

Public Transport Bus Network — Additional Security Measures — Statement by Minister for Transport

Resumed from 11 August 2009.

Motion

HON LJILJANNA RAVLICH: I move —

That the statement be noted.

This ministerial statement reaffirms the Liberal-National government's commitment to ensuring that we all feel safe in our communities, recognises that the government was elected to lead on law and order issues and states that, in the government's view, that is what it is doing. The ministerial statement was read into this place by the then Minister for Transport and is about addressing the issue of antisocial behaviour on public transport. I will make some comments on the importance of public transport and the lack of this government's effort in that area. Public transport has become increasingly important, and there are a number of drivers for that. One of those drivers is the increase in the price of petrol. We see that reflected in the price people pay to fill up their car, which can cost \$80 or \$100 a week. That is a substantial amount from anyone's household budget. A potential result of that is an increasing number of people who patronise the public transport system. There is no doubt that the rise in petrol prices adds to that pressure. We need only look at the influx of skilled migrants in this state to see that the population is increasing significantly. Many of those skilled migrants are taking up jobs in the metropolitan area and, of course, many will be driving to work or be given a lift to work by someone.

I have to say that as someone who uses the road system to drive to work and whose electorate office is in Morley, I find it particularly frustrating having to navigate the traffic early in the morning. It is absolutely horrendous—absolutely horrendous. We need only look at the situation on our train system. There is an excellent front-page photo in *The West Australian* that shows the pressure on the rail system during peak hours. We need also only look at the peak-hour traffic as people head to work. The traffic starts at about 5.30 or six o'clock in the morning, and by 7.30 the main arterial roads are generally absolutely chock-a-block, and it does not ease until about nine o'clock. I have to say that, given that backdrop, many people want the option of getting to and from work by public transport. However, when we look at the photographs such as the one on the front page of today's *The West Australian*, it shows a level of congestion in that, firstly, people do not feel comfortable and, secondly, they do not feel particularly safe. I think it is a problem. It is beholden on the government to recognise that this is a major issue and to try to do something about it. There has been underinvestment in the transport portfolio. I understand there is a \$4.1 billion public transport blueprint for the metropolitan area, but I also understand there is no money attached to that. Of course, it is one thing to have a plan developed; it is another thing to fund the plan properly and move it into something that is more tangible.

I quickly want to comment on my experience on the roads. Certainly, in the City of Vincent the main arterial roads are an absolute nightmare to navigate. On major connecting roads such as Fitzgerald and Beaufort Streets, early in the morning and when people are leaving work to get home, the traffic is bumper to bumper. Heaven help anyone travelling along Alexander Drive, for example, who gets stuck behind a bus. It can be a very, very lengthy journey. When I first moved my office to Morley, I was quite excited. I thought, "Alexander Drive, a lovely direct route; it'll take me 10 minutes to get to work."

Hon Simon O'Brien: It's still a long way from Cottesloe, isn't it?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Well, it is. I thought that by using Alexander Drive it would take me 10 minutes to get to Parliament House, but I have to say that there are occasions when I get stuck on Alexander Drive. It takes me a considerable length of time. Given that and that there is a continuing population increase, the government really needs to explain what it is going to do to get the level of congestion off the road. Beaufort Street is another classic example; it is always jam-packed, but it is an absolute nightmare during peak times. It is very interesting that we have a ministerial statement that refers to the need to make sure that public transport is available, is secure and is safe. Clearly, given the reality, what is presented in this ministerial statement does not bear any reflection of what is happening on the ground.

I have to say to the minister that there are concerns within communities; they are getting mightily jaded by what they have to put up with on a daily basis due to the roadworks et cetera along the freeway and in the metropolitan —

Hon Simon O'Brien: There's a lot of work going on along the freeway, is there?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: There is some work going on. I am sure the work will provide good results in the end, but at the end of the day, it is a major inconvenience and it causes more pressure on an already stressed transport system. That is really the point. The minister must recognise that having been part of a government that

has increased household fees and charges, it is quickly coming to the time when people will not be able to afford to drive their cars to work and they will have no option but to use public transport.

Hon Adele Farina: They can't afford that either.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Yes.

Hon Norman Moore: Do they go without food too, and water?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Some people do go without food. The Leader of the House need only visit a soup kitchen to know that some people go without food. In fact, lots of people go without food. I would not make light of it; I think it is very important. Clearly, what the Leader of the House reflects is someone who is so out of touch that he has no idea what is going on in the real world; he has no idea of the impact of his fees and charges on the average family in his state.

