12 August 2003

Launch of the implementation of the O'Sullivan report
Hon Paul Henderson MLA Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services

Madam Speaker, I rise today to outline to the Assembly how the Martin Labor Government will implement the O’Sullivan Report with a $75M "Building our Police Force" plan - the largest ever injection of resources into the Northern Territory Police Force.

This Report, and the Government’s comprehensive response to it, represents a landmark in the history of the Northern Territory and its Police Force. It is clear from the response I have received since last Thursday that the community, and police officers in particular, are overwhelmingly pleased with this report and the Government’s comprehensive response to it.

Today is an opportunity for members of the Assembly to learn more about the Report and the Government’s $75M plan, and for members to place on the record their views. The announcements I made last week represent an unprecedented injection of funds into the Northern Territory Police Force.

200 Extra Police

Above all else, this package will deliver 200 extra police on the streets by the end of 2006.

This will be achieved primarily by the Government providing sufficient funding so that the Police can recruit and train 120 constables a year.

The O’Sullivan Report provides an independent assessment of the needs of our Police Force, and its 112 recommendations provide a roadmap for building the strength and capacity of the Force.

The Report

As I said in February, the outcome of this review would be made public and that is exactly what has happened. The full Report and a summary are available to all on the web. Materials have been widely distributed throughout the community. The Opposition spokesperson and Independent Members received the Report in full last Thursday.

Interest has been high. In fact, I am told there were technical difficulties on Thursday due to the large numbers of police members down-loading the material from the web site.

The Report was commissioned by the Government in February 2003. The expertise, credibility and independence of Mr O’Sullivan is beyond reproach.

The feedback I have received from the community - and police officers especially - about the way he went about his task has been exceptional. The task he had was massive. Over four months, he and his team spoke to over 1200 Territorians and travelled the length and breadth of this great Territory. The comprehensive Report he prepared is testament to him and all those who contributed to it. The Territory is indebted to Mr O’Sullivan and his team for their efforts.

Key Findings

Mr O’Sullivan makes several key findings about how the Police Force has arrived at where it is today. This is a discussion that cannot, and will not, be

swept under the carpet. To know how to assist an organisation, the community and elected representatives must, I believe, understand how and why it has the problems it has in the first place.

- Mr O’Sullivan found that the Northern Territory Police Force was run down over a decade, with under funding and staff shortages.

- He found that a recruitment freeze from 1991 to 1994 has left the Northern Territory Police with a shortage of experienced Sergeants. This recruitment freeze, which was brought about by funding and broad policy decisions, which must have had the consent of the Government of the day, went for three years and 11 months in the early 1990s. It means the Force now has a serious shortage of Sergeants and Senior Sergeants. Officers of this rank provide the on-ground supervision and leadership that is so important. The finding of O’Sullivan in this area can be found at page 24 of the report, and I quote:

  Not only was there an impact on absolute numbers of Police Personnel during the years 1990-1994 as attrition rates eroded the membership base, but this four year gap had moved progressively through the organisation so that there is currently a shortage of personnel with 10-13 years of service.

- O’Sullivan found the number of police available for operations has always been fewer than the number of police positions recorded on paper. There has been some discussion in the Assembly over recent times about the strength of the Police Force during the 1990s. This finding is important because it puts to bed much of the nonsense that has been espoused by members opposite.

  It also reinforces the position articulated by the former Commissioner, Brian Bates, in correspondence tabled during the Estimates hearing earlier this year. In that letter, the former Commissioner complained underfunding in the late 1990s meant he did not have the real police to do the job, but what he had were ‘police on paper’. Commissioner Bates wrote, and I quote:

  This increase of police with no funding for an increase in civilian support staff has continually posed a problem, as already mentioned, without adequate funds for civilian support staff. Police will have to carry out more administrative duties, to the detriment of their operational duties.

  The former Commissioner went on and, again, I quote:

  I again restate that the only civilianisation carried out to date has occurred by leaving police positions vacant but retaining the establishment numbers "on paper".

Commissioner Bates’ observations were backed up entirely by this finding of O’Sullivan, which makes clear what really happened in the years following the recruitment freeze in the early 1990s. Whilst the rhetoric from the Government of the day was overflowing, the reality on the ground was far less impressive. The numbers on paper looked good, but they were never matched by operational strength.

- O’Sullivan found that, long term, police recruitment rates have failed to take into account the rate of police leaving the force.

