



Police deserve protection

Much more needs to be done to protect police and emergency personnel while they are carrying out their duties, writes RANDOLPH WIERENGA

THE rate and severity of violent assaults against police and emergency service workers is intolerable.

And this problem could be resolved through a little political fortitude.

It is an ominous warning for our society that incidents of attacks on police and emergency service workers are increasing. For front-line police, it is difficult to stomach.

We have received account after account of police who are appalled and dismayed at the assaults they receive at work. Yet it is not simply the assaults that are so outrageous. It is the lack of political support the police receive after being attacked that is the real slap in the face.

Policing is a dangerous job. Police accept this. What police and emergency service workers cannot accept is that everything that could be done is being done to improve their safety.

Police and emergency service workers are being singled out and attacked at work. We have had officers stabbed, punched, kicked, spat on — and that was just in 2009.

And we are deeply troubled that if nothing is done, an officer will be killed while trying to protect Tasmanians.

We have had incident after incident occur where police are assaulted at work attempting to protect the community. And in incident after incident, people who are found guilty of assaulting police are let off with sentences that seem to bear no reality to the gravity of the crime.

The failure of political leaders to support minimum sentences sends the strongest possible message to the community that if you assault police, there aren't any meaningful consequences.

Every time a front-line police or emergency service worker is attacked and the offender is back on the streets with a smirk, the sentiment grows within the police force that there is no real justice.

How much violence against police and emergency service workers do we have to accept? At what point do we say enough is enough? Police feel let down by political leaders pandering to criminally sympathetic indi-

viduals, unaware of the reality on the front line.

Greg Barns, in the February 15 edition of the *Mercury*, notes that "in every other jurisdiction, mandatory sentencing is all the rage". And there are well-established and compelling reasons that they are all the rage. Minimum sentences work.

In Tasmania, we introduced minimum penalties for taking undersized crayfish, because we deem that this is a crime that cannot be accepted. Because we care about the long-term viability of crayfish and other marine resources, we are determined to prevent this crime by sending a strong deterrent to the community.

We also introduced minimum sentences for drink-driving, because we want to send the strongest possible message to the community that it is not acceptable, it is dangerous, and the strong punishment has been identified as providing a strong deterrent.

These changes did not happen in a vacuum. They were driven in the main by people outside the "excuse industry" who realised that a tougher message needed to be sent to possible perpetrators that society will no longer tolerate such behaviour. The failure of the judiciary to impose proper penalties in these



LINE OF FIRE: Police realise their job is dangerous.

cases led to the politicians "interfering in their independence" to ensure that minimum sentences were imposed.

But what about police and emergency service workers? Is it the case that, as a society, we think drink-driving and taking under-sized crayfish require a stronger deterrent than assaulting police and emergency service workers?

Victims of these assaults deserve to be treated better than crayfish. The victims cannot believe the sentences offenders of these assaults get away with.

Police and emergency service workers can not, and should not, accept that someone who has assaulted them and endangered their lives can be let off with a slap on the wrists.

Assaulting a police officer or

emergency worker, someone who is attempting to protect the community, is a choice. And no matter the circumstances cooked up by criminals, politicians need to do all they can to protect police.

Currently, our politicians appear more concerned with attempting to be all things to all people, particularly some of those more sympathetic to criminals and the lenient and inadequate sentences they receive.

On February 19, the *Mercury* reported that Tasmania has the highest number of unreported serious assaults in the country. Is it the case that people don't bother reporting these serious assaults because they know the punishment will never fit the crime and the offender will not receive a deterrent penalty?

Police and emergency service workers are just like anyone else, they want to know that when they go to work they will come home safely.

Offenders should know that if you seriously assault a police officer you will be punished. The evidence shows what works. We just need politicians to recognise that all that could be done, simply isn't being done.

● **Randolph Wierenga is president of the Police Association of Tasmania**