



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Chief Inspector and NFCC attack FBU at Westminster

On 2 March 2022 the Home Affairs select committee held an evidence session on the topic 'State of the fire and rescue service', as fire comes under the Home Office remit. The panel invited Roy Wilsher and Tom Winsor, inspector and chief inspector at HMICFRS respectively, and Mark Hardingham, chair of the NFCC, to give evidence.

Of the inspectorate's observations Winsor stated *"overall we're finding that the performance of fire and rescue services are improving"*. However, he said that concerns remain over culture and preparedness.

Although the purpose of the session was to look at the performance of the service as a whole, the witnesses unfortunately took the opportunity to criticise and attack the FBU.

Winsor's December 2021 report claimed *"the influence of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU)... goes too far"*, and Winsor told the committee that *"the conduct of the FBU is a drag on reform, particularly in matters concerning the true role of the firefighter"*.

When asked by committee chair Diana Johnson to elaborate, Winsor stated that in Merseyside and London there have been disagreements over how to respond to marauding terrorist attacks. Wilsher later corrected Merseyside to Manchester. Winsor said he, the government and the NFCC take the view that firefighters are already being paid for response to such incidents, and as such a *"2% pay rise on top of the 1.5% already agreed nationally is unjustified – it is paying twice"*.

Regarding the pandemic response, Winsor told MPs that the FBU *"attempted to prevent in some parts of the country the firefighters from helping with the vaccination programme because they said it was not part of their function"*. This is simply false, as is clear from the FBU circular of 9 December 2020, which stated:

"Firefighters are ready to assist the UK's rollout of Covid-19 Vaccines after an agreement was reached between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the fire and rescue service national employers....The FBU and national employers said fire and rescue services are open to assisting with the vaccine rollout if requested by Local Resilience Forums."

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Winsor also took aim at the right to strike, citing the removal of the right for police following the 1919 police strikes, and confirmed his support for its removal for firefighters, although acknowledged that decision is one for parliamentarians. On the NJC, he said *"the current pay negotiation machinery does have a considerable capacity for paralysis"*. He believes there would be benefits to come from following police towards a pay review body, although he accepts that the Police Superintendents Association and Police Federation are *"still very dissatisfied"* over pay.

Paula Barker, Labour MP for Liverpool Wavertree, told Winsor she has read the FBU's response to Winsor's previous reports, and she agrees that *"the language and aspects of the report is inflammatory, and some of it, if implemented, will seek to make industrial relations worse rather than better I believe, and surely that hardly serves the public interest"*. She said this has led to morale dropping, which Winsor denies. On this Hardingham stated that *"trade unions have an important role to play in the future of the fire and rescue service but I think there is reform needed of that industrial relations climate"*. He claimed his NFCC colleagues across the country are working hard to create a positive climate with unions, using recommendations from the NFCC's Fire Standards Board and Code of Ethics.

Diane Abbott, Labour MP for Hackney North asked the panel about diversity, and Hardingham accepted there is more work to be done to recruit and retain firefighters from different backgrounds. He suggested that part of the recruitment problem is that *"in predominantly white communities, the fire service has a very good reputation because what the white community sees is a fire and rescue service that represents them"* whereas other communities do not. This was immediately derided by both Conservative and Labour MPs on the committee. Hardingham also mentioned the problems with keeping retained, on-call firefighters.

Hardingham took the opportunity to raise the cuts with MPs, about which the FBU consistently campaigns. He said, *"like all other parts of the public sector... there have been challenges over the course of the last 10 to 12 years through the period of austerity"*. Astonishingly, despite this resulting in the loss of one-in-five firefighters, Hardingham went on to say this situation presents *"not all challenges, of course – that does create opportunities as well around productivity, efficiency and innovation"*.

Also on funding, Diana Johnson asked about risks resulting from the cuts to fire inspectors – another issue the FBU has raised with parliamentarians. Wilsher claimed numbers are increasing but explained the training process for them is slow.

Towards the end of the session questions were asked about the Grenfell Tower fire and the likelihood of a similar tragedy. Hardingham outlined the work since Grenfell, such as reviewing the competency based framework for inspectors, but could not rule out a recurrence due to the number of factors that feed into such a tragedy.

The FBU has written to the select committee to correct the falsehoods that were peddled about the union and our members. The FBU will also challenge why the FBU has currently not been invited to reply in person in front of the committee.

Yours in unity

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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