

POLICE — RESIGNATIONS

135. Ms L. METTAM to the Minister for Police:

I refer to the minister's comments yesterday that his government will break its 2021 election commitment to boost the Western Australia Police Force by 950 officers above the attrition rate over four years, and that this is likely to be an irreversible demographic shift.

- (1) Will the minister accept that his inability to address serious concerns within the Western Australia Police Force has created cultural problems leading to record resignations?
- (2) Is this irreversible shift a direct result of WA Labor policies?

Mr P. PAPALIA replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for her question. It is a return to lower ground from the emotion the other day when I explained to the member—I think it was fairly obvious, but, nevertheless, I will do it again—that circumstances have changed. That commitment to growing the Western Australia Police Force to 950 above the attrition rate assumed a set of circumstances and it was made pre-COVID, before the post-COVID effects, and before our economy had recovered from the disaster that we inherited from the previous government. I think the Leader of the Opposition referred to the former Commissioner of Police Karl O'Callaghan saying a couple of years ago that 10 years before, the attrition rate was 25 a month, and I told the member that in the last six months it had reverted to around 25 and a half a month, on average. That said, it is possible, and in all likelihood probable, that those circumstances will not change because we are in a different time. People do not join the uniformed services for 20 years anymore. This generation does five to seven years on average in a career and then they transition. That is a normal thing. It is happening with not just the police, but right across an entire economy. I was referring to that effect. It is likely that that will not change. I said that when we came into office, we inherited a recession and we had the biggest deficit and biggest debt in history. That meant that public servants did not leave the public sector. That was true for the first couple of years. Then we did a lot of work to fix that budget—or we rebalanced it anyway. Then COVID hit and no-one left a public sector job because it was a secure position. Subsequently, right around the world in western nations, there was the great resignation. When COVID moved and people had the opportunity, they left. That build-up was significant here because it lasted effectively for four years, not just the two with COVID, because the previous government had destroyed the economy a couple of years before.

We had already anticipated the need to go out and recruit, and we have, and the member criticised it. It was the most successful recruiting campaign in the country. As I said yesterday, the Australian Defence Force is envious of what we are doing. We are targeting exactly the same sort of people and, as we heard from the Premier, we have thousands or more than half the number of the police force in applicants. More than 2 600 people in Western Australia and more than 1 500 overseas experienced officers have applied to join. That is an extraordinary effort. It means that people respect and value the police force and want to join it. As I said to the member yesterday, if it is the case that there is some cultural problem or some issue within the police force in terms of terrible morale, does the member not think that potential applicants might investigate that? Does she not think that it would deter them from choosing to work in the Western Australia Police Force before they travel half way around the globe to make that life change and commitment? Does the member not think that local applicants would investigate? It is not that difficult for a person considering joining to investigate and find out what people working inside the police force think. We are in a different environment, and I have asked the commissioner to prepare a study on what the environment means in terms of our need to recruit—potentially, we will have to recruit at a higher level than we might have in the past—and what other measures we have to take to try to retain people, because they are always looking at that.