Video Interview Transcript between MEC CE Mervin Singham

and Commissioner of New Zealand Police Andrew Coster

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:00:06:33

Tēnā koutou katoa.

I'm Mervin Singham, Chief Executive for the Ministry for Ethnic Communities.

I'm joined by Andy Coster, the Commissioner for the New Zealand Police.

The Ministry for Ethnic Communities engages extensively with ethnic communities across our country,

and law and order frequently comes up as a top matter in their minds.

Today, Andy Coster is with me to answer some of the questions that ethnic communities have about the justice and policing system in New Zealand.

Andy thanks so much for joining me this morning.

ANDREW COSTER – 00:00:36:00

My pleasure.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:00:38:18

The first question I have for you is about yourself.

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role as the Commissioner for the New Zealand Police?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:00:46:22

I've been the Commissioner since April 2020,

just before our first COVID lockdown was when I started.

Prior to that, I'd been in Police for about 25 years,

did a range of frontline roles, investigative roles, mostly in Auckland, but also down in the South Island.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:01:03:49

So Andy, was the job what you thought it would be?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:01:07:07

Well, I think no one predicted COVID,

and so it was three days

into our first lockdown that I took up the reins.

It was a really challenging time, but I'm very proud of the way we policed through that period.

We had to, you know, create a whole lot of new skills and capabilities

to enable us to do what we did in that time and our people really stepped up.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:01:31:10

So, Andy, as you know, for many ethnic communities, they come from different jurisdictions.

Their experiences with their Police of where they come from, the justice system can be very different.

What would you like them to know about the New Zealand Police and within the justice system in our country?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:01:45:21

I'm mindful that it's not in every country that the Police can be trusted

and are seen as people who you would go to in order to feel safe.

So in New Zealand we have a high level of trust

and confidence from our community in our Police service, and rightly so.

We have one of the best Police services in the world and our role is to keep communities safe.

And we work very hard to be accessible, to act with integrity

and to be the kind of organisation that people should feel confident to come and engage with.

So one of the things we often hear when we talk to ethnic communities

and with the NZ Police is this idea of community policing.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:02:25:18

Can you tell us what that means and why it matters?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:02:28:23

We are very much of the view that Police officers

are the community and the community is the Police.

In other words, we're not an elite organisation.

We're not set apart from communities.

We're most successful when we're able to engage, to work in partnership with communities because safety comes from communities

and community leaders taking ownership

of their own space with Police in support.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:02:56:43

So if we have ethnic community leaders listening to this interview,

what would your message be to them about how they can partner with the New Zealand Police to do what you just said?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:03:05:48

New Zealand Police has a range of ways

that we connect with communities right across the country.

Our Maōri, Pacific and ethnic

focus forums are a key mechanism.

So as the Commissioner, I have a group of leaders from a range of ethnic communities that I meet with on a quarterly basis, but also in districts and areas across the country, our commanders have similar forums,

so we're looking out for people who have leadership

influence in the community, who can help us to understand the issues

from a community perspective and who can work with us towards finding solutions for the things that are making people feel unsafe.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:03:48:07

So in terms of the things that those community leaders are telling you and giving you advice on,

what are some of those issues that they've raised with you?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:03:54:45

We know at the moment for the ethnic community there's a particular concern about retail crime, in particular for small businesses who

sometimes are the victims of dishonesty offending

of violent crime and some high profile incidents,

particularly around things like ram raids, have led

to a lot of public dialogue about this issue.

We're working very hard, particularly with retailers

to try and bring in prevention solutions.

That's included the retail crime programme, which has been about strengthening shops to make them more resilient to robberies

and other forms of crime.

ANDREW COSTER – 00:04:39:00

Also, we've been working incredibly hard to hold accountable those who are responsible for this offending.

So that's that's one big area.

We also know that family harm is quite

a big concern amongst our ethnic communities,

and there are some very promising prevention initiatives

targeting that particular area as well.

We also know that our ethnic communities are incredibly diverse in and of themselves,

and so we don't assume that the problems are the same

for every ethnic group in New Zealand, and we do our best to understand the local issues.

In terms of accessing support from Police,

ethnic communities can have some unique challenges, so language might be a barrier, cultural barriers might exist,

people might be afraid the New Zealand Police

may not understand their culture and respond in a way that's not appropriate for them.