Hon Norman Moore: Is Cottesloe in the real world?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: He can keep saying that. It does not worry me one bit; it is common knowledge. Where I live is my business. It is a sad reflection on him that he makes the comments he does about the plight of Western Australian families. That is all I want to say in respect of this matter.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I appreciate Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich's motion that the ministerial statement be noted. I hope I do not strike a too discordant note by referring to the content of the ministerial statement, because it had nothing to do with the matters the honourable member was referring to.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That is nonsense, and you know that.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I will refer briefly to what is in the ministerial statement and then everyone can work out who is peddling the nonsense.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I did say they don't feel safe on buses because they are overcrowded, and the same with trains.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It just shows how out of touch the member is. The fact of the matter is that people might feel frightened on or around public transport vehicles or infrastructure when they are on their own, not when other people are around. That is one demonstration.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Is that why we have to contend with overcrowded trains and buses?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No; that is my response to a very silly remark Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich just made.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That is a useless response. It is about as useless as the Minister for Mental Health and her responses. I put you in the same basket.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Now, now —

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Order, members! It is starting to get a little out of hand now. Perhaps the minister could direct his comments to the Chair.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: This ministerial statement is more than two years old. I look forward to the day when we have different arrangements in the chamber that stop things coming up that are not contemporaneous.

I was interested to review this statement. At face value, I could not remember what it was about, being more than two years old. I have made a number of ministerial statements. This one was about working on broader strategies to address a trend of antisocial behaviour. In particular, I believe it was in a climate in which we were all very concerned about an incident of rock throwing, which resulted in one of my drivers—when I say “one of my drivers”, that is how I used to consider them when I was Minister for Transport—losing sight in an eye. We moved quickly to bring the public transport community together for the purpose of reinforcing our support for public transport workers. That is what this statement was about. As a result of the discussions that I had organised between the Public Transport Authority and drivers' representatives, I was able to approve a package of measures to enhance security on the bus network straightaway. The particular measures outlined in the ministerial statement, just to remind members, were an immediate additional investment of \$1.65 million on practical protective measures for bus drivers and a commitment to a \$2.2 million increase in recurrent expenditure to fund extra bus security officers. That came on top of the already allocated bus security program. In real terms that authorisation I gave then to the Public Transport Authority, as reported in this statement, boosted bus security personnel by nearly 50 per cent. Whether the member who moved that the statement be noted likes it or not, that is a significant initiative in the context of what was being contemplated at that time. It also translated into a 120 per cent increase in mobile patrols. An increase over what? Basically, it was an increase over what we inherited from the previous government. Therefore, when we launch into rhetoric about who is interested in matters of public transport—in this case it was about security on buses—I will not seek to trivialise this matter by engaging in some sort of point-scoring exercise, but I will remind the Committee of the

Whole that this ministerial statement was about the actions taken by this government and by me as minister, in particular. I authorised the installation of an additional 295 security screens for bus drivers, bringing the total number of buses fitted with screens to 790. That resulted in all bus drivers working after 6.00 pm having the extra security of a protected cab. I think we are all aware that it is in the hours of darkness when passenger loadings on buses have eased that there is the greater tendency for antisocial behaviour.

That is what the statement was about. I was interested, though, to hear the comments of my good friend Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich about her commuting habits. I do not know whether she has ever tried catching public transport from home to her office in Morley.

Hon Adele Farina: She'd have to change quite a few buses.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: She would have to change quite a few —

Hon Adele Farina: It would take a very long time.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It certainly would because it is a very long way. Nonetheless, we are all glad that she manages to soldier on and gets to Parliament from Morley despite having to go down a busy road.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You can make light of it, can't you?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Honestly, if that is all that my friend has to grizzle about, she does not have too much that we need to take notice of, I do not think.

I thank the committee for again noting this statement, even though it is ancient history.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: Unfortunately, I was away on parliamentary business so I caught only the second part of the minister's comments. I am not sure of all of what he said in the first part. However, to a large degree I agree with the minister's outline of the history in the sense that —

Hon Simon O'Brien: All I did was remind the committee of what was actually in the statement; that's all I did.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: In that sense, I am happy to put on the record that what the minister did, which he outlined in the ministerial statement, was a good thing.

