

Neo-liberal reform of the Fire and Rescue Service in Britain

Matt Wrack

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Foreword

Professor Gregor Gall, Professor of Industrial Relations and Director of the Centre for Research in Employment Studies, University of Hertfordshire.

Just as I was delighted to welcome Matt to give the annual CRES lecture, I am also delighted to write this brief foreword to the text of Matt's lecture. I am sure the publication of his lecture will be of great use and interest to a number of people – students, academics, policy-makers, commentators and the like as well as firefighters, FBU members and other union members.

Matt is a passionate believer in the worth of public services – publicly-owned, publicly delivered and publicly controlled and accountable – as part of a decent, civilised society for this generation and future generations. Of course, the case of the Fire and Rescue Service is the touchstone here. He has long argued that only decent terms and conditions will motivate firefighters and public servants to be able to provide quality services and that only well funded public services will allow firefighters and other public servants to do their jobs properly – that is, provide the quality of services that the public rightly expects and deserves. For these reasons, Matt has been a dogged critic of 'new' Labour.

Matt is an important voice in the British union movement as well as an important voice amongst the radical left in Britain. He is part of a new and different breed of union leader – a generation or so younger than most of his counterparts and unencumbered by 'new' Labour politics and affiliation to the Labour Party by personal or union institutional ties. He has helped pioneer, along with other new left union leaders like Bob Crow of the RMT and Mark Serwotka of the PCS, an approach which not just puts the interests of his members before any loyalty to any party or government but also critiques the neo-liberalism now so dominant in all major political parties in Britain. He has, thus, maintained his membership of the so-called 'awkward squad' of union leaders and not transferred to the 'obsequious squad' as many of the original members of the 'awkward squad' have since done.

Matt's particular contribution to the FBU since becoming general secretary has been to begin to explore the opportunities for the FBU and firefighters that may arise from the union acting as public body of professionals. Here, the objective has been to provide the union with not only the tools to defend the Fire and Rescue Service against 'new' Labour and neo-liberalism on the basis of a defence of standards but also to point out what a progressive vision for the service would look like, based again on an agenda of standards. Here, the underlying theme is to link the defence of conditions of FBU members with the defence of the service standards that the public expect and have a right to.

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Biographical Details

Matt Wrack, born in Manchester in 1962, joined the London Fire Brigade in 1983 and worked at various fire stations in East London. He quickly became involved in the Fire Brigades' Union, becoming a Branch Secretary in 1984. Matt served as a member of the FBU London Regional Committee between 1988 and 2005. In 2002, he was elected London FBU Regional Organiser and then Regional Secretary in 2004. In March 2005, he was elected as FBU Assistant General Secretary and then stood for the position of general secretary against the sitting incumbent, Andy Gilchrist. He won that election by 12,883 votes (63.9%) to 7,259 (36.1%) and became FBU General Secretary on 5 May 2005. As a result of holding the senior most position in the FBU he is the Employee Side Joint Secretary of the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services (NJC) and also for the Middle Managers' Negotiating Body (MMNB). Matt is also a member of the TUC General Council.

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Introduction

The FBU was formed in 1918 - this year is our ninetieth anniversary. But I think that the union really developed as a national force during the Second World War. Faced with the threat of bombing, the government recruited large numbers of 'auxiliary' firemen (they were called 'firemen' at the time and for most of the time since). The existing fire brigades were very small and union membership smaller still. In 1939 the FBU had 3,150 members. In London alone, 18,000 auxiliaries were recruited by 1939. The very real danger was that the union would be destroyed by this sudden influx. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, the initial response from the pre-war 'professionals' was to refuse to speak to the newcomers and who saw them as a threat – a bunch of amateurs who should be ignored and got out of the service as quickly as possible.

