



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 11 May 2004

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Queensland Police Service, Digital Communications

Hon. P.D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier and Minister for Trade) (9.41 a.m.): On 6 May I wrote to the Crime and Misconduct Commission Chair, Brendan Butler SC, about the dissemination to the media of Queensland Police Service communications in light of the service's roll-out of secure digital police communications. I asked the CMC to identify the parameters of, and consider options for, appropriate dissemination.

I made the request under section 52(1) (c) of the Crime and Misconduct Act 2001, which enables the CMC to research matters I refer to it about the administration of criminal justice.

I seek leave to incorporate the letter I wrote to Brendan Butler in *Hansard* for the information of members.

Leave granted.

Mr Brendan Butler SC
Chairperson
Crime and Misconduct Commission
GPO Box 3123
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Dear Brendan

Referral of research matter pursuant to s.52(1) (c) of the Crime and Misconduct Act 2001—Appropriate dissemination of police communications information

In line with developments in other jurisdictions, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) has commenced a roll out of secure digital communications. The technology offers a greater level of security to police officers and the public when police are responding to critical and sensitive operational situations. It also allows more detailed information to be communicated and prevents unauthorised access to information in the possession of police, information that is often of a sensitive personal nature. The technology helps prevent criminals and, in these times, potential terrorists from accessing police information.

While the technology is not being implemented for such a purpose, the technology will have the effect of preventing the media (and the public generally) from monitoring police communications. Media organisations have expressed concern to me and the Minister for Police and Corrective Services about the implementation of the technology.

One media organisation has requested that the media be given the same level of access to police transmissions that the media traditionally enjoyed, through scanning pre-digital radio transmissions. The organisation has stated that this "provides external scrutiny that is crucial to maintain police standards and the public's faith in the police service". Also, I am informed that the Media and Public Relations Branch of the QPS has a policy of advising media of significant newsworthy events as quickly as possible.

The roll out of this technology raises important public interest, privacy and operational considerations. I would be pleased to be advised of how other jurisdictions have dealt with the issue of disseminating, or otherwise providing access to, police information once secure communications have been implemented.

Pursuant to section 52(1) (c) of the Crime and Misconduct Act 2001, I request the Crime and Misconduct Commission to examine the appropriate dissemination of Queensland Police Service (communications) information to the media in light of the pending introduction of secure digital police communications, with the objective of identifying the parameters of, and considering options for, appropriate dissemination.

I have requested Kate Ellis, Acting Research Director, Law and Justice Policy, to meet with you to discuss the referral, and assistance with resourcing this research project should it be required. Ms Ellis may be contacted on telephone 3406 2121.

Yours sincerely

PETER BEATTIE MP
PREMIER AND MINISTER FOR TRADE

Mr BEATTIE: In line with other states and internationally, the service has commenced a roll-out of secure digital communications, beginning with a trial in Brisbane. The service argues that the technology offers a greater level of security to police officers and the public when police are responding to critical and sensitive operational situations, including potential terrorism threats. It argues that the technology also allows for the communication of more detailed information, prevents unauthorised access to information in the possession of police and helps stop criminals accessing police information.

The technology has not been designed to prevent the media from monitoring police communications. However, it will render obsolete radio scanners some media outlets use to pick up the Police Service's analogue transmissions and, I should say, some criminals as well. So the roll-out of this technology raises important public interest, privacy and operational issues. It is fitting that the CMC examine these issues and I welcome the CMC's decision—announced on 7 May—to call for submissions, hold public hearings, and report to parliament.

The *Courier-Mail* on Saturday, 8 May reported that it and Channel 9 will be part of the process. I welcome the participation of other media as well. The *Courier-Mail* and Channel 9 have brought their concerns to the government and the Minister for Police, Judy Spence, and I have met with a representative from the *Courier-Mail*, David Fagan, and Lee Anderson from Channel 9 at their request.

I look forward to the CMC's report, its research, analysis, and information gathered from submissions and open hearings.