There might be perceptions of New Zealand Police that make people

a little bit nervous to come to the New Zealand Police for help.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:05:36:31

What would you say about those things?

What's your understanding about those things and what do you say to people?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:05:41:12

We've been working incredibly hard as an organisation to become more diverse.

We've been actively recruiting out of a range of ethnic communities,

and so our frontline is increasingly able

to understand different cultural considerations

and has a wider range of language skills than we've ever had in the past.

Our people also have access to translation services,

particularly our call centres.

So if someone makes contact with us and language is a problem,

then our call centres are able to access a third party translation service

so that we can understand what the issue is that's being raised

and work through it together.

Also, our website has 12 different languages and we work to keep increasing

the range of different language advice that's available.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:06:36:17

Speaking about your staff, the diversity of your staff, I understand one of the core values of the New Zealand Police is valuing diversity.

What does that actually mean for communities and for the staff that work for you?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:06:48:41

When I joined New Zealand Police, it was a fairly homogenous organisation.

We all came from similar backgrounds, mostly men, mostly Pākehā,

New Zealand European and we have diversified massively in the last 25 years.

We still have a long way to go, but 6% of our frontline

constabulary workforce is now from an ethnic community.

That's one of the things the Ministry is really keen on, is making sure that the public service represents the community that it serves.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:07:23:10

If I was a young person thinking about a career

in the New Zealand Police and I'm from an ethnic community, what would you say to me?

Why would I join the New Zealand Police?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:07:31:48

I'm mindful that policing might not be seen

as a good career option for some ethnic communities, maybe because of low

levels of trust in Police in countries of origin.

What I would say is that in New Zealand, policing is a noble occupation.

It's one characterised by service to the community.

We're very deliberately not called a Police force

but a Police service because our job is to serve the community.

And so for someone who has an orientation towards public service,

for someone who wants to make a difference for their own community,

then there are great opportunities in New Zealand Police to do that and we have many officers who will testify to the job satisfaction

that comes from feeling like you're really positively impacting

the safety of the community.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:08:17:13

Yeah, I remember myself actually saying the New Zealand Police force when I first arrived in New Zealand

and somebody said to me, ‘that's not what we call it here’, so that's interesting to hear that from you.

Andy, in terms of the crimes that ethnic communities

themselves might be involved in, because no one's immune from that.

Are there any particular areas that you know that,

whether it's the Asian community or the Middle Eastern, Latin American

and African communities might be a little bit more, you know there's a bit more of a focus on those areas.

What might those be?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:08:49:49

One of the things that we focus on particularly

in New Zealand is behaviour on the roads.

We have a high rate of fatalities in New Zealand compared to many other countries.

That's partly because our roading network, particularly in rural areas,

is not as well advanced as some countries.

We have a very large road network, a small population to pay for it.

So driving behaviours,

making sure that people are competent for the roads that they’re driving.

Drink driving is a particular area of focus.

We have a strict enforcement approach about people who drink and drive,

and so that's an area where we really focus.

And the other big one would be around family harm.

So in New Zealand, we have a very firm response to violence in families.

And so we have a lot of initiatives that are doing our best

to shift behaviours where violence is being expressed in the home.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:09:55:44

The New Zealand Police are having more focus on hate crimes,

particularly if they're based on ethnicity, race, national origin, that sort of thing.

At what threshold does that kick in? Because there are some things that aren't a crime, right?

How does that work?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:10:10:16

That's absolutely right.

We have protection of freedom of expression in New Zealand.

We don't have specific laws about hate speech

that falls short of inciting violence.

So there are a range of things where communities

might understandably feel concerned that New Zealand Police

may not be able to do anything about.

People should feel confident to contact us if they think that there's something that is straying

into the area of crime or a threat to their safety

because we are interested to know.

But it's also important for people to understand

that Police's role is to enforce the law and the law doesn't cover

every kind of behaviour that may leave

people feeling unwelcome or unsafe.

And I think we recognise that there's a role for the whole community

to condemn behaviours that leave members of our ethnic communities feeling like they’re not welcome here because that's not the case.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:11:22:13

So Andy picking up on that, is yelling a racial slur

at someone across the street,

is that something that people can call the New Zealand Police about?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:11:31:20

They could call. It's not the sort of thing that we can

do anything about unless that yelling amounts to a threat.

So if there's a threat to somebody, then that comes into the domain

where the law may be able to do something.