  The sickening part to this finding is that it uncovers that the previous Government did not implement the key finding of the McAulay/Bowe Report. McAulay/Bowe, on the whole, made a number of relatively less substantial recommendations. It did, however, make one very substantial recommendation relating to recruitment.
It urged the Government of the day to ensure recruitment levels took into account anticipated attrition. O'Sullivan found that this never happened. The key recommendation of McAulay/Bowe was never implemented.

- O'Sullivan found the maximum numbers of constables the Northern Territory Police Force can recruit and train each year is 120. This finding is pertinent because it puts a reality test next to everything politicians of any ilk want to say on the topic of police numbers.

It is simply not possible to produce police overnight. Suitable applicants have to be found, they have to be trained and they have to be supervised when they leave the police college. Taking all factors into account, O'Sullivan found the maximum capacity of the Northern Territory Police to recruit, train and absorb new constables is 120 a year.

- Significantly, O'Sullivan found that the Northern Territory Police Force is led by a professional Commissioner and staffed by dedicated men and women. This must be remembered at all times.

Over the past two years, and even as late as last Friday, we have seen many unreasonable attacks launched by members of this Assembly at the Commissioner and attacks on the efforts of the police. An absolute key finding in the O'Sullivan Report, and it is wholeheartedly endorsed by this Government, is that we have a fine Commissioner and a fine body of men and women in our police force. The time for negativity is over. The time for getting behind the Commissioner and the police members must start now.

Lessons of the Past

In summary, the damning findings of the O’Sullivan Report is that the combination of under-funding, and the previous Government’s recruitment freeze, has meant our police have been unable to deliver many of the basic services expected by Territorians and the Martin Labor Government.

These are the lessons from history. These are the things we must learn from. The mistakes are ones that must not be repeated, so that in 10 years’ time another Government will not inherit the type of mess passed on to this Government by our predecessors.

Martin Government Implements the O'Sullivan Report

The Government said it would act on the O'Sullivan Report and it has.

The Martin Government’s $75M "Building Our Police Force" plan is the largest ever injection of funds into the Northern Territory Police.

In 2003-04, it will see $9.8m more to the Police, in 2004-05 - $16.4m, in 2005-06 - $20.5m, and in 2006-07 - $28.3m more to the Police.

These funds will enable:

- 200 more police on the beat by the end of 2006;
- Recruitment and training of the maximum number of constables - 120 each year;
- Doubling the number of constables entering the Northern Territory Police Force;
- More Territorians recruited to the Northern Territory Police Force;
- More police back to core policing duties;
- More police patrols;
- More than 80 extra civilian support staff to get police back on the beat; and
- Improved living and working conditions to keep our experienced police in the Northern Territory.
The bottom line - this Government wants to see more police on the streets, faster police response times and improved levels of service for Territorians.

**Building our Police Force**

I will now break down the initiatives in more detail.

The immediate priority of the Government’s "Building Our Police Force" plan is to get more police into the Territory community for core policing duties - 200 more police on the street by the end of 2006. This will be achieved through a range of initiatives.

- As I outlined earlier, the O’Sullivan Report found that the maximum number of constables the police can recruit in a year is 120 (that is, recommendation 83).

This will mean more constables entering the police force than ever before. There will also be more recruit squads than ever before.

In 1998 and 1999, there was one recruit squad each year. In 2000, 2001 and 2002, there were two squads each year. This year, the plan is that there will be four recruit squads – one graduating next Thursday. In 2004 and beyond, there will be five squads each year.

Under "Building Our Police Force", the Government will meet this recruitment rate, more than doubling the current number of recruit squads and the number of constables entering our police force. Taking into account the current rate of police leaving the Northern Territory, this record recruitment rate will deliver 150 new constables to serve Territorians by the end of 2006. The Government will also recruit an extra 28 Aboriginal Community Police Officers and two extra Police Auxiliaries, and I am sure Members are noticing those advertisements in the paper at the moment.

- As a short-term measure to bridge the gap and experience left by the 1991-94 recruitment freeze, the Government will implement Mr O’Sullivan’s recommendation to contract interstate Sergeants on a temporary basis. It is expected around 25 Sergeants and Senior Sergeants will be sourced through this scheme. These officers will add to the experience base of our Police Force, providing additional support and guidance for Constables as they gain experience on the job.