In 1939, the union had elected a new, and young, general secretary, by the name of John Horner. Horner was previously a London firefighter. He recognised the danger in the new position and saw the real possibility that the union's influence could be severely undermined by the thousands of auxiliaries – unless they were drawn into the union. This caused considerable debate but Horner was eventually successful in winning support for his argument. He convinced the union's full-time members to accept the auxiliaries as members and the FBU subsequently campaigned for improvements to the terms and conditions of the auxiliaries. Horner's campaign meant that the union had grown to 71,500 by 1941. Even after the end of the war and the return to a peacetime Fire Service the union had 15,293 members – a 500% increase on the pre-war membership.

This was one factor which put the FBU in a strong position to influence the creation of the new post-war Fire Service. The basis for this was laid by the *Fire Services Act 1947* and I think that legislation needs to be viewed within the context of what became known as the post-war consensus with the creation of the welfare state and modern public services. One aspect of this political compromise meant that the role of trade unions was recognised and acknowledged within official social and political structures.

Fire Services Act 1947

The 1947 Act created a public service which was delivered and run locally, by local authorities in various forms, but which worked to certain national standards. This approach applied both to issues relating to conditions of service and to the actual service delivered to the public. It is interesting in the light of the current debate in the Fire and Rescue Service to revisit the 1947 Act and see what it created.

It included the powers to create fire authorities, often County Councils in the post-war period, and the following:

- Under Section 29 it created a body – the Central Fire Brigades' Advisory Council (CFBAC) – to advise on a whole range of Fire Service professional and operational matters.
- Section 17 gave powers to create a Discipline Code
- Section 18 gave powers (after consultation with the CFBAC) to set standards for recruitment and promotion
- Section 19 required Fire Authorities to set an establishment scheme of firefighters. It required any change to this (increase/decrease of the numbers of firefighters, fire stations or fire engines) to be approved by the Secretary of State.
- Section 23 granted the power to create one or more central training venue.

- Section 24 created an Inspectorate – to ensure that fire authorities were meeting their obligations under the legislation.
- Section 26 created the Firefighters (Firemen's) Pension Scheme

I have dealt with the act in some detail. This was, in reality, a contract; a contract between the citizen, elected politicians and the workforce. The citizen funded the service and in return would know that he or she could rely on certain standards:

- That, depending on the area, a certain number of fire engines would be required to attend a fire within certain time limits;
- That the firefighters would be required to meet certain standards of training and therefore of competence – set nationally as required.
- That the firefighters would be required to meet certain standards of behaviour and that this would be enforced by a centrally set disciplinary process
- That systems were in place to ensure national professional standards were being set (through the Advisory Council).

In turn, firefighters were acknowledged in this contract in terms of their rights to be consulted as professionals; rights to a pension and so on.

Looking back, despite various problems, despite the militarism and the like, it was a progressive step and a very progressive piece of legislation. It really was an example of the post-war consensus at work and which worked well.

It created a structure which was to remain in place for 57 years. During those 57 years the UK's Fire Service became established as a world-class professional service. When we hear various criticisms of it today we should remind those people that the post-war Fire Service was, in general, a magnificent success story of which firefighters and citizens can be justly proud.

Within that structure, the FBU continued to build and develop its influence. A key aim of the union in the post-war years was the professionalisation of the service. In 1959, Horner launched a programme called 'A Service for the 60s' which aimed to introduce fire safety inspections and other specialist roles for firefighters as a way of ending the old regime of washing floors and polishing brass and as a way of raising the status of FBU members.

The union followed this agenda through work on the negotiating body; the National Joint Council. But equally important was the work on the CFBAC. This body (and the twin body in Scotland) dealt with professional standards. For the union, there were a host of safety issues but, in truth, in the Fire Service it is (and was) impossible to separate health and safety matters from the question of professional standards.

Firefighters rely on their equipment, training, procedures and resources. These are what allow them to carry out their job safely but also professionally and efficiently. So the union had a key role at the heart of that contract with the public – in helping to set those national professional standards while at the same time protecting firefighters.

