

## **NHSGC Meeting 27 January 2005: address by David Eves, Vice President**

These are challenging times of great and rapid change in what politicians like to call the “world of work”. I suggest that they are as challenging for us to respond to as for major companies and government organisations.

*For example, the tilting of the balance from large manufacturing companies to services.* Many of our Groups began by being fostered by large manufacturing companies and we are still grateful for their invaluable support. But smokestack industries are no longer prominent in the UK landscape and many of our bigger firms have closed down or moved manufacturing abroad. Today, large firms tend to be in the high tech, services and retail sectors. Just look at the composition of the FTSE 100. What does this mean for us?

*The Trade Unions* have been going through the mill. Membership is about one third of what it was when I began inspecting factories in the 1960s, and tends now to be strongest in the older, unreformed areas of the public sector.

*The public sector* itself is undergoing change, whether willingly or not. Look at the political pressures for improving health and education, two of the present Government’s top priorities. Local authorities and the civil service face the same reforming pressures. The Gershon proposals point towards large cuts in numbers of Civil Servants. The Opposition would go further, given the chance.

*Regulatory philosophies and methods* are also up for grabs. The Hampton Review though still in progress seems likely to lead to a major shake-up of the approach across Government to regulation of all kinds. A more business friendly approach, less emphasis on heavy-handed prosecution and more use of administrative sanctions to encourage compliance.

*The regulatory authorities* that we look towards for leadership in occupational safety and health, the Health and Safety Commission and Executive and the local authorities are unlikely to remain untouched by these reforms. While in some respects they are exemplars of good practice in their proportionate, risk-based approach to regulation and enforcement, they too will have to continue to modernise if they are to remain effective and retain the trust of Ministers and the society they serve. The Commission is slightly ahead of the game, having consulted and then published its Strategy for Workplace Health and Safety to 2010, and lately having consulted on whether to change its regulatory methods, in the consultative document “Regulation and Recognition”.

*Social and economic change* continues apace. Britain has become a multicultural society with many more women in the workforce, part-timers and thousands of micro businesses have sprung up working from homes or the business parks that are a feature of every town. Many of these will be out of sight or scarcely known to the authorities. What can we do to help them?

*Attitudes to work* are quite different today from when I began forty odd years ago. Few young people are looking for a job for life. Like final salary pension schemes, that sort of job is fast disappearing! The expectation of young people today is of “portfolio” careers, working for different employers or themselves, adding value to their worth by gaining multiple skills and experience. Can we help meet their needs?

*Technological change* continues to affect the way we work and organise ourselves for work, making remote management more possible, eg by remote conferencing,

and enabling flexible working practices, better – even constant – communication via email and mobile telephones. What can we learn from this?

*The growth in small businesses and micro businesses has been phenomenal. More than 95% of the nearly 4 million UK businesses are thought to employ less than 10 people – though whether anyone can be precise about these figures when the black economy is also growing strongly, must be doubtful. How should we reach out to them?*

*Internationally, many of the economies once thought of as basket cases are growing at a phenomenal rate, fuelled by cheap labour aided by technology. If you phone your bank you are quite likely to find yourself talking to a call centre in a faraway country. Practically all the electronic goods in the shops now seem to have been made in China or Malaysia. The Global Village has arrived.*

Forty years ago very little of this was being predicted. But there have been some very positive outcomes for occupational safety and health. Sixty odd years ago, fatalities in manufacturing alone were running at over a thousand a year, mining was similar. Society then regarded the toll as almost inevitable. Today, society has become more risk averse and is concerned about a fraction of these numbers. Expectations of quality of life have risen and today we demand that workers have a right to come home safe and sound.

Organisations that have survived and prospered over this period have been those that have responded well to change, avoided complacency, and been flexible and forward looking.

So, what does all this mean for us, the Council and the Groups? What does it suggest about the leadership and governance that the Council should offer them? And how do we rate our chances for increasing the contribution that we can make to achieve society's expectations?

Without complacency, we can first congratulate ourselves that we are still in business. The existence today of eighty or so Groups that had their origins in our industrial past must say something about the worth of the Groups and their attractions for members. I'd like to congratulate the two Groups that this year mark their 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries – due honour will be paid to them later today by Lord Brougham. But I suggest that it would be very dangerous to rest on our laurels. Unless all the Groups, led by you, and by this Council, can be helped to respond effectively to these fast moving changes in the world of work, they could be in danger of being left behind, less relevant and marginalised. I believe that would be a significant loss to the wider system.

Now I come to an even less comfortable area. I have to say that not all my one-time colleagues in the Commission and Executive and other bodies see you in the same light that I do. I know from my past contacts with the Groups over many years and lately through my involvement in the judging of the Alan Butler Awards what excellent work many Groups are doing. But I am sorry to have to say that this is less obvious to members of influential bodies such as the Health and Safety Commission, who have had little or no contact with us.

The perception amongst some of those that are even aware of our existence – and many are not - is that we are a bunch of rather elderly safety people who meet occasionally to talk about accidents. Whether or not you think this is a caricature, there is a problem of perception about us, and a lack of understanding about what we

do, that I think we need to address. I'd like therefore to suggest a few questions we might like to try and answer during our discussion today:

- Should we align ourselves more closely to the priorities set out in the Commission's current Strategy? The Commission is seeking partnership agreements with other bodies – why not us?
- Are we doing the right things to meet the needs of members? (Bearing in mind the existence of other bodies such as IOSH (now with 28,000 members) and other sources of professional and technical information).
- Should we raise our profile and increase our influence? Do we need to modernise our image?
- How representative are we of small firms? Is it our aim to grow membership by attracting more SMEs to the fold?
- If so, how? And how should we best market what we can offer them in a way that attracts them? How good are our communications?
- What are the measurements that would then indicate success for the Council and the Groups?
- What can we offer other bodies who are also active in the national health and safety system? (And, in exchange, what is in it for us?)

This is a challenging time for us. But the good news is that we currently enjoy the tremendous support of Roger Bibbings of RosPA. And Marcia Davies of the Health and Safety Executive, whom some of you will know well from her spell in Manchester as NW Regional Director and now in Birmingham as director for HSE's Midlands Region as a strong supporter of our movement, has signalled to him a willingness to engage with the Council and the Groups in furthering the Health and Safety Commission's strategy for improving health and safety at work.

We can capitalise on that if we strike while the iron is hot.

#### *A re-launch of the Health and Safety Groups movement*

You have all, I hope, seen the document which our Chairman, Kerry Ross, sent out on 26 November for your consideration in which he proposes a re-launch of the NHSGC under a new banner, "*Safety Groups UK*". It states our mission clearly and positively and the terms of references chart a way forward that, personally, I believe will help invigorate and take our movement in the right direction over the coming years. But it is your views that will count in coming to a decision.

Today we have the opportunity to debate the proposals. I am sure you will have much to say. Thank you very much for your attention.

David Eves CB BA FIOSH, 27 January 2005