Discussions will take place with the Northern Territory Police Association to ensure suitable arrangements for this scheme. O’Sullivan recognises this temporary measure will be a sensitive issue amongst serving police. The Government would not accept this recommendation but for the persistent representations from many, including the Northern Territory Police Association, that the shortage of Sergeants is a real problem. In addition, O’Sullivan makes it clear that this initiative is only designed as a temporary measure.

The Government has made clear its desire to see more Territorians join and remain serving in the Police. The lateral entry program is only a measure designed to bridge the gap caused by the mistakes of the past. I am confident that the understandable and legitimate concerns of serving police can be addressed and accommodated.

- More than 80 civilian administrative, technical and professional roles will be funded to address the current lack of support for our police, making sure police are able to get back to the basics of policing.

This injection will allow for new support mechanisms, such as the creation of the PROMIS administration unit, with civilians employed to support
officers with patrol-related paperwork.

PROMIS, the computer system chosen by the previous Government in 1999, has been a huge issue for police on the ground. This new administrative support should further the Government’s objective of police spending the maximum amount of their time on the street and providing direct service to Territorians.

- Civilian professionals will also be employed to do some of the jobs currently done by police, seeing more police return to the beat.

The exercise of freeing up police contrasts with that undertaken under Planning for Growth in the late 1990s. Under Planning for Growth, civilianisation took place, but the Northern Territory police were never funded for the extra positions that were created. In Commissioner Bates’ letter he observed:

... Without this funding, administrative support staff cannot be employed and police will have to carry out even more administrative duties, to the detriment of operational policing.

This, of course, led to police needing to shuffle money away from operational areas to cover the civilian posts that had been created. By contrast, this process will see Police allocated the funds they need to see police freed up.

**Opposition Belittles Expansion**

The Leader of the Opposition has curiously belittled this massive and record expansion of the resources for the Police.

To put what he says about police resources in context, prior to the last election the Leader of the Opposition, who had led a party that had been in power for 26 years, said that the Northern Territory Police needed an extra 60 police, an increase of 15 a year.

Under the plan I am outlining, this Government will be recruiting 120 constables a year, which should result in a net increase of around 50 constables per year. On top of that, we will be having other recruitment initiatives and rearrangements of roles that, in combination, will result in an extra 200 police being available for core policing duties by the end of 2006.

**More Police than ever before**

The contrast between 15 police officers a year and what this Government will be doing is clear: 200 more police on the street by the end of 2006 will mean more police than ever before patrolling our suburbs, towns, and communities.

Some of the things this will enable the Commissioner to do are identified in the report.

In Darwin:

- Three new patrols, including a foot bicycle patrol for Darwin’s northern suburbs;
- A new foot patrol for Darwin central business district; and
- An extra 24-hour vehicle patrol for Darwin’s CBD and inner suburbs.

In Palmerston:

- Two extra General Duties patrols.

In Katherine:
Additional uniformed police for General Duties.

In Tennant Creek:
- Additional uniformed police for General Duties; and
- Additional police for crime investigations.

In Alice Springs:
- Additional uniformed police for General Duties.

In remote communities:
- More General Duties police and Aboriginal Community Police Officers; and
- More police available for relief duty from nearby centres.

I would like to emphasise that this unprecedented boost in resources will benefit both the towns and the bush.

**Too high for too long**

For too many years, the rate of experienced officers leaving the Northern Territory has been too high. The Government tasked Mr O’Sullivan to investigate the issues of retention and attrition of Northern Territory Police as part of the Terms of Reference for the assessment.

Reasons for leaving identified by the O’Sullivan Report include:
- The impact of over a decade of under-funding and stretched resources;
- Decline in benefits and working conditions over the last decade;
- Standards of police housing in urban centres;
- Targeted recruitments of the Northern Territory’s talented and highly skilled police by other states; and
- Officers returning to their interstate home towns.

The Government will action a range of initiatives to address this issue. The stretching of resources, including the unacceptable levels of overtime, will ease as the strength in the Northern Territory Police Force is built.

**Living and working conditions improved**

- In 1999, the previous Government removed death and disability insurance cover for new police officers.

Recognising the dangers involved in policing, all other jurisdictions provide police with this protection. Following discussions with the police association, the Martin Labor government will introduce an appropriate form of cover for police and their families.

- The standard of police housing in major urban centres has been unsuitable for too long and the Government is taking action.

The O’Sullivan Report identifies a range of possible solutions, including Defence Housing Authority providing services, the Government taking out head leases on properties, and upgrading facilities in existing houses.