In this context, the FBU built its strength throughout the post war period to such an extent that it was, indeed, central to the functioning of the Fire Service. Union organisation developed, for example, among Fire Service officers. At the end of World War Two, the union claimed 25% of Fire Service officers. Sixty per cent were members of a separate officers' association. Today, even after five years of attempts to create splits between

officers (or middle-managers using 'modern'-speak), the FBU represents more than 90% of the equivalent roles.

So the FBU was increasingly seen as an obstacle to the agenda of politicians, civil servants and certain chief fire officers. The pay settlement of 1978, creating a pay formula, came to be seen increasingly as a further block to 'reform' of the service.

And 'reform' has been *the* issue for a number of years now. The changes in the Fire Service – or Fire and Rescue Service as we now call it - need to be considered within the wider context of the 'modernisation' of public services in general and indeed of the wider political context within which public services operate.

In Britain, the election of the Conservatives to government in 1979 opened up a new era in politics. The rhetoric of Thatcher around the need to 'roll back the state' set the scene for a series of counter-reforms which together formed a broadly coherent strategy; legislation aimed at weakening trade unions; privatisation of publicly owned enterprises, utilities and services; 'reform' of the welfare system; and changes to the structure of taxation. All these were designed, supposedly, to allow the market to work more fully and more efficiently.

Since then we have seen thirty years of propaganda about the supremacy of the market. It has received some knocks in recent months but it remains the global orthodoxy which we now call neo-liberalism. Significantly, for firefighters and others, this agenda has been continued and developed under 'new' Labour since 1997. Indeed, in many respects and using the language of 'modernisation', they have gone further than the Tories ever dared.

In public services, neo-liberalism has meant a creeping process of privatisation and the attempt to create markets or pseudo-markets where they do not exist. It has also seen the never ending expansion of private sector style management techniques in our public services. The evidence can be seen in health, education and elsewhere and the past five years have shown the Fire Service is not immune.

Audit Commission reports

Significantly, the contemporary debate in the Fire Service started with the Audit Commission. I have recently commented to FBU members that we need to remember that the debate about modernising and improving the service did not start within the service but with reports from the Audit Commission firstly in 1986 and then with '*In the Line of Fire*' report in 1995.

This report argued that the regime within which the service operated needed to be altered so that considerable savings could be made. For example, by showing that fewer fires occur at night, the Commission argued that less fire cover could be provided at night, i.e. fewer firefighters and fewer fire engines. It was the start of arguing for the application of a type of 'just-in-time' production to the Fire Service.

Increasingly, the entire structure of the service came to be seen as an obstacle, with the FBU at its heart. The opportunity for change came with the pay dispute of 2002/2003 and the Labour government's Bain report which developed the pre-existing arguments of the Audit Commission. And again, it is interesting to review what Bain had to say. Here are a couple of quotes:

- *while it will be important to maintain the partnership between employers and unions, which has been a feature of the Fire Service arrangements in the past, there must be a clear demarcation of the management role from that of representing members of the service.*

- The CFBAC should be replaced and – *The [new] board would not be concerned about consensus building.*

Indeed, one of the themes running through the Bain report is the need to undermine the position of the FBU. This was, indeed, taken up by the Labour government after 2003 in the new Act, the *Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004*. To be brief, this Act ripped up the entire post-war Fire Service system and (sort of) started again:

Gone – national standards of fire cover

Gone – appointment and promotion regulations

Gone – the discipline code

‘Reformed’ – the pension scheme

Gone – the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (and Scottish CFBAC)

The government claims this whole process has been a success. Fire deaths are falling – at least deaths in accidental fires in the home. But we need to look a little deeper to discover why. The truth is that these developments are part of a longer term trend affected by various factors such as the houses and homes we live in, how we heat these houses and homes, how we cook, the reduction in smoking, and how we live generally. All these are factors and it is, therefore, ridiculous for the government to claim the results as the products of the ‘modernisation’ of the past five years.

