your job. 30 officers a week are assaulted – and the number is rising.

I believe the Sentencing Act needs to be fixed to ensure equal treatment before the law. And I promise Labour will fix it.

The Sentencing Act is meant to provide balance in the factors judges take into account when passing sentence.

It seems wrong that factors such as using violence in the commission of a crime, the use of a weapon, or assault on Police are factors that make an offence more serious for the purposes of sentencing but are then overlooked when exercising a discretion to grant discharge without conviction.

Either they are aggravating factors or they are not. And if they are, they should exclude the possibility of a discharge without conviction to protect a person's career or reputation.

Section 4: Police overstretched

Like most New Zealanders, I value the difficult job our police do.

In contrast to some of the troubles we're seeing overseas, in New Zealand our Police command high levels of respect in the communities they serve.

Police have done an impressive job of ensuring that the increasing diversity of our country's population is reflected in the front line. You're the community's ally as well as its protector.

For 20 years, Police successfully reduced crime levels across New Zealand.

All up, crime fell nearly 40% between 1996 and 2014. Much of that drop is because of more cops on the beat and better policing techniques.

But that's all changed in the past two years.

Burglaries are up 32% since August 2014 – that's an extra 50 burglaries each day.

Assaults are up 8% thefts up 3%, while robberies are up a staggering 66%.

Let me be clear: this isn't the fault of Police; the responsibility to fix this lies with the Government.

Since National came to office, population growth and inflation have added a total of 25% to Police costs. But the police budget has only gone up 14%.

It means all of you are being asked to do a lot more with nothing extra. In the real world, that's a cut.

The ratio of Police officers to population has worsened from 1 officer for every 488 New Zealanders in 2008 to 1 for every 528 today.

There are fewer Police officers today than there were in 2014, even though the population of New Zealand has grown by 200,000 in the past two years.

Police are getting 22% more emergency calls than they were in 2010, but they don't have the extra officers to meet the demand.

And, now, Police commanders have been told, in the four year plan signed off in May of this year, not to expect any more officers until 2020 even though the population is growing at a record pace.

The thin blue line is reaching breaking point. Our Police are valiant and hardworking but they are over-stretched and under-resourced.

That means fewer crimes solved and more criminals staying on the street to commit further crimes.

According to your biennial survey, nearly three-quarters of Police Association members say they are dissatisfied with the number of front line Police, and 86% of Police Association members say that front line Police are under resourced.

The 2016 workplace survey said 55% of Police had undue workplace stress and 60% believed that Police were not delivering on promises made to the public.

It's not enough for the government to suddenly turn around and promise that every burglary will be investigated without providing a single dollar of extra funding.

As one officer put it:

“There hasn't been a budget increase in five years, and we're expected to keep crime rates down, burglaries down, when there's way more people, way more crime and we're getting less and less cops”

A wider problem

Police aren't the only public service professionals who've been treated this way. Ask the doctors, nurses, and teachers. The same underfunding has been happening in our schools, our hospitals, and our housing sector.

And every time it happens, the community suffers.

- Longer waiting lists for vital operations and people dying because our hospitals can't afford the latest medicines;
- schools relying on donations to provide the education our kids deserve;
- a housing crisis that is destroying the Kiwi Dream of homeownership and forcing families to live in cars
- More crime leaving New Zealanders feeling unsafe in their homes, at their places of work, and on the streets.

For the good of New Zealand, that has to change.

Labour will invest in the public services that New Zealanders need. We'll invest in health, in education, and in housing. And we'll invest in Police.

Section 5: 1,000 more Police

On that point, I am committed to lifting police numbers in the first term of a Labour Government.

Today, I am proud to announce that Labour will hire a thousand more Police officers in our first term.

There will be 1,000 more Police officers under a Labour Government I lead.

This will take total officer numbers to 10,000, and it will be enough to bring the Police to population ratio back below the international benchmark of 1 to 500.

We will work with police to prioritise these additional officers on the serious invasive and violent offences like assaults, sexual assaults, burglaries, and robberies, and of course, the scourge that is methamphetamine.

This increase will be fully funded.

We'll boost the total Police Budget in line with the increase in officer numbers.

That means \$180m more a year for policing once all the extra officers are recruited.

There will be money for extra equipment, cars, non-sworn staff, training and all the other things we need to support our Police on the front line.

There is a cost to not being able to protect innocent citizens and uphold our laws.

- We can't afford 5,000 unsolved sexual assaults a year.
- We can't afford 600 thefts, burglaries, and robberies every day.
- We can't afford the majority of police saying the job puts them under unacceptable levels of stress.

Section 6: Conclusion

Labour supports the Police – and we're putting our money where our mouth is by committing to fund a thousand extra officers.

The blame for the current surge in crime doesn't lie with Police. It lies with a government that has frozen Police numbers and hasn't kept up with our growing population.

New Zealanders deserve to feel safe in their homes; safe in their neighbourhoods. That can't happen with under-funded, over-stretched Police.

Labour will back our Police to get back on top of crime, and restore safety to our communities. Thank you.