



Speech by

Mr M. HORAN

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH

Hansard 8 August 2001

MINISTER FOR POLICE AND CORRECTIVE SERVICES

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (6.00 p.m.) I move—

That this parliament calls on the Premier to bring forward his planned mid-term appraisal of ministerial performances so that a more competent, more informed and less antagonistic minister can be appointed to the Police and Corrective Services portfolio.

In the five months since the member for Mount Isa was appointed as Minister for Police and Corrective Services, community confidence in the administration of these important portfolios has plummeted, relations between the Queensland Police Service and the Beattie government have deteriorated to an all-time low and the correctional services system has been racked by a series of security breaches.

The member for Mount Isa has been wont to say in the past that the buck stops with the minister. The opposition agrees. However, increasingly in recent times the member for Mount Isa has tried to duck his own pledge and blame everyone but himself or, if that fails, to shoot the messenger—practices that many of his colleagues on the other side of the House indulge in.

We have seen members of this parliament asking legitimate questions, as they are entitled and expected to do on behalf of the public of Queensland, attacked and personally vilified for doing so. We have seen the Queensland Police Union viciously attacked with wild accusations whenever members of the union raise their very legitimate and serious concerns regarding issues such as the underfunding of their operations by the Beattie government and the refusal of the Beattie government to protect police officers in preparation for the expected demonstrations at CHOGM. We have seen staff and other individuals within the Corrective Services portfolio blamed and targeted whenever a security breach occurs. We have seen communities such as Helensvale arrogantly scorned for highlighting problems with police shortages.

It is time that the member for Mount Isa did as he said and lived up to his pledge, because the buck does stop with him. It is worth noting that he was removed from his previous portfolio for exactly the same sorts of reasons as he now should be removed from the Police and Corrective Services portfolio—because the buck stopped with him. His position in that portfolio had become untenable because the mining industry had completely lost confidence in his administration and because he simply could not fix the issues that the industry needed fixed—issues like the backlog of some 1,700 mining exploration permits that had developed under the Beattie government's failed native title regime.

Let us look in more detail at the record of the member for Mount Isa since he was removed from the Mines and Energy portfolio and handed the Police and Corrective Services portfolio. Firstly, let us look at police staffing on the Gold Coast. In the most recent incident, last week the minister scoffed at concerns amongst Gold Coast residents about this fast-growing region, police response times and police numbers. Instead of sensibly and rationally undertaking to investigate the matter, as the Police Commissioner later did, the minister simply lambasted the *Gold Coast Bulletin* for reporting those concerns and then tried to claim that the region was overstaffed. The Minister for Police and Corrective Services stated that the Gold Coast, which has the worse crime rate in Queensland, is overpoliced. In fact, there is one officer to 606 people on the Gold Coast compared to a state average of one officer to 481 people.

There is also the problem of the record number of police stress claims. Under the Beattie Labor government, Queensland police are lodging stress claims and being medically retired in record

numbers. In the year 2000-01, 200 stress claims costing in excess of \$3.6 million were lodged, compared to 118 in the year 1999-2000 which cost \$1.5 million. Medical retirement numbers have increased from a three-year low in 1998-99 of 49 retirements to 58 in the year 2000-01. Those are dramatic increases in anyone's language and surely point to a significant problem within the Police Service. Despite that increase, the Police Minister proposes to do nothing because he is reportedly satisfied that best management practices are being implemented in the Police Service.

I move to the Police budget. The Criminal Justice Commission recently revealed that Queensland's spending on criminal justice is four per cent below the national average. Despite a claimed budget increase, the minister failed to address this underspending relative to our national position in the 2001-02 state budget.

The police housing maintenance budget was cut from \$880,000 last year to just \$653,000 this year. The maintenance budget for small stations has been cut from \$630,000 to \$500,000. The maintenance budget for watch-houses has been cut from \$1.9 million to \$1.2 million. The minor works budget for larger stations has been cut from \$2.82 million to \$2.1 million. Those figures reflect the fact that the minister is a weak representative of his portfolio in cabinet.

