



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

Motions

4 May 2017

BUS DRIVER SAFETY

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (12:30): I move:

That this House:

- (1) Notes the great work of bus drivers in providing public transport to the community of Wallsend.
- (2) Notes that the level of assaults on drivers has increased dramatically, with drivers being verbally abused, spat on and physically attacked.
- (3) Notes the pending privatisation of Hunter public transport and private bus fleets have been shown to have even less safety measures in place in their vehicles.
- (4) Calls on the Minister for Transport to ensure bus drivers have the safest possible work environment.

Bus drivers all over Australia are reeling from the murder of Manmeet Sharma in November last year. Mr Sharma was a Brisbane driver. He was a hardworking and decent person, a well-known figure in the Australian Punjabi community and a man who was just doing his job. His tragic, pointless death highlighted the dangers faced by bus drivers all over Australia, including in Wallsend. Chris Prestons, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union [RTBU] divisional secretary, said:

When driving buses, our members are being verbally abused, spat at and, in some cases, physically abused. Like any worker, they should have the right to go on their shift and not cop abuse. It was not long ago that we had a driver seriously assaulted at night in Newcastle by some drug addicts.

In recent years, more and more drivers have come forward with reports of being verbally abused, spat on or physically attacked. In 2014 a bus driver was brutally attacked in the Hunter area: A bottle was smashed over his head, and he was punched and stomped on. What incited this incident? The driver asked two disruptive, intoxicated individuals to get off his bus. Even when police are called to address antisocial and threatening behaviour on buses, it is no guarantee of safety for drivers and passengers. An incident on the 100 bus in 2014 illustrates this. About 20 young people began causing trouble and were ejected from that service by the driver for antisocial behaviour. Police attended the scene, but this did not prevent further antisocial behaviour. When the same group caught the next bus service, according to reports, police officers refused to assist the driver by riding the bus until the antisocial group got off. Within 15 minutes a passenger's hair had been set on fire. That passenger, unsurprisingly, required medical attention. The transport and police Ministers must know about these events; they are not isolated incidents.

I am told that it has been five years or more since transit officers regularly rode Newcastle buses. Although they sometimes patrol trains and the buses that have replaced rail services from Hamilton to Newcastle, transit officers are rarely, if ever, seen on outer suburban or Nite Owl buses, according to drivers and commuters. A bus driver in Newcastle told me, "Our drivers are constantly blowing up. Talk to any one of our drivers and their biggest concerns will be the lack of transit police on their buses. The lack of transit officers encourages anti-social behaviour. This is especially true on late-night services, when you have people who might have been taking drugs or drinking heavily, crammed onto services without oversight—they think they can get away with anything." It is a shame that the Government has allowed security to slacken so noticeably in recent years. The same driver continued, "The Government has washed its hands of us." I think that is how many bus drivers feel.

The situation is even worse for drivers on the private services that are already operating in the Newcastle area. There are fewer closed-circuit television cameras, no security screens as found on public buses in the Hunter and they usually drive longer, more remote routes. Of course, police will always respond as quickly as they can to any incident on public transport, but they should not have to. Police in the Hunter region are understaffed and under-resourced as it is—I have argued for more staff and resources many times in this Chamber. Having to respond to emergent incidents on public transport stretches those limited resources even further, when they could be avoided altogether by better security on our buses.

I call on the transport and police Ministers to take steps to ensure that bus drivers in Wallsend, the wider Newcastle area and around New South Wales are as safe as possible. I call on the Ministers to engage with the RTBU, with drivers and with the broader community to ensure that our drivers and their passengers reach their destinations safely, no matter where or when they are travelling.

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (13:01): In reply: I thank the members for Seven Hills, Newcastle, Tamworth, Port Stephens and Terrigal for their contributions to this debate. We all agree that the safety of bus drivers and passengers is paramount. We also agree that everyone deserves to be able to work and to travel on public transport safely both during the day and at night, regardless of whether they are in the city or regional and remote areas. All members have agreed that the Public Transport Command [PTC] does a great job. The fundamental problem, and the reason I moved this motion, is that we need more PTC officers and more resources. The PTC officers are doing a wonderful job, but members on this side of the House—and I am sure members opposite—have been approached by commuters saying that when they travel by train and by bus they feel unsafe, and particularly at night. That is not the fault of anyone in particular but because at times intoxicated people use late-night services.

Drivers feel vulnerable because they do not see many PTC officers and the police are overstretched. I take my hat off to the police and I believe that they are overworked in what is an extremely stressful job. However, I do not want people in the Hunter to stop catching buses or to take risks by driving their cars when they should not because they feel unsafe travelling on buses. I also do not want bus drivers to be worried about doing their shift at night and not getting home. I have received concerning, factual reports about bus drivers having their hair set alight and being abused and spat on. That is disgusting and it is not acceptable anywhere in our community.

Why should bus drivers feel unsafe? I do not feel unsafe in my job, and I am sure members opposite do not feel unsafe as they go about their duties. I am asking the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure to take this issue seriously—I am sure he does. I want him to examine the services being provided and the number of officers in the PTC. I urge him to consider increasing the command's funding in the next budget so that people using and working on remote bus and train services—particularly those in Newcastle—feel safe. The PTC should have enough funding to enable it to employ sufficient officers to allow bus drivers to feel safe.

People tell us that PTC officers are invisible and that it has been years since they have seen one on a bus or train in the Wallsend and Newcastle area, or on a Sydney service. We must take this seriously. We should not simply talk about transport safety; we should do something about it. I know that the Minister can do something and that he will. I know that he is committed to our public transport system. However, I want him to improve it to ensure that everyone using it and involved in it is safe. That is what we deserve. I hope all members will support this very worthy motion.