

ASSAULTS AGAINST POLICE OFFICERS - PUNISHMENT

23. Mr M.J. BIRNEY to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services:

I refer to my media statement dated 23 September 2002. That media release, which is now four years old, calls for increased penalties for cop bashers and outlines the fact that - this was happening even back in 2002 - hundreds of offenders a year have been getting away with assaulting police officers without serious punishment. I refer also to just a small sample of the sickening assaults that have been committed against police officers since the opposition first raised this issue four years ago; namely, Acting Sergeant Shane Gray, who was viciously attacked and bashed on 31 January after pulling over William John Watkins near Karratha; Constable Jeremy Marklew, who suffered serious facial injuries on 4 February during a group attack outside a Carnarvon tavern; Constable Christina Johnston, who was brutally bashed last Saturday night in Meekatharra and suffered a suspected broken jaw; and Constable Shane Markham, who was bashed during the same incident and lost several teeth and suffered damage to his eye socket. Why has the Labor Party been turning its back on this issue in the four years since it was first raised by the opposition; and why was it that the Commissioner of Police had to raise the issue publicly before the minister would even come to the negotiating table? Mr Speaker, I seek leave to table my media statement for the remainder of this day's sitting.

[The paper was tabled for the information of members.]

Mr J.B. D'ORAZIO replied:

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. Every member of this house would be appalled at the damage that is being inflicted upon police officers who are doing the right thing by the community and are working to protect our interests. We should all look at this issue and see whether there are areas in which we can strengthen the current laws. The laws that are in place already contain severe penalties. It is clear from the data that I have looked at since I have become Minister for Police that the cases that have gone to the District and Supreme Courts have resulted in severe jail terms. However, as the new Minister for Police, on behalf of the government I want to see whether there are any anomalies in the law. Today I have had discussions with the Commissioner of Police about this matter. The Commissioner of Police and I, and the government, are at one about the fact that we need to look at all the possible ways in which we can improve the current laws to make sure that people who are looking after the interests of the community are protected. I have asked the commissioner to meet with Robert Cock, with the support of the Attorney General, to work up some of the propositions and to look at all the laws in relation to assaults on police officers. However, we are not talking just about police officers. This issue extends to nurses, bus drivers and other public officials who are performing their duties on behalf of the community. I have asked them to look at whether there are any ways in which we can improve the current laws. It is important that we do that. As a consequence of that process, this government is committed to making sure that people who are acting on behalf of the community, whether they be police officers, nurses or bus drivers, are protected. I am happy to convey to the community once again the message that people who abuse or cause bodily harm to public officers acting in the line of duty will be dealt with severely. We will look at the current laws to see whether there are any anomalies that we should rectify. This government wants to send the clear message that people who interfere with and cause bodily harm to public officers will be sent to jail.