

Police ignored me after bashing: gay MP

By LUIS M. GARCIA

The Minister for Police, Mr Pickering, has promised to investigate a Labor MP's claims that he was told to "get lost" at Kings Cross police station when he reported being bashed by street thugs.

Mr Pickering said yesterday he believed Mr Paul O'Grady's claims were serious and should be investigated by the NSW Ombudsman, Mr David Landa.

Mr O'Grady, who attracted national media attention earlier this year when it became known he was gay, revealed last night that the attack had taken place while he was walking near Kings Cross in March.

He said he had gone to the local police station to report the bashing, but had been told by officers there to "get lost", despite his being in obvious distress.

He then went to Sydney Hospital, where he was kept overnight and treated for a broken cheekbone and other injuries.

The next day, he had complained informally to the station officer, who had apologised. But no further action appeared to have been taken.

Mr O'Grady said he had decided not to publicise the attack at the time, nor formally complain to the Police Department, because he thought the incident was isolated.

But in recent weeks he had received complaints, especially from gay men, who claimed they had been refused help by police officers after being assaulted in or near Oxford Street.

One of the complaints involved a man who was attacked by two others in Taylor Square on September 21.

It was claimed that two police officers were asked by onlookers to go to the aid of the victim, but refused and went into a milkbar to buy spring rolls.

The officers had eventually "strolled" to where the man was being attacked.

In other cases, Mr O'Grady

said, people who had been walking through Hyde Park on a recent Saturday night had complained about being set upon by a group of attackers.

"These people escaped and when they rang the Sydney Police Centre, they were told that unless they had been physically attacked there was nothing that the police could do," he said.

"It seems to me extraordinary that the NSW taxpayers spend the best part of 1 billion dollars a year and the police force in many instances cannot respond to very real and reasonable requests."

"The police force needs to lift its game if the community is to have faith in them."

Mr O'Grady said senior police were well aware of the problem and had moved to improve relations with the gay community, but it was obvious that some younger officers were failing to take any action.

Mr Pickering said that while he was concerned about the allegations, he was also confident of the good work done by the police's Gay Liaison Unit to improve relations with Sydney's large gay community.

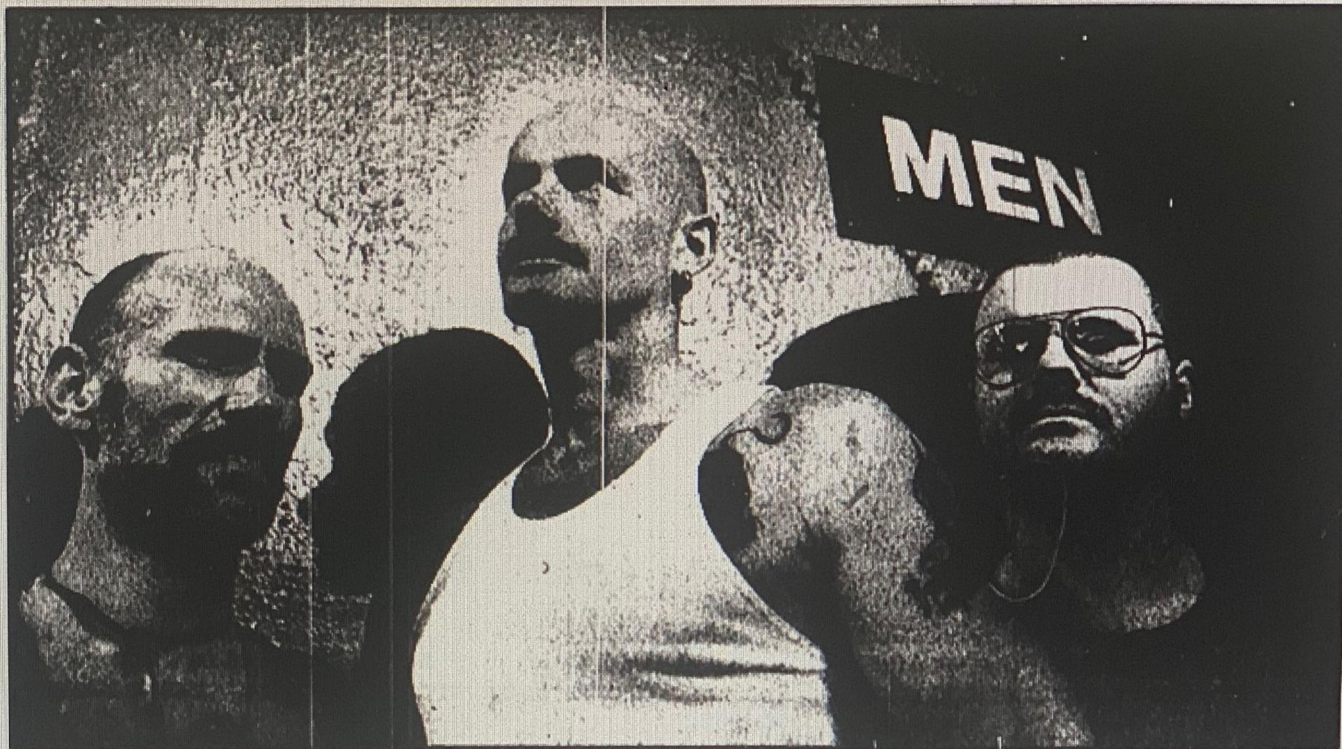
Figures released by police earlier this year showed that in the three months to March, at least 30 serious attacks had been reported to local police by gay men, including one murder.

