

Fairfield Area Shooting Incidents

Subjects - Shootings; Firearms; Western Sydney; Sentencing and Parole; Crime; Federal State Relations
Speakers - Speaker; Debnam Mr Peter; Watkins Mr John
Business - Questions Without Notice

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Mr PETER DEBNAM: My question is directed to the Minister for Police. Following a series of shootings and attempted murders in the Fairfield area last year, was Deputy Commissioner Madden warned by a detective of a further escalation in gang warfare, and that there would soon be another Cabramatta?

Mr JOHN WATKINS: I am pleased to respond to a question today about shootings in south-western Sydney because it is on the minds of all of us. Government members saw media reports this morning, as indeed did the Opposition. I take this opportunity to update the House on aspects relating to some of those shootings. The shootings that have occurred over the past couple of days in the city's south-west are horrific and outrageous. There is no consolation for any of us in reports that this was not a random act, but NSW Police have mobilised the resources of Strike Force Grapple, the State Crime Command's firearms squad and also detectives from the Bankstown Local Area Command to find those who are responsible and lock them up.

Police are working hard on the case and they believe that recent incidents are linked to Monday night's violence. Police are conducting a number of interviews but it is true to say that they are being met with a wall of silence—and that must end. I call on anyone who has any information about Monday night's shootings, or indeed other connected shootings, to ring Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000. Evidence has been collected at the scene and at other crime scenes. A number of other operational measures are currently under way.

It is not appropriate for me to discuss those publicly at this time. However, I am able to report to the House on the Government's recent firearms reform package which was announced just three weeks ago. New South Wales has the toughest firearms legislation in Australia. Penalties for serious gun offences under the Firearms Act and the Crimes Act provide for up to 20 years imprisonment. Gun crime is still too prevalent. In a moment I will share with the House the official independent statistics from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Mr Peter Debnam: Point of order: My point of order relates to relevance. I think the Minister has progressed enough with his answer to understand where he is going. My question is about the deputy commissioner and the warning given to him late last year about another Cabramatta. Is the Minister going to answer that question?

Mr JOHN WATKINS: I will answer the question about the problem of firearms.

Mr John Brogden: He did not ask you that.

Mr JOHN WATKINS: Yes, he did. The question clearly relates to firearms and guns in south-western Sydney, and that is the information that I will give to the House today because it is a matter that concerns everyone in this House. It is why, after several months of work, three weeks ago I announced the most comprehensive package to address firearms crime in this State. This is the one matter that the shadow Minister has been raising in the media and at other places over some months. The Government has released a firearms package and I will take the House through it because it is information that people should know about.

It is important to introduce information on this package with other information provided by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research which was referred to me recently. That information shows that, in the two-year period to 31 December last year, assault "shoot with intent" incidents involving a handgun fell by 26 per cent and that assault with a handgun fell by 36

per cent in that two-year period. The downward trend between 2001 and 2002 continued in the first half of 2003. However, clearly more work has to be done. That is why on 23 September I released a package of measures to improve the comprehensive, co-ordinated approach taken by NSW Police to illegal gun availability, detection, apprehension and prosecution.

These initiatives cover increased detection, protection and enforcement, search powers for illegal handguns, legislative changes, improved security industry controls, better storage of firearms and the need for greater national controls. NSW Police is working hard to combat the scourge of illegal handguns on our streets, but even greater emphasis and co-ordination is needed. This package delivers a stronger approach to illegal gun availability, detection, apprehension and prosecution. In the area of increased protection, in the first week of October a new 47-member mobile team of Operation Vikings police began its high-visibility, high-impact raids targeting criminals and thugs who may be carrying illegal weapons. This month the unit held operations in Campsie, Bankstown, Rosehill, Fairfield, Cabramatta, Burwood and the city. The Government is reviewing also stop-and-search powers to specifically target handgun crime and that review will be completed by the end of this calendar year.

The Government is also seeking stronger sentences for handgun crimes to address consistency in sentencing and will ask the newly formed **Sentencing Council** to examine sentencing trends for serious firearm offences with a view to implementing standard minimum sentences. The Government also proposes to consider making more-serious firearm crime strictly indictable: that is, that it be dealt with in the District Court and Supreme Court where more severe penalties are handed down. The Government will ensure that more cases are dealt with on indictment and that the Commissioner for Police instructs prosecutors to instigate immediate appeals if firearm crimes receive sentences that the community views as inappropriate.

I will also introduce legislative change to the Crimes Act and the Firearms Act to amend offences and penalties relating to illegal guns. In the package there is a range of other measures, including reviewing the security industry so that there are tighter controls over that industry. I also announced that the Operation Vulcan illegal firearms phone-in has been reactivated with increased rewards of up to \$5,000. Five additional sworn officers are available to the State Crime Command's Firearms and Regulated Industries Crime Squad. However, there are two areas in which the Opposition can assist. Earlier this year I approached the Prime Minister to establish a \$5 million fund to be made available to police agencies across Australia to assist in purchasing illegal weapons.

Mr Peter Debnam: Point of order: I draw the attention of the Minister to a very good ruling by Speaker Rozzoli, back in 1988, who said:

In answering a question a Minister should come to the subject matter of the question as quickly as possible.

The subject matter of this question is Deputy Commissioner Dave Madden and a warning given late last year about another Cabramatta.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member for Vaucluse is well aware that the Chair cannot direct the Minister how to answer a question.

Mr JOHN WATKINS: I became Minister for Police on 2 April this year. The Opposition can assist in two areas: first, in influencing the Prime Minister to accept the New South Wales plan for a \$5 million fund that will assist law enforcement agencies across Australia in stings against criminals who are using illegal weapons; and, second, in assisting in convincing the Federal Government to have tighter controls on the importation of illegal weapons. One thing is clear: hand guns are not made in Australia, and every one of them came in across the customs barrier. The illegal weapons used in south-western Sydney in particular have been brought through our porous customs barrier. They have been smuggled into this country across our porous customs barriers; no effective customs controls are stopping the flow of illegal weapons into this State. Clearly that function is the responsibility of the Federal Government. If the Opposition were fair dinkum about stopping the availability of illegal weapons in New South Wales it would influence its Federal colleagues in establishing that \$5 million fund and tightening Australia's porous customs barrier.