

Agreement in Principle

Mrs BARBARA PERRY (Auburn—Minister for Local Government, and Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health)) [4.36 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Government is pleased to introduce the Crimes (Sentencing Procedure) Amendment (Council Law Enforcement Officers) Bill 2009. The object of the bill is to amend the Crimes (Sentencing Procedure) Act 1999 with respect to sentencing for crimes committed against parking officers, council rangers and other employees of local councils who are exercising enforcement functions. Council employees, such as parking officers and animal control officers, provide important services to the public. But, unfortunately, many have their personal welfare put at risk when they go out to perform their duties. The Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils has advised the Government that between July 2007 and June 2008 some 31 serious assaults, 41 common assaults and more than 1,000 incidents of verbal abuse, intimidation and harassment had been recorded against their officers. While of course no-one likes seeing a fine notice left on their windshield, committing acts of violence against these hardworking men and women, who are simply doing their jobs, is totally unacceptable.

Section 21A (2) of the Crimes (Sentencing Procedure) Act provides for aggravating factors that are to be taken into account by a sentencing judge. Section 21A (2) (a) of the Act provides that it is to be an aggravating factor on sentencing if the victim was a police officer, an emergency services worker, a correctional officer, a judicial officer, a health worker, a teacher, a community worker, or other public official who is exercising public or community functions, and the offence arose because of the victim's occupation or voluntary work. The bill amends section 21A (2) (a) so that it includes the words "council law enforcement officer". This will ensure that these officers are covered by this section.

The bill also makes consequential amendments to the table in part 4 of division 1A of the Act to mirror the amended wording of section 21A. Council law enforcement officers undertake a key role in the community. Ensuring alcohol-free zones remain alcohol free, ensuring that dangerous dogs in the community are managed properly and ensuring that traffic regulations are dealt with appropriately are all functions undertaken by these workers. Under recent changes introduced by this Government to help reduce incidents of alcohol-related violence, enforcement officers have been granted new powers to confiscate and pour out alcohol when people are drinking in alcohol-free zones.

This bill will allow council enforcement officers to take on these duties with the confidence that they have the protection of the law behind them. These new protections are a great win for these workers, granting them the same level of protection already provided by the Act to other front-line professions such as teaching and community work. That is why these changes have already been welcomed by representatives of local councils and their employees. Ben Kruse of the United Services Union, which represents thousands of council employees across the State, in a media release on 30 March 2009, said:

No one deserves to be bashed, spit on, punched, kicked or have objects thrown at them while they are at work, but this is the reality that these workers face every day.

We are pleased that finally steps are being taken to address this issue and protect council workers from serious abuse.

In correspondence with my office the Local Government and Shires Associations have also backed the proposed changes, saying:

The Local Government and Shires Associations welcome additional protection for local government enforcement officers during the execution of their duties, which ensure the efficient functioning of our local communities.

The bill has also been publicly backed by individual council officers working on the front line. For example, on 31 March 2009, the *Illawarra Mercury* reported that Shellharbour City Council ranger supervisor Craig Nolan, a ranger for eight years, has welcomed the new laws. The Mercury reported that Mr Nolan said this about the bill:

It can only help considering that we're patrolling school zones to make things safe for the residents, verbal and physical abuse is just not warranted.

Council law enforcement officers should not have to put up with being assaulted for doing their jobs, and deserve the additional protection of the law. This bill sends a clear message that assaults and other criminal conduct towards council officers will not be tolerated by this Government. I commend the bill to the House.