Recently, on seven nights in a row there were police chases in south-east Queensland. The opposition has proposed that a new law be introduced to punish offenders who cause high-speed police chases. Despite the increase in police chases and subsequent accidents, and despite the dangers to the public, the minister still refuses our proposal to introduce a new law. The Beattie Labor government has also refused opposition calls to introduce a specific offence in the Criminal Code to protect Queensland police from assault. Those are the sorts of things that the minister should be bringing forward in cabinet, so that the ministers responsible for the relevant legislation can act to provide protection for our police.

The existing provisions of the Criminal Code do not provide sufficient protection for police officers against assault or an effective deterrent for people considering making such an assault. An increasing number of violent assaults on police officers is occurring, resulting in stress caused to police and the very real risk of officers contracting a serious communicable disease.

The Queensland Police Union has threatened to march on Parliament House in protest over security funding for CHOGM to provide for equipment, training and rehearsals. So far the Beattie Labor government has taken no notice of the recent call by the opposition to introduce special precinct powers during CHOGM to provide for the special needs of police in all circumstances.

The Queensland Police Union has repeatedly expressed its extreme dissatisfaction with the minister, to the point where it has called for his sacking. Only today, after the minister was finally forced into it, has a meeting taken place between the Queensland Police Union and the minister. On the TV news tonight we saw the union stridently attacking the minister over the state of the cells at the police station at Cloncurry, some three years after they were burnt out. That is in the minister's own electorate, but nothing has happened about it.

This year the police capital works budget has been cut by \$4.4 million on last year's actual spending. For the first time ever, the department has been forced to borrow \$22 million to pay for capital works, with an interest cost of \$547,000 for this year alone.

Queensland prison debts have soared to \$226 million after the government slashed a \$100 million equity injection from the budget of the Department of Corrective Services. In the important area of Drug Squad funding and despite the rampant increase in drug related crime, evidenced by the total rate of reportable drug offences increasing by 117 per cent to 1,010 offences per 100,000 population, just \$5 million has been allocated to the Queensland Drug Squad. This compares to an allocation of \$133 million or 15 per cent of the entire Police budget for traffic policing this year, which got an increase of \$14 million on last year's budget. As part of traffic monitoring operations, 1,691 police are employed in comparison to only 68 staff in the state drug investigative group.

There were 41 escapes and absconds from custody in the past year. There are still three escapees and 10 absconds at large within the community. The minister has blamed the parole boards and community corrections staff. In desperation, he has put his director-general, Helen Ringrose, singularly in charge of approving all day leave and work leave permits. If that is not buck passing, I do not know what is.

In relation to correctional services funding versus funding for police stations, we have seen the Beattie government spend \$69 million on the Woodford prison, \$44 million on the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and \$97 million on the Maryborough Correctional Centre's upgrade, yet there are police stations all over the state in need of urgent work to improve their security levels, provide more spacious facilities and generally provide for the needs of modern policing. Some of the works needed include those at the police headquarters in Roma Street, the city station, Holland Park, the overcrowded Oxley Police Academy and the Coolum Police Station. The planned \$1.5m for the Coolum Police Station was scrapped by the Beattie Labor government after the 1998 state election.

The police housing in rural and regional Queensland is appalling, with exposed electrical wiring, leaking roofs and rotting walls. Some of these places are beyond repair and many of them are in the minister's electorate. Maintenance work has not been conducted for months and even years.

Finally, perhaps the most poignant demonstration that this minister is not up to the job came today in question time when the Premier tried to avoid backing his minister. It was only after sustained pressure that he was finally forced—he was dragged kicking and screaming—to offer any expression of confidence that the minister could do his job. He did everything possible not to answer the question and carried on with his usual antics.

Time expired.
