

Grievance speech – September 11th, 2008

STRATHALBYN POLICE SERVICES

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:40): We in the country live in a time when the state government seems hell bent on shoring up its own electoral stocks in the city by stripping or shaving services in country regions. We still have problems with the new Country Health Care Plan. The government is telling us that because it cannot afford to provide reasonable health services to 500,000 rural residents country people have to go without. Rural education needs have been compromised in order to save the government money, and now penny pinching on rural transport services is compounding the problem of how country people access basic services at other regional centres.

Residents of one town in my electorate presented a petition requesting the government provide a reasonable level of police services to their fast-growing community. The people of Strathalbyn have been grappling with increasing lawlessness in their town for some time. This lawlessness is generally perpetrated by younger people, many in their early teens. They have reported incidents of repeated and systematic destruction of letterboxes and fences, unruly behaviour late the night (including yelling, foul language, broken bottles and street lights, vomiting, and so on), speeding cars with screeching tyres and loud exhausts, and abuse and threats to anyone who dares to challenge them.

Specific examples include noisy, drunken groups occupying parklands adjacent to the home of elderly residents, who get no sleep and receive little or no response when police are called. A woman in her mid 40s was too afraid to walk a few hundred metres to visit her mother after dark. Perhaps the most disturbing story came from an elderly gentleman who was woken by cries for help. When he went to investigate he found a young girl on his front lawn, naked and extremely distressed. It transpired that she had been drugged and allegedly raped. What use is a 30-minute wait for police attendance in that situation?

Something else happened on this occasion. The resident was advised by police that he might think twice before reporting the matter, as it might bring reprisals against him. This is not an isolated case. The volunteers at a community shop were given the same advice following an incident at their premises. This situation raises several worrying points. Police response times to calls for help typically have been too long to be effective in preventing or limiting crime. Police numbers can be so low as to cause a lone police officer not to attend an incident where he fears he will be outnumbered. I cannot blame him for that, but he should not be placed in that position. The suggestion that further reprisals may occur implies that police are powerless to prevent it.

In 1972 Strathalbyn had 1,200 residents served by three police officers. In 2001 there were over 4,700 residents and still three police officers—a situation which continued until April 2007. The current population is probably already over 5,000 with four officers. The population will continue to grow and could double within the near future. The local police station is not manned throughout the whole day. Many years ago, following a public outcry, residents were led to understand that approval had been given for the full-time manning of the station. It did not happen. Why? Funds were available.

When questioned on radio about the situation, I understand that the Police Commissioner said that there was no need. One cannot help but marvel at the priorities. No-one could condone or excuse the deplorable actions of the so-called gang of 49, but how much is being spent trying to deal with 49 misfits in a city of one million people. Here we have 20 or 30 troublemakers in a community of 5,000, where an appropriate police presence would make life better for all. The community is not asking for a new station or ridiculous numbers of officers but, rather, a reasonable level of staffing.

Earlier this year over 1,150 residents signed a petition requesting better police services. Strangely, services seemed to improve around this time. More recently, one resident met with a senior regional police officer. She felt that he subtly chastised her for speaking to me about the matter before speaking to him. She pointed out that many members of the public had been bringing the matter to the attention of the police for years with no result.

It has been noted that police presence appears to have improved again since then, with one late night incident attended by three patrols. Wonderful, but for how long will this go on? Will it be just until the noise dies down or another neighbouring community begins to notice police presence has dropped off, or maybe it will be until the local station is properly staffed? We can only hope.