All viable options will be examined to address this important issue and the Northern Territory Police Association will be actively involved in the consultation process.

- In line with the Report’s recommendations, Aboriginal Community
Police Officers will be provided with the same housing and remote area allowance entitlements that apply to other police officers.

- Greater emphasis will be placed on attracting Territorians from all sections of our community to the Northern Territory Police Force.

The Martin Labor Government believes that, generally speaking, Territorians have a greater understanding of the challenges facing Northern Territory Police, and importantly they will be more likely to stay in the Territory and for longer.

**Improving Policing Capabilities**

The priority of the Government’s "Building our Police Force" plan is to see more police on the streets. At the same time, the Government has recognised that, where funds allow, capital items and equipment must be improved.

To ensure police officers have the necessary and appropriate policing equipment as part of "Building our Police Force" the Government will fund the $2M capital shortfall in the recurrent Police Budget identified by the O'Sullivan Report, enabling the scheduled maintenance and replacement of:

- Vehicles, radios and communications equipment;
- Station equipment and furniture;
- Small motors for boats;
- Safety requirements on vehicles; and
- Minor forensic equipment and surveillance equipment.

In addition to the on-going maintenance and replacement of existing Capital Works, the Government will provide funds for an expanded road safety campaign through improved driver safety education and awareness, and upgraded road safety equipment. The Government has also allocated funds for new inshore patrol boats and has agreed to a phased schedule to boost inshore water patrol capabilities.

The Government has made boosting the human resources the priority of the $75M plan. The capital expenditures I have identified have also received priority. Other capital items referred to by O’Sullivan will be considered in the context of future budgets.

**Implementing the Plan**

The Government has mapped out the broad policy directions it wants to take the Police, and has funded the items I have outlined.

Reporting to the Minister, the Commissioner of Police has been charged with the responsibility of implementing the operational aspects of the O’Sullivan Report. A steering committee along the lines of that recommended in the report will be established to assist with this implementation process. The Commissioner will chair the committee, which will involve the Northern Territory Police Association, the Commissioner for Public Employment, Treasury and others as required.

I am pleased to advise the Assembly that on Monday morning I met with the Commissioner and we discussed the implementation action. I know the Police Association Executive is busy considering the Report and its implications. The first meeting of the Implementation Committee, to be chaired by Commissioner White, is scheduled for Thursday next week.

The Government recognises that policing demands can change rapidly. The Police Commissioner has the discretion to advise the Government on
changed operational circumstances and the subsequent changes in resource requirements.

**Keeping Territorians informed**

Territorians will want to see how the progress of "Building our Police Force" is tracking. As the O'Sullivan Report found, the community has experienced the key recommendation of the 1997 McAulay/Bowe Report never being implemented. This fact says something in relation to the credibility of the Members opposite, but more importantly it says that to all those associated with implementing this report - including Government, the Commissioner, the Northern Territory Police Association and other stakeholders - that the community must be kept informed on how things are tracking.

The community will not stand for the trust-less approach of the previous era because patently that trust was breached.

To that end I have committed the Government to providing reports to the community and the Legislative Assembly on progress being made. This will include performance indicators, milestones, and details of the numbers of officers entering and leaving the police force and the number of recruits in training.

**Roadmap for the future**

I place on the record my appreciation to the Chief Minister and my colleagues in Government for their support to Police as evidenced by this package. For any Government to commission a truly independent report on such a sensitive area as police resources, and to commit to implementing its findings in such an outstanding way, is exceptional.

The feedback from members of the community - organisations like the Alice Springs Town Council, the Police Association, and individual police officers whom I have spoken with since last Thursday - to the Government’s response and approach to the report has been overwhelmingly positive.

There is relief that Territorians now have a Government prepared to seek out the truth and to share that truth with Territorians. But most importantly, Territorians are relieved they now have a Government prepared to act and put the funds into building our Police Force to the strength we need.

At the start of this process the Government had before it two stark choices: to stick with the old ways of underfunding Police, or to embark on an ambitious plan for the future.

We have a fine body of police members who are eager to be provided with more and better resources. O’Sullivan has given us the launching pad into a new era. It is an exciting time. I know we have the backing of Territorians to build this Police Force into something better than what we inherited. It needs to be done, it can be done and today I have outlined how it will be done.

Madam Speaker, I move that the Assembly take note of the statement.