On the other hand, there are some alarming developments. For example, we have just published a report on firefighter fatalities (FBU 2008a, 2008b, LRD 2008). It identifies many areas of concern but let us just look at one - deaths of firefighters at fires. For a period of almost seven years – between February 1996 and October 2002 – there were no deaths at fires recorded. Yet in the five years from 2003 to 2007, we have seen 13 firefighters killed at fires – the worst five year period in the entire thirty years studied. And, it would have still been the worst five year period even without the terrible tragedy at Atherstone-on-Stour in 2007.

If we recall that thirty years has been the approximate length of a firefighter’s career, we can state quite clearly that we have experienced in the past five years the worst loss of firefighters’ lives in an entire generation. Using the HSE official information for the Fire Service (and they ignore at least three other deaths at incidents), the latest figures show a fatal accident rate in the service of 8.5 per 100,000 employees. That is more than ten times the average for all workers in the UK today – and that is simply unacceptable. So, while workplace fatalities have experienced a general, if slow decline, we are concerned that the Fire Service is going in the opposite direction.

This issue brings into sharp focus the questions – are the lessons of these and earlier tragedies being learned? If they are, how and by whom? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that firefighters are informed of relevant issues or that the necessary improvements are made? We come back therefore to the issue of the setting of professional standards.

So let us look a little further at the abolition of the CFBAC, the body which developed professional standards. This is what the Inspector’s report said about the CFBAC in 1999/2000:

The arrangements to bring together all the Fire Service stakeholders through the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) bring greater consistency to the guidance and advice developed for the Fire Service in England and Wales. (HMI report 1999/2000)

Yet, a short time later, under ‘modernisation’ the proposal was made to abolish the CFBAC and SCFBAC. This is what was said in the consultation on this issue in Scotland:

It has been widely acknowledged that the previous UK arrangements have not worked well as they were seen to be slow, bureaucratic and unable to deliver the required strategic guidance.

So, we now have new structures in place in England, in Wales and in Scotland. And, it is worth looking at what has happened in the 'modernised' and presumably speeded-up Fire Service of today. In April of this year, a paper was presented in England to the Ministerial Advisory body – the Practitioners' Forum. It was submitted by Sir Ken Knight, the new Chief Advisor to the Minister at CLG on FRS matters:

*The environment in which the Fire and Rescue Service operates requires appropriate guidance to ensure safe systems of work for firefighters and effective service delivery to the community. The increased need for resilience in response to major incidents, including extreme weather events and acts of terrorism, means that a single Fire and Rescue Service may be unable to provide all the resources required to resolve the incident. **National** guidance provides a **consistency of approach, common operational practices** and facilitates **interoperability** between Fire and Rescue Services. It also confirms shared **good practice** on matters relating to operational response, community safety and regulatory fire safety issues. [emphasis added]*

*... there is an **urgent** need to progress matters in respect of operational doctrine as it is recognised that **a gap has emerged over the last few years and further delay is not acceptable.** [emphasis added]*

The same situation exists in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland. There has been throughout that time a failure to address this gap in the development of standards, procedures and best practice in relation to operational response.

So, the Advisory Councils were abolished because, it was claimed, they were too slow. But for the four years after abolition, next to nothing was done to fill the gap in operational guidance to the extent that 'further delay is not acceptable.'

Emergency intervention matters

Behind these developments lies the thinking of certain politicians and policy makers within the civil service. We have seen what can only be described as an attempt to undermine the role of firefighters and the professional and social importance of what they do. This has been in part by emphasising educational and preventative activities at the expense of emergency intervention – i.e. turning out to 999 calls. So we have a senior civil servant who can claim in the House of Commons – with a straight face – that the Fire Service can respond to emergencies slower than it did previously and it does not mean a worse service is being provided to the public. In my view, that is part of a very clear agenda to make the case for cuts which will undermine the safety of the public and of firefighters in the name of 'modernisation'.

