



Speech by

Mr ALLAN GRICE, OAM

MEMBER FOR BROADWATER

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

Mr GRICE (Broadwater—NPA) (11.49 a.m.): I cannot help but endorse the comments made by the previous speaker. I have said numerous times in the press that the very, very serious allegations that I made about Mr Le Grand deserve to be cleared up one way or the other. That fellow still has a working life and a future ahead of him; he needs the thing cleared up. I endorse those comments.

While we are already in deep danger of the usual paralysis by analysis under Labor that we have seen so many times before, one of the many inquiries that have been proposed recently does deserve support, and I give it my support. I refer to the call for an inquiry into the total, abysmal, disastrous and incompetent mismanagement of the prison system in this State by a succession of failed Ministers throughout every minute of the former Goss Labor Government. That serial incompetence has been highlighted by the order of a payout from the public purse in excess of half a million dollars to one of the victims of the same serial incompetence: a former manager of Lotus Glen who had to try to run a prison while he was walking around tripping over cots in the corridors. We are told that there are more like claims in the system. There can be no doubt about that. They could emerge from just about any prison in the system in that shameful era.

That gives this inquiry potentially a very valuable purpose: it could save lives. It could make prisons a safer place to work than might otherwise be the case if this Government were allowed to fall into its natural state in this area of public administration—of neglect and incompetence. In the six years between December 1989 and February 1996 we saw a very cynical extension of the old political adage there are no votes in prisons. Because there are no votes in prisons, there was no priority for prisons; and because there was no priority for prisons, there was a disaster in the prisons for which there was absolutely no excuse.

The member for Crows Nest, who in my view was the best prisons Minister this State has ever had, commissioned the Kennedy report. When Labor took office in 1989, it had a blueprint. All it had to do was follow the dotted line, but it did not. The most extraordinary thing was that it could not even follow it when Mr Peter Coaldrake redrew it a few disasters down the track. He emphasised it for the Labor Party. There was, of course, some irony in this because Peter Coaldrake was without doubt the biggest disaster ever to hit the Queensland Public Service. In concert with the Ministry, he reviewed everything to a standstill. If it looked like moving, he reviewed it again to give it the coup de grace. His review of the Queensland Corrective Services Commission in December 1993 addressed exactly the whole problem that existed under Labor for so long. I will quote from the review to give honourable members some examples. Page 84 says—

"Associated with high occupancy rates are: the need for more frequent transfers of prisoners between centres; overcrowding of watchhouses; and increased stress within correctional centres.

...

The shortage of accommodation in correctional centres needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency ..."

But did the Labor Party do anything about it? It did not do a single thing other than to close two jails. When this crisis of overcrowding was pointed out to it, the Labor Party closed two further jails. The press was full of articles about this crisis. In the Townsville Bulletin in November 1994 appeared the heading

"Overcrowded jail system 'in state of crisis'", and "Prison crowding: riots fear" appeared in the Courier-Mail in 1995.

Why could the Labor Party not get the message? Nothing was done. In the six years that Labor was involved—as I will come to again later—only 220 beds were built in this State. This report shows us that the Government did not have any planning—no capital works planning. It had no ongoing outlook on prisoner numbers, and successive Labor Ministers just blundered about with it. The report showed that Labor's reason for shutting down the Woodford prison was a cover-up. The incompetent Minister of the day said that it could be closed because prisoner numbers were falling. It was, in fact, closed over the heads of the commission to save \$7m a year. Prisoner numbers were actually on the up when the Minister made that statement. That report said—

"The shortage of accommodation in correctional centres needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency."

This was the shortage of accommodation which was already chronic and which led to the problems for the taxpayer this far down the track. Prisoners were sleeping on cots in corridors. Twelve months later, the system had 2,630 inmates and 2,360 beds. In other words, the State's prisons were at 115% capacity 12 months after this Coaldrake report, and still incompetence reigned. The 1994-95 capital works budget for prisons of \$53m—the quick fix \$53m—was 43% underspent. Out of \$53m, \$22m was not spent.

We inherited a mess, a system that was almost literally bursting at the seams and a system which was simply not safe to work in all because members opposite were simply not capable of running it. Our response was to get down to work. The 1996-97 capital works budget was \$96.775m. The 1997-98 capital works budget was \$118.478m, and the 1998-99 budget, which was tabled in this House, is \$199.024m. That is over \$400m committed by the coalition in three Budgets, which is double what the Labor Party committed to in six. That is the sort of volume of money needed to remedy the mess that Labor left behind the last time it was in Government.

As I said at the outset, if holding an inquiry now will help keep this Government focused, I will fully support that. I am aware also that the people of Queensland are just about inquired out, but if there is no other way to get to the seat of this problem, an inquiry has to be held. We cannot afford a performance from Labor this time around like the one we had last time, yet there are already signs that that is precisely what it is going to do without somebody putting some salt on its tail.

The Cabinet of the previous Government had approved plans to build three 200-bed prisons, which this new Government has put on hold. It is likely and possible—I would like to be assured that I am wrong—that those three 200-bed prisons will be amalgamated into one prison somewhere in the metropolitan area holding a number smaller than the sum total. I have seen a comment made by the current Minister that the decision to build three 200-bed prisons is more expensive than building one 600-bed prison. Of course it is. Everybody knows that, but that is not the point.

The coalition understands the difficulties with unemployment, the general standard of living and lots of other problems that are faced by regional areas. Three 200-bed prisons, the cost of which is in excess of \$20m each, employing 80 to 90 people, with \$6m per prison per year in recurrent spending and the additional jobs created in the service areas associated with running prisons mean an extraordinarily big impact on a regional area, a country area, where that amount of employment can be created and maintained. That is one of the most important reasons for putting three 200-bed prisons in different parts of a regional area rather than to amalgamate it in one prison which would probably be near some metropolitan centre. Does the Minister not understand the importance of regional Queensland and the dire problems it is facing with unemployment? On the one hand, we have a Premier who rants and raves about achieving 5% unemployment within five years, which is a lot of nonsense—let us sit on the fence and count that as it goes down—and on the other hand we have a Minister who talks about amalgamating prisons.

Time expired.
