



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard 24 March 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Police Resources, Laura

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (9.50 a.m.), by leave: In the last parliamentary sitting I praised the member for Toowoomba South for his sensible approach to police numbers and police resourcing issues. As members will recall, I highlighted this particular quote from the member for Toowoomba South. He said—

"The position I always take is to support the police in the first instance, and if there has been an inefficient use of resources, I have no doubt the professional mechanisms of the Police Service will rectify that."

I thought that at last we had one coalition member who understood how police resources are allocated and the petty bickering from the coalition about police numbers had become a thing of the past.

I am sad to say that I was wrong! Barely two weeks had passed since the member for Toowoomba South had made his enlightened statement before he blotted his copybook. Instead of relying on the "professional mechanisms of the Police Service", the member for Toowoomba South could not resist a cheap shot over police resources at Laura. He ignored the professional advice from the Police Service, the level of crime and the police to population ratio in the Laura police division—all of which consistently showed that at the moment there is no need to increase police numbers in Laura.

The member for Toowoomba South wanted an extra police officer stationed at Laura despite the fact that there are on average only 15 offences per year and the police to population ratio is 1 to about 400. This crime level and police to population ratio is much lower than it is in many police divisions in the member's own electorate, but he still wants police to divert resources to Laura.

I am not saying that Laura will never get an extra police officer, because we are increasing police numbers at record rates. However, at the moment, the Police Service has identified other areas of the State which have a greater need for police. But instead of relying on the professional mechanisms that he lauded a fortnight ago, the member for Toowoomba South wants the Police Service to overrule all of its resourcing criteria.

The calls for more police at Laura came to a head recently following an incident involving a large number of local residents. There seem to be differing views on how to describe this incident. Those who have been calling for more police have described the event as a riot. On the other hand, the Cairns Post on 17 March quoted Ang-Gnarra Aboriginal Corporation secretary Rhonda Henry, who said—

"There was a fight between a man and his wife but there were a lot of community-minded people who tried to help the police officer. It's a bit exaggerated ... there were no mass riots."

Putting aside these differing views, the senior constable at Laura did the right thing. Instead of inflaming the situation, and faced with more people than he could adequately handle, he withdrew and called for back-up from Cairns. This was provided the next day and the situation was successfully resolved. It is unlikely that this incident could have been resolved quickly even if Laura had two police officers.

Under police training, officers are required to withdraw and monitor situations which involve numbers of people that are much greater than available police. They then call for back up. These are the same professional mechanisms that the member for Toowoomba South praised a fortnight ago.

The member for Caboolture has also criticised the Police Service for its recent decision to recruit a police liaison officer to replace the Aboriginal tracker at Laura who resigned recently. While a suitable person to fill the position has yet to be employed, the ironic aspect of the so-called riot is that if Laura had had a police liaison officer the incident could have been averted. PLOs across the State do a great job, resolving disputes and assisting police in preventing crime in their local communities. In addition, the PLO at Laura will have tracking skills to assist local police in searches. When this person is recruited it will be the best of both worlds for Laura. They will have someone with tracking skills to replace the tracker who left and they will have someone who lives in the community and who can assist the local police in resolving disputes and give police backup.