We are concerned to know if people believe that there are people in their community that are a threat to them, a danger to them,

because we know that, for example, terrorism can be identified by understanding that some people have very hateful views towards others.

So that information is valuable to us.

But we may not be able to take law enforcement action

depending on how far that yelling has gone.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:12:20:30

Andy many of the examples we talked about refer to ethnic communities,

people based on their national origin and race and so on.

What about faith communities?

Do New Zealand police also respond to faith communities when issues arise?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:12:33:04

Very much so. When we talk about valuing diversity,

it's the full variety of diversities that we see in our community,

which can be ethnic, can be faith-based, can be a range of other things.

New Zealand Police was the first police organisation

to adopt the hijab as an option within Police uniform and also the turban.

We maintain relationships with a wide range of faith communities,

with the Muslim community, with the Sikh community, with the Jewish community, and with many others.

Because we recognise we have to understand the considerations for those groups.

We recognise that the way different communities deal with, for example, death,

with the customs they observe, are quite varied.

And we want our staff to understand those things and to respond

ANDREW COSTER – 00:13:26:02

as appropriately as they can to the diversity that we encounter.

We would encourage, again, anyone who's feeling unsafe for any reason

to be able to contact us and express those concerns.

And we do our best to understand as well the specific considerations

that particular faiths might have in terms

of Police response to a particular incident.

And we're doing our best to educate our people on

how different faiths deal with different situations.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:13:57:48

Andy, one of the things I've seen the New Zealand Police do

is support the Race Unity Awards that has been running for many years.

I saw you make a speech about this recently you were very passionate in the things you said.

Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Why does the New Zealand Police support that activity?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:14:14:36

We recognise that our young people

are the future of our country and that it's important that their views

about the kind of country we want to be are able to be expressed.

So we've been very proud to be a part of sponsoring those awards.

That's included having members of Police sitting on judging panels,

hosting events around the regions, and then it culminates with an event at Parliament.

And that's been a very special way, I think,of supporting young ethnic leaders.

And when you look, many of them have gone on from being successful in the Race Unity Speech Awards

to occupying other positions of leadership in the community,

so a really positive way for us to build that ongoing connection

with the community and particularly with young people from ethnic backgrounds.

Andy we talked before about language barriers that many ethnic communities might face.

And in fact, the way ethnic communities access information may be far from the usual,

they may not be accessing information from mainstream media and mainstream social media even.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:15:19:17

So what do you think the New Zealand Police can do to make sure

that information is getting out to ethnic communities through the avenues that they are accustomed to?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:15:27:0

Yeah, we certainly recognise that the places people get

their information are many and varied, particularly these days with social media.

We've asked our media team to think particularly about, you know,

what's the messages on any given news item of the day

that need to go to the ethnic community.

And we're keen to increase our outreach through

ethnic social media and other channels

be it you know, ethnic community newspapers and so on,

so that people can hear the New Zealand Police perspective.

There's a lot of wrong information that gets shared by social media

and we know we need to be a bit more in those places

to be able to reach the communities that are there.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:16:11:25

Is disinformation something that's on your mind?

Does that worry the New Zealand Police?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:16:16:35

We are really concerned about mis and disinformation.

Policing relies on the trust and confidence

of the vast majority of people in the community to be successful.

You know, we need most people to agree what's right,

what the rules are, and to abide by those.

And so if we have influencers that are polarising our communities,

that are causing people to believe things that are untrue,

then that really undermines the ability of policing to be effective.

So we are concerned about it, it's a massive challenge and I think there are lots of people thinking about how we might tackle this in the future.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:16:54:41

So Andy in closing, do you have any messages that you'd like

to convey to ethnic communities who might be listening to this video?

Is there anything you'd like them to understand or know beyond what you've just shared?

ANDREW COSTER – 00:17:04:12

New Zealand Police is an organisation that you can trust.

Unlike Police services or Police forces in many countries,

New Zealand Police is one that aspires to high levels of integrity.

We are focused on caring for communities and helping to make them safe.

To do that, we need to be able to work with those communities.

Police can't impose safety by ourselves.

And so we want to work with ethnic communities.

We are doing that.

Please feel confident to contact us that we will be able to bring

an appropriate response to whatever might be concerning them.

MERVIN SINGHAM - 00:17:43:34

Thank you very much Andy I really appreciate you joining me for this interview today.

ANDREW COSTER – 00:17:47:14

My pleasure. Thank you.