



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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CRIMINAL CODE (ASSAULTS AGAINST POLICE AND OTHERS) AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (8.14 pm): I rise to support the Criminal Code (Assaults Against Police and Others) Amendment Bill introduced by the Queensland coalition. The objective of the bill is to introduce minimum sentencing principles for the offence of serious assault as defined by the Criminal Code Act 1899. Amendments in this bill propose to extend section 340 of the act to include emergency services personnel and introduce a number of specific definitions into the legislation.

Police and emergency services officers fulfil crucial and challenging public service roles for the benefit of the wider community. These officers perform their functions in some of the most demanding and stressful situations that our society throws up for rewards and remuneration that are not lucrative and a level of gratitude that can often be described as grudging and in some cases outright hostile.

Currently section 340 of the Criminal Code affords protection to police and corrective services officers respectively against serious assaults by offenders and prisoners. The maximum penalty for an offence against either of these subsections is seven years imprisonment. Despite these provisions, however, in June 2007 the Queensland Police Union reported that there had been over 3,000 assaults against police in the previous 18 months. These alarming statistics, together with recent media reports of serious attacks on police officers, demonstrate the lack of respect some offenders have for police and such offenders' disregard for the laws of the state of Queensland generally.

All too often when offenders appear in court to answer charges for assaulting police or other corrective services officers the sentences awarded are out of step with community attitudes about how our police officers, corrective services officers and emergency service officers should be treated. Frequently reported abhorrent offences against police officers include officers hit in the groin, attacked with syringes, punched in the jaw, hit in the face, dragged behind a car, spat at, bitten and hit over the head with a glass bottle. Statistics provided by the minister for police and corrective services in a media release on 29 July 2007 confirmed that only one in three people who seriously assault police are sentenced to imprisonment.

A recent article in the *Townsville Bulletin* dated 23 February 2008 detailed the escalating instances of violence against police officers. It reports that in 2007, 202 police officers were assaulted in the northern region alone and that in the last two months nine officers have been assaulted. The article also details the vicious assault of a young Townsville female police officer, Constable Tennelle Luscombe, who was savagely king hit in July last year while trying to break up a brawl in Flinders Street East. Constable Luscombe suffered injuries to her jaw, cheek and eye socket which necessitated reconstructive surgery. This is an example of the prevailing conditions faced by police officers in the field which supports the Queensland coalition's argument for the passage of this private member's bill.

Police officers know when they apply to attend the Queensland Police Academy that they are pursuing a profession that will put them in harm's way in the course of doing their duty on behalf of the state of Queensland to enforce our laws—laws, I remind members, that have been agreed to by this parliament as duly and democratically elected representatives of the people of Queensland. If we make the assumption that our work in this place and the work of the Queensland Legislative Assembly since it was

first convened is of some importance to the lives and the circumstances of the people of this state, we must be willing to say that there are consequences for individuals who not only have little regard for those laws but also have little regard for the police officers who have taken an oath to uphold those laws on our behalf.

Police officers know that they will be asked to negotiate difficult situations during their career in the Queensland Police Service. Police officers go to work every day with a firearm and other assorted protective and defensive equipment. We ask them to go into the community on our behalf, often to deal with the most violent, antisocial, callous and dangerous individuals in our community, and enforce the laws of the state. Police are aware that they will be asked to do this and I am sure that they do not expect that all dangerous, violent, criminal and unacceptable behaviour will end overnight as a result of the passage of the bill. However, it will demonstrate to the people of Queensland that their state parliament insists that the community understands that we believe the laws of this state are lawfully enacted, that it is our view that police officers charged with enforcing those laws are to be respected and that a failure to extend that respect has serious consequences that will be enforced.

I turn now to Queensland ambulance officers, who will be embraced and protected for the first time by this legislation if it is agreed to by those in this place. There is currently no specific legislative protection for ambulance officers who are assaulted in the course of their duties—an oversight that this bill seeks to address. Our ambulance officers increasingly and regrettably find themselves in harm's way in responding to a vast range of emergency calls. Their patients may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, may suffer from a mental health condition or may have injured themselves in the course of a domestic dispute which has not yet subsided.

Ambulance officers are certainly amongst those people in the community who deserve special protection. I turn to a recent article in the *Townsville Bulletin*, dated 19 February 2008, which was prompted by the reported experiences of Queensland ambulance officer Anthony Wemm. It is reported that during Mr Wemm's three years as a QAS officer he has been attacked regularly, including being chased with a knife, being kicked in the head and having blood thrown at him. Mr Wemm is reported as saying that on a weekly basis as a QAS officer he is verbally abused and threatened with violence.

In these articles in the *Townsville Bulletin*, on both 19 February and 23 February this year, the state secretary of the Ambulance Employees Australia union, Steve Crow, has raised the possibility of a future requirement for ambulance officers to be accompanied by security officers when they are deployed to an emergency should there be no improvement in the standard of community regard for paramedics on the job.

Things are certainly grim if paramedics believe that they need to be accompanied by security officers on call-outs in order to do their jobs safely. All of the emergency services and police officers who are embraced by this bill who serve for any length of time in these roles are a group of people motivated by reasons other than the remuneration on offer. They have a sincere commitment to our communities.

The uniforms they wear are not merely so that they can be identified in the community. Those uniforms represent the explicit agreement that the people of Queensland have with them to perform their duty for our safety, be it attending us in a medical emergency or enforcing the laws of the state.

Tonight this parliament should repay that sincere commitment of police officers and ambulance officers and express a view that we believe that they should not be obstructed, assaulted or otherwise hindered in the course of their duty, and that if individuals do not comply with that expectation there are consequences and those consequences are significant and agreed to and endorsed by the parliament of Queensland on behalf of all Queenslanders. The Queensland coalition has brought forward a sensible proposal in the interests of some of the most important people in our community.