We need to think back, because it was a while ago now, that what occurred in Perth was a significant spike, which was one of the major issues, in rock-throwing incidents. For some reason, the number of rock-throwing incidents virtually went through the roof—it was just going up. I remember that at the time on a couple of occasions I did not make comments because one of the things that was made clear to me was that the more we talked about it, the more rock-throwing incidents there were. Therefore, we had to take a position of being responsible. The minister may not agree with this, but I had a couple of opportunities for media comment, but I chose not to do it because I realised that it would prolong it and increase it.

Hon Simon O'Brien: I'll acknowledge that. I don't particularly remember the occasion, it was so long ago, but I'm sure that that was your attitude and I compliment you for it.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: It is that balance of raising the issue but doing it in a responsible way that does not cause more harm.

Of course, a number of assaults occurred at the time. Mr Sin was assaulted and lost his eye. There was an assault on one of the CAT buses, which was in the middle of the day.

Hon Simon O'Brien: On a lady driver, too, yes.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: It was a fairly serious assault. There was a clear spike, so it became a matter of public debate at the time. As a former bus driver, I took it very seriously; I understood. This is not a political comment, but it was not as bad 20 years ago, when I drove buses, as it was two years ago. I admire the drivers these days because I think they put up with a lot more than I did when I drove buses. I think they do a fantastic job.

I initially put out a five-point plan at the time. One thing that I vividly recall, because it was not being talked about at the time, was the whole issue of duress alarms. I remember sitting and talking to a number of bus drivers at the time. I asked one of them whether they hit their duress alarm and they said, "We haven't had duress alarms in our buses since the buses were privatised." I said, "You're kidding me!" Again, when I was a driver, a duress alarm was the major thing that made drivers feel secure; if they got into trouble, they could press the button on the duress alarm and assistance would come to them. So I put forward a five-point plan. Many of the issues that are raised in this ministerial statement were issues raised in the five-point plan. I congratulate the minister for taking those issues up and getting the money through cabinet to fund those things.

I also at the time—because I acknowledge that this is not and should not be a party political issue—put forward the idea that we need a parliamentary inquiry. We all in this place know how effective parliamentary inquiries

can be; in fact, during this session we often intersperse consideration of ministerial statements with consideration of reports from our inquiries. I still think that it would be a good function for one of our committees to look at the whole issue of public transport safety and security, not only at the transport level but also to try to understand what the underlying causes are. A report came down the other day that showed that public transport in Western Australia has a very high rate of security officers in relation to, I think, passenger kilometres rather than just passengers. I might stand corrected on that. The fascinating point was that we still have high levels of violence on public transport in Western Australia.

Equally, I was looking again at the report on government services that is done on a national basis—every year it looks at each state—and the public of Western Australia believe that they feel a lot less secure on public transport in WA than they do anywhere else in the country. That is a longstanding issue. I am not saying that has come about simply from the arrival of the Barnett government; it has been an issue for a long time. So there is something about Western Australia and our public transport that is less safe and less secure, both in reality and in perception. I think it is incumbent upon all of us to try to find out—I again put the offer to the government that I believe it is something we should work collectively towards—and understand what makes WA so different from the rest of the country.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Where do we get the data from that tells us that?

Hon KEN TRAVERS: As I said, there was the report on government services, which I think the Productivity Commission brings out on an annual basis that looks at all the issues in every state. It does a range of survey data. That is one of the documents that I was referring to. That document shows that people in Western Australia do not feel as safe on public transport as do people in other states. The government has not tabled the KPMG report that it referred to in a press release on Friday. That report talked about the number of security officers that we have. I am trying to remember where I saw this data, but there were some statistics that showed that the incidence of antisocial behaviour was higher in Western Australia than in other parts of Australia.

Hon Simon O'Brien: If you will take a quick interjection, my understanding is that, firstly, the data gathering here in Western Australia is very good and very comprehensive, and perhaps that is not matched elsewhere. Therefore, we may have a greater tendency to examine it objectively. I am not sure. The other thing that seems to happen, too, is that wherever extra law enforcement or extra police are put on the job, whether it is here, in Germany, in France, or wherever, we tend to have a greater reporting of antisocial behaviour, because people are there to officially observe it.

Hon KEN TRAVERS: That may very much be the case. Again, that is one of the things that a parliamentary inquiry could look at. Is it the case that we have a bigger problem in Western Australia, or is it the case that we have better statistics of the problem in Western Australia—which is what I think the minister is saying? As I have said, in trying to understand what this problem is all about, we need to get to the underlying causes. I have no doubt that I could put forward the argument and bring into the chamber statistics that show that the problem is getting worse. Certainly when I have done that in the media, one of the responses that the government has come back with is that the reason that there has been an increase in the incidence of graffiti is that we have better reporting. In some circumstances, that may very much be the case. However, if we are dealing with the issue of people being assaulted, it is not good enough to say that the reason is that there is better reporting.

