



The Royal British Legion

Annual Conference 2010

National President's Address

In my address at last year's conference – my first as National President – I said what an honour it was to be appointed as your President. One year on, I still feel that huge sense of honour and with it a sense of tremendous pride. Pride in the Legion and all its achievements. Because during the past 12 months I have got to meet so many of you - whether members, staff, volunteers or supporters - and see your achievements at first hand.

These achievements have been notable across all four of the things the Legion delivers - welfare, campaigning, Remembrance and comradeship. And I believe that it's important to remind ourselves of what's been achieved - not to be self-satisfied or persuade ourselves that everything is perfect or can't be done better, but as a context to what follows at this Conference. Now I shall stick to headlines, because I know that the detail will be covered by other speakers later, notably the Chairman and the Director General.

And across all four areas, I have been particularly pleased to see the focus of the Legion's activities move further during the last 12 months to support the heroes of today, our brave Service men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their families, and those recently retired.

Welfare, first. We are, by a considerable margin, the largest charity providing such support. We recently made our 10,000th – yes, 10,000th - welfare payment to beneficiaries in this group (sometimes called 'The Afghan Generation'). We helped 2,000 homeless ex-Service people. We provided free representation for over 5,000 of our beneficiaries at appeal hearings and helped a further 5,000 with war pension claims. And we made over 20,000 immediate needs grants or loans to our beneficiaries. Among our grants to other charities has been one to Combat Stress (who look after mental welfare) of £1.8 million. And we are contributing £21 million, in our partnership with the Ministry of Defence and Help For Heroes, setting up the Personnel Recovery Centres (convalescent centres) around the country.

Then **campaigning**. We have continued to campaign vigorously on behalf of our beneficiaries, championing their cause – particularly the younger generation, for example with the highly successful 'Honour the Covenant' campaign. We have been at the forefront of negotiations with the Government in the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme which has, amongst other things, doubled the top level compensation for the most seriously wounded from £280,000 to £570,000. We have successfully campaigned for start-up funding for businesses for those leaving the Armed Forces – the Government recently responded by committing £5 million to it in what's called the 'Enterprise Scheme for Veterans'. And we launched our own Election Manifesto to all prospective Parliamentary candidates, persuading large numbers of them to sign-up to it.

In terms of **Remembrance**, we have provided the focus for the nation's commemoration activities, most notably at Wootton Bassett, but also with the 65th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy last June, and ten days ago with the 65th anniversary of VE Day in

London. And our National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire continues to grow, literally, from strength to strength, and in March hosted a high-profile repatriation of the Basra Memorial Wall on which are plaques commemorating each Service man and-woman who died in Iraq. Importantly, following the youth theme, we have also continued our schools programme, taking over 4,000 children from over 80 schools on Remembrance tours of battlefields and Commonwealth war graves.

Turning now to **comradeship**, I am pleased to see that this word has received renewed emphasis within the Legion. Comradeship has always been an important aspect of what the Legion provides to ex-Service people, and it is delivered through the Legion's membership. The Membership Review recognised this, and as we move to implement the Review we need to focus on how comradeship is best provided to the next generation of Legion members. While striving to attract new members into traditional branches (and I note that some branches have been remarkably successful in this), we need also to recognise rather different forms of membership – specialist branches such as the Riders - and the role of the internet – things like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter - although I'm afraid that when it comes to these things I'm personally (as my three undergraduate sons keep telling me) at the rock bottom of an extremely steep learning curve!

But there is a further area I want to mention, and that is **fundraising**, because it is achievements in fundraising that make all the others possible. The work and effort that goes into fundraising in the Legion – all around the country and in Haig House - is, I find, really inspiring. The 2008 Poppy Appeal was a record, and we await with bated breath, the announcement later today of the results of the 2009 Appeal. Plans are already well developed for the 2010 Poppy Appeal, and I was delighted to be present at the Warwick Conference last month to hear about them. Important, too, are the large number of other special events, both national ones like 'Pedal to Paris', and the many local initiatives round the country which add up to such a significant source of funds for the Legion. It is, after all, fundraising which allows us to do all the things we do.

So, in summary, looking back, a year of great achievements (and I have just touched on a selection of them.) In everything it does, the Legion stands, and is seen to stand, shoulder to shoulder with those who serve.

Looking ahead, the Legion faces exciting challenges. The continuing operation in Afghanistan means that those we are here to support will need that support probably even more than at present. Our 90th Anniversary beckons, and it will, quite rightly, be a big event – or rather series of big events – and we'll be hearing more about that later in the Conference. And looking ahead, too, the Legion must continue to move with the changing times. Not change for change's sake, but change where it's necessary to do so. As always, that calls for vision and wisdom.

But I would like to end with the most important part of my message: a big thank-you to all of you in this hall, and all whom you represent, for what you do for The Royal British Legion. It is much appreciated.

**Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely KCB MC
National President**