

# Future Directions in the NSW Police Highway Patrol

The NSW Police Force's Highway Patrol is an indispensable element in a safe road network. Yet during its time in power, the NSW Labor Government has failed to provide an adequate number of Highway Patrol Officers to perform essential road safety duties, decreasing driver safety awareness and putting community safety in jeopardy.

Between 1 January 1995 and 5 March 2008, 7,161 people died in fatal crashes on NSW roads. Since 1995, more than 347,000 people have been injured in motor vehicle accidents.

As far back as 1995 then Premier Bob Carr promised the people of New South Wales the safest roads in the world, committing to less than 500 road deaths annually<sup>1</sup>. Despite this commitment it was not until 2006 that road deaths fell below 500.

These tragic road toll figures and increasing concerns about young driver behaviour mean that the Highway Patrol can no longer be allowed to remain an 'optional extra' within the NSW policing strategy.

There are 1070 Highway Patrol Officers in New South Wales, with an authorized strength of 1,088, with 118 unfilled vacancies.

Under the Government's plan to increase the total number of Police to 15,956 by the end of 2011, the public will have to wait until 2010/2011 to receive just 50 additional<sup>2</sup> Highway Patrol Officer authorised positions.

There is fundamental agreement throughout the community that the current NSW Highway Patrol model is not delivering a sufficiently visible presence on our roads and improvements are needed.

In June 2006, NRMA President Alan Evans stated, "*The visible presence (of Highway Patrol officers) is by far the best deterrent and the best way of convincing people to behave*"<sup>3</sup>.

Just months later, the Chairman of the Pedestrian Council of Australia argued, "*The NSW Government can do much more. But after 12 years of procrastination and complacency, the legacy is an annual road trauma bill of \$6 billion and immeasurable – and avoidable – pain and grief*"<sup>4</sup>.

## **A New Model for the Highway Patrol – a Highway Patrol State Command**

Increasingly the State Labor Government has downgraded the role of Highway Patrol Officers, allowing them to be taken off the roads to do other police work<sup>5</sup>, including General Duties and prisoner escorts, rather than concentrating on their core responsibilities.

**A NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition Government will consolidate the Highway Patrol, traffic police and Accident Investigation Squad into a standalone Highway Patrol State Command. It will be headed by an Assistant Commissioner for Road Safety.**

The advantages of a Highway Patrol State Command are significant.

Placed under the direct command of an Assistant Commissioner, within the NSW Police Commissioner's leadership team, it would ensure that a single chain of command of the Police Force was primarily responsible for road safety throughout New South Wales.

A centralised Highway Patrol State Command allows for a clear, intelligence-based outcome for road safety. Statistical data on accidents, unsafe driving behaviour and road hazards can all be centralised, with the outcome of targeted responses to those issues collected and analysed by the one Command.

The resultant consistency in the enforcement of road rules and the specific targeting of identified safety issues through the analysis of road safety data should be significant.

Under their own State Command, greater control can be exercised by supervisors on what duties Officers undertake - ensuring they focus on road safety duties rather than regularly being called upon to fill deficiencies in frontline Police support.

Under a centralised Command, Highway Patrol and other traffic related Officers can be consistently trained, with a defined career path involving further educational and practical development. These Officers will also have higher skills levels with respect to road safety awareness and occupational health and safety.

One of the greatest tests facing the NSW Police Force is the retention of skilled Police Officers who are increasingly leaving for occupations in other fields. Under a specialist Highway Patrol Command, Officers would be encouraged to career-develop within the Command and subsequently their skills would be retained.

To assist in this process Officers involved with the investigation of accidents - currently the Accident Investigation Squad - will be allowed, and indeed encouraged, to complete training to become a NSW Police Detective. This additional training will provide invaluable skills not only to these Officers but the Command as a whole.

### **Upgrading the Detection of Driving Offences**

A centralised Highway Patrol structure is more than just consolidating the line of command. It should also be about seconding non-sworn public officials from other Government departments to work on a continuous basis with Highway Patrol Police to ensure every possible opportunity is afforded for Police to be patrolling our roadways, not shuffling paperwork in an office.

There needs to be a system that frees up Police to perform much needed high visibility policing not filling in paperwork which should rightly be undertaken by those with an expertise in that field, particularly those within other State Government agencies such as personnel from the Office of State Revenue and the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA).

The RTA currently has experts specialising in motor vehicle modifications and heavy vehicle inspectors who skills would be invaluable to assist Police in identifying vehicles that pose a risk to other motorists.

Police are regularly identifying and stopping vehicles for a number of purposes - whether it be for a random breath or drug test, speeding, dangerous driving or following an accident. They are the frontline for detecting vehicles that are not roadworthy, are unregistered, have been illegally modified or have been subject to an order under Car Hoon legislation.

The expertise of staff from the RTA in performing inspections on motor vehicles that are identified by Police should result in a higher level of confidence that motor vehicles on our

streets are safe and registered. These skills are rarely utilised during large-scale random breath or drug testing operations and during heavy vehicle inspections undertaken by Highway Patrol Officers.

The permanent secondment of RTA officers would free Police Officers to concentrate on identifying unsafe driver behaviour, alcohol or drug affected drivers or those without a drivers licence, rather than focusing on the condition or registration of vehicles.

RTA officers have the skills and access to RTA databases, including those of authorised motor vehicle inspectors and vehicle repairers, to identify vehicles that have been modified and inappropriately certified for registration.

The opportunity also exists for a Highway Patrol Command to second the services of staff from the Office of State Revenue to handle the authorised confiscation of motor vehicles and to arrange for the sale of those vehicles. They can also assist with the relocation of motor vehicles impounded by Police and their appropriate storage until returned to their owner or their subsequent disposal.

Utilising these expert services will free valuable, scarce Police resources.

### **Teaching a New Generation**

Young people continue to be over-represented in NSW road crash statistics. In 2006 young drivers aged 17 to 25 accounted for 25% of all drivers and motorcycle riders involved in fatal crashes although they only accounted for 15% of licence holders<sup>6</sup>. A Provisional Licence holder (P1) at the age of 17 is approximately four times more likely than a driver aged 26 or over to be involved in a fatal crash.

### **A NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition Government will improve the relationship between a Highway Patrol Command, the state's high schools and the 59 Police and Community Youth Clubs throughout the state to deliver education and awareness to younger drivers.**

Police Officers are currently working in high schools through the School Liaison program. Police are already attached to PCYC's and many are currently involved in young offending driver programs, which is a valuable component in changing driving behaviour. However, once again this interaction occurs after an offence has been committed.

It would be of greater preventative benefit to utilise the expertise and knowledge that exists with Highway Patrol personnel and seek to build the interaction with young drivers before they develop unsafe driving practices and come under the notice of Police.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Scruby, Harold, "The more they fiddle, the longer the road toll stays the same", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 2006, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> ALP Policy 2007 State Election, *New and Expanded Services: Police Numbers and Crime Reduction*

<sup>3</sup> McDougall, Bruce, "Lost highway patrol", *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 2006, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Scruby, Harold, "The more they fiddle, the longer the road toll stays the same", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 2006, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> McDougall, Bruce, "Lost highway patrol", *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 2006, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, Road Traffic Crashes in New South Wales 2006. Downloaded 11 March 2008 <http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/roadsafety/downloads/accidentstats2006.pdf>