A couple of weeks ago, I met with a constituent about some concerns that she had. She and her two daughters had been bashed at Burswood railway station after they had been to a Miley Cyrus concert. I have not spoken about this issue previously, but I am happy to talk about it now. She spoke on the Howard Sattler show the other day, and if anyone in this chamber had heard her, they would be absolutely horrified about what had happened to her; it was just horrible. In my view, our aspirational goal, for want of a better term, should be to get to the point as a community where that does not happen to anybody. We can sit here and argue about statistics and whether they are going up or going down. But while there are still people in the community who are being injured on our public transport system, I believe it is incumbent upon all of us in this place to work out, as best we can, in a cooperative manner, why that is happening, and make a significant effort to try to reduce it, with the ultimate aim of eliminating it. Whether we will ever be successful in that is another matter. But our goal should always be to get to the point where it is completely eliminated. I agree wholeheartedly with the measures that are outlined in the report. I suspect, though, that until we can get into some of the underlying causes, the problems will continue.

I just want to go back for a moment to the incident with the lady who was assaulted at Burswood railway station. There has been a lot of publicity in the last couple of days about that railway station. It has now reached the point where the Town of Victoria Park has been instructing landowners around Burswood station to clear vegetation on their properties to remove hides and all the rest of it. I think that when we have to get to that point, it shows that we are losing the war. We all need to find a way to resolve this problem.

I want to highlight one comment that the then Minister for Transport made in his statement. The minister said —

To complement these practical measures the Minister for Police and I last week announced that we have instructed our respective agencies to sit down and examine future options for increasing the police presence on the public transport network, including examining an option that would see the PTA's present security arrangements taken over by WA Police.

It is interesting that although the minister says this is an old statement, the final outcome of that part of the statement only occurred, or was publicly announced, anyway, last Friday. I have asked the minister a number of questions and harangued him about this matter, because I thought it was taking too long to find out about that.

Fundamentally, I was never someone who believed that moving PTA security to the police would be the answer to the problem. The government used to say, when these issues were raised, that that is one of the things that it is looking at. The government said that to try to make sure—as governments do—that people would know that it is on the job. However, as we have pointed out, it has taken the government well over two years to do something about this. We have not seen the full report. But we have seen a press release, which states that the system that we have in Western Australia is as good as anywhere else in Australia, if not better. That may very well be the case. As I say, I am arguing this without having had the benefit of seeing the full report.

However, I want to place on the record that I think there is still a problem with the security arrangements that operate in Western Australia. We have the public transport division of WA Police. Interestingly, at the last count that I got, 88 officers are allocated to that division. One of the commitments that was heavily publicised by the current government prior to the last election was that it would increase the police presence on public transport. From the figures that I am aware of, in July 2008, 96 FTEs were allocated to that unit. When I last asked a question on this matter and got an answer, I was told that the number had dropped to 90, but that the actual allocated strength was only 88 officers.

That is the first and probably the highest tier. Sitting underneath that are the PTA-employed transit officers. Those officers are given a number of powers under the Public Transport Authority Act with respect to PTA-owned land. Those officers predominantly work on the train system. There are supposed to be 321 FTEs. The number of FTEs on the train system was increased as part of the opening of the Mandurah rail line. During the boom times, the PTA found it very difficult to recruit people into that employment, as was the case with many government agencies. From the figures that I have been able to track, the number of FTEs has actually been around 227. I understand that a training course is due to come out shortly. But that will still take the number up to only 250. I understand that while that two-year review was going on, the PTA put on hold any further recruitment. Therefore, during that window of opportunity when the employment market was an employers' market and it was easier to recruit people, we missed the boat a bit in that we were not in the marketplace but were on hold waiting for these discussions between the police and the PTA to be concluded. Those 227 transit officers have significant powers of arrest, and they get to carry certain equipment that helps protect them. I would argue that there is a bit more that we can do with respect to the training of those officers. There are often court cases in which transit officers are charged for actions that they have taken. I think that often comes back to a lack of training. These officers do need to be held accountable for their actions. But if they were given better training, perhaps a situation would never arise in which they were charged with assault against another person.

We then have revenue protection officers. I do not know how many people in this chamber travel on public transport. I probably do not do that as much as people who commute on a daily basis. But I do try to use public transport from time to time to see what is happening out there.

Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to temporary orders.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.30 pm