It is an entirely incorrect approach by the way. Emergency intervention is central to what the Fire Service does. Our figures show rescues (just from fires and Road Traffic Collisions) running at almost 17,000 a year (16,744). And this figure excludes many other rescues such as those from floods and other such incidents. This is a success story for the service. But it is one which nobody else seems to want to tell. The government stopped publishing these figures six years ago and it is now left to the Fire Brigades' Union to collect them. And that tells its own story.

In my view, the changes of the past few years have created a fragmentation within the Fire and Rescue Service. Different standards are set in every single service about the response provided to the public; each service sets

its own standards of training; we see new initiatives introduced without any thorough assessment of their value or use.

And behind all this lies a drive to save money. Rather than looking at how firefighters can deliver the best possible service to the public, the agenda is how much money can be saved. The long term threat is actually to undermine the whole ethos of teamwork and public service that lies behind firefighting.

The ideology of modernisation is based on introducing private sector techniques into the public services. And the truth is that behind that lies a deep hostility to the very idea of 'public service'. Some of this thinking is seen in the Fire and Rescue Service today with the increased emphasis on 'leadership' and with the very significant pay rises for the most senior managers – on the basis of driving through 'modernisation', i.e. achieving cost cutting and job cutting measures and targets.

But these reforms have excluded two key groups of people; they have excluded firefighters and they have excluded the public. Each Fire and Rescue Authority is required to consult the public over its plans for emergency cover. Everyone knows that the consultations are generally a complete farce whereby the public opposes further cuts and then the public are subsequently ignored. This raises a further question about the deficit of democratic control.

Fire and Rescue Authorities are claimed to be mechanisms of local democratic control. But in general nobody elects them directly. Apart from a few County Councils, they take the form of a joint board with members appointed from a range of other local authorities. So how can the public ever control or influence the actions of the authority? If, for example, a community was so angered by measures taken that it wanted to replace an entire fire authority, it would be impossible. Any councillor not returned by election is simply replaced by appointment by another one from the same party.

But in attempting to exclude firefighters and the public from a role in the future of the service, a potential alliance is created. Firefighters, through their union, and the public, through community organisations, could develop an alternative vision for the Fire and Rescue Service.

If we asked a sample of members of the public what their priorities for the Fire and Rescue Service should be I am confident what the top issue would be. People want to be sure that when they dial 999 they get fire engines and firefighters there as quickly as possible. They hope it will never happen but when it does they want to be sure that the service will deliver. And, I think that firefighters would be in complete agreement. On the other hand, the civil servants and Chief Officers will not be, because they have other priorities and other agendas.

So we need to find ways to build alliances between firefighters and the public. This has been done remarkably well in many local campaigns. We have seen communities fight with great tenacity to protect their fire stations and we work hand in hand with them. We need to find ways to develop that and take it forward.

Conclusion

The best and most progressive values of the Fire and Rescue Service are those of teamwork, mutual support and public service. They are the values around which the FBU has been built. They stand in sharp contrast to those of the current trends of public sector managerialism which includes a bitter hostility to close-knit teamwork and to the solidarity it has created among firefighters. These trends seek to break up that solidarity just as they increasingly seek to break up the service itself. Instead of a national service delivered locally (as claimed even by Bain), we are seeing the development of a fragmented local service delivered without any

common standards. They seek the endless hiving-off of sections of the service; a training department here; the fire safety department there; all on grounds of cost cutting.

Our vision is different. We see the Fire and Rescue Service working best when all the parts work together; as an integrated and professional modern public service; where the fire safety specialists are able to support firefighter and public safety; where the expert trainers can help improve the service for the benefit of all. There are many challenges ahead of us. The Fire and Rescue Service is in the front line of dealing with the effects of climate change whether by floods or by increased grassland and heathland fires. We are at the front line of responding to the threat of terrorist attack. There are a whole range of such challenges and we will face them best if the professional voice of firefighters – alongside the voices of our communities – is at the heart of developing the service for the future, a service genuinely fit for the twenty-first century.

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