When I met with Lee Anderson and David Fagan, with Judy Spence, I presented them with a letter setting out the current circumstances and what the service was offering. Because of the importance of the letters that I presented to Lee Anderson and David Fagan, I seek leave to incorporate the Anderson letter and attachments for the information of the House.

Leave granted.

29 April 2004

Mr Lee Anderson
Director of News
Channel 9
GPO Box 72
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Dear Lee

Following our meeting where you raised concerns about the Queensland Police Service's use of digital communications, I discussed the matter with the Minister for Police and Corrective Services, Judy Spence.

All other Australian jurisdictions have either implemented or are in the process of implementing the use of digital communications by police.

There is also a growing international trend towards its use by police. This is because of the greater security it provides for sensitive police operations—something that is obviously of heightened importance in the current climate.

The purpose of police radio communications has always been for the safety of police and the protection of the public.

The new technology means that Queensland will continue to be at the forefront of the fight against terrorism by helping to prevent criminals from accessing police information. Queensland has therefore been progressively introducing the technology since May 2001.

At the same time I recognise the importance of informing the public and the imperative for you to report on crime in an accurate and timely fashion.

To facilitate such reporting, the Queensland Police Service has now developed options for advising media of breaking news.

Following further discussion, these options and other protocols for communications between the police service and media could be set out in a Memorandum of Understanding.

I have attached the options for your consideration.

Yours sincerely

PETER BEATTIE MP
PREMIER AND MINISTER FOR TRADE

Options for advising media of emerging newsworthy events
SMS messaging system

Police are investigating the provision of an SMS-based messaging system that would enable the Police Media unit to give advice on a range of possibly newsworthy events to media to enable them to get to scenes to gather pictures and information for stories. Consideration would need to be given to what sorts of events could be advised (eg no sex offences, offences against children or domestic violence order-related matters). Details to be included in SMS messages would be sufficient to enable media to respond, but not so detailed as to breach privacy principles.

The system being considered would enable an immediate broadcast SMS to be sent from a computer. The number of recipients would be unlimited. Police are currently investigating a receiver pays system which would enable news organisations to decide how many recipients they wanted to include (and pay the subsequent costs).

It is understood that this option could be activated fairly quickly and be reasonably cost-efficient if news organisations paid upon receipt of messages. This would also allow less significant matters to be advised to allow media organisations to make their own decisions on whether they followed up.

Broadcast telephone connections

Police are also investigating a broadcast phone system that would enable immediate voice advice of significant information to be delivered simultaneously to all media organisations that wanted to receive the service. It would enable a single call from the Police Media Unit to be received simultaneously by all media organisations who expressed interest.

There would be set-up and operational costs involved. A system of annual subscription to the service (on a cost-recovery basis) or a per call cost system could be used.

This option could be activated in a reasonable time frame and would supplement and enhance the SMS messaging system.

24-hour Media Unit operation

To provide an around the clock advice system (as requested by some media organisations) the operating hours of the Police Media Unit could be expanded to 24-hours, seven days a week. Currently the Media Unit operates between 6am and 10pm weekdays and from 7am to 8pm on weekends.

This option would have significant benefits to the flow of information between police and the media, especially in providing overnight round-ups. It would also enable timely advice of newsworthy events to overnight crews and on-call media representatives.

Mr BEATTIE: In doing so, I just make this point. We live in a very ugly and uncertain world where, tragically, terrorism is a fact of life. Whatever system operates, we need to make certain that we do not allow terrorists to access police operations. That is on the one hand. On the other hand, we need to make certain that there is appropriate accountability and that the public do have access to appropriate information.

We also need to draw a fine line between commercial interests and the public interest. While there are some in the media who will not accept this, we need to ensure that this information is not simply released for commercial purposes—to sell newspapers, for example—or to assist tow truck operators. But there is also the other side of that coin, and I readily accept this. We also need to make sure that the police are accountable and, indeed, that the government is accountable. Therefore, we look forward to the public hearings and findings of the CMC.