A study completed by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby at about the same time found that in 90 per cent of bashings, the attackers were men aged under 25, who often roamed the streets in gangs up to 15 strong.

The editor of the gay newspaper *The Sydney Star-Observer*, Mr Larry Galbraith, said gay bashing was a widespread problem.

Mr Galbraith said that while gay men who had been bashed received courteous and prompt attention from most police stations in the inner suburbs, there were one or two stations that had caused concern.

"While it is popularly thought that most of the attackers are people who come into town from the western suburbs, the fact is that the attackers come from other areas as well, including the lower North Shore," he said.



Action over bashings: Mr Marcus Craig (left), Mr Henry Forester, and Mr Paul Costello.

Picture by ELIZABETH DOBBIE

Fear and loathing as violence rife

By SANDRA HARVEY and TONY HEWETT

Craig Brown and James Timmins are confident the injuries they suffered in a bashing by a gang of youths in Darlinghurst two weeks ago will heal.

But they see no end to the growing fear and nervousness in Sydney's gay community as gay bashings in the inner-city area continue to increase.

Like many Sydney homosexual men, Mr Brown and Mr Timmins are scared.

"I just don't feel very safe on the streets any more," said Mr Brown.

"At present, I'm still very nervous during the day and at night. If anyone comes across to me that I don't know, even at work, I become very nervous."

Both men are unhappy with the way police treated them when they reported the bashing.

"The worst thing about our attack is that these youths knew what they were doing," said Mr Brown. "They had obviously done it before and they just walked off down the street."

Mr Timmins has not been out at night since and wants more inner-city foot patrols.

"But it is self-defeating if you increase the number of police and find you have a bunch of homophobic, racist policemen running around," he said.

Mr Marcus Craig, 31, said he had been assaulted three times in six years.

"The first time was the worst," he recalled. "After that, I was petrified about going out after dark."

He grew a beard to hide the scars after being karate-kicked by a gang in Oxford Street in daylight.

He said he received sympathetic treatment from the police, but every time they told him there was little they could do except "keep an eye out".

Paul Costello was bashed several years ago by a gang of skinheads wearing jackboots in Oxford Street.

"I was spat on and then kicked from behind," he said.

"I felt shocked, so humiliated and really angry."

Mr Costello said that because gay-bashing had been going on for many years, the Sydney gay community began the Whistle Project - in which gays carry whistles to use if attacked.

"We also raised attention to the issue by asking everyone who had been bashed to wear red armbands in this year's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras," he said.

"Thousands of people wore them ... so this is how bad the situation is."

Mr Costello called on the State Government to educate younger people about homosexuals and their rights.

"In the schools, kids have to be taught about gay rights and our need to be left alone," he said.

And, he said the police needed to develop better policies to deal with the problem.

Mr Lex Watson, a prominent gay activist and Sydney University lecturer, said the Government and the Police Department had failed to issue "strong messages that gay bashings would not be tolerated".

"This just hasn't happened and there has not been any warning of harsh penalties for people arrested for assaulting gay people," he said.



Serious claims: Mr O'Grady.