



Speech by

**Hon. J. FOURAS**

**MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE**

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Hansard 21 October 1998

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL**

**Committee (Cognate Debate)**

**Estimates Committee B**

**Report**

**Hon. J. FOURAS** (Ashgrove—ALP) (3.52 p.m.): I am pleased to take part in the debate on the report of this Estimates committee. I want to refer specifically to Corrective Services. I note in the Budget papers that in a full year, at a cost of \$3m, we will have 50 additional correctional officers. Of course, that increase is necessary because of the increase in prison numbers. Also, we have an absolutely massive capital works budget of \$178m, which is more than double the \$80m allocation in the previous year.

Irrespective of the fact that that increased funding will create some 2,000 jobs, I believe that in the interests of the society that we serve we must think very seriously about the crime statistics. It is absolutely appalling that, even during the term of the Goss Labor Government, in Queensland the prison population increased by 40% and, during the term of the previous Government, it doubled.

I remember listening to the previous Budget that was not passed and hearing Joan Sheldon, the then Treasurer, say, "Mr Speaker, I am pleased to advise the House that the prison population has doubled under our regime." I said, "Congratulations, Joan", and she smiled back. She must have thought that that was a compliment from the member for Ashgrove. In fact, it was a criticism; it was a piece of sarcasm. I think that it is appalling that we want to go down the way of California—the richest State in the richest country in the world—which has seven times the per capita prison population of Australia. I respect Mr Springborg, the Opposition Justice spokesman, as a friend. However, I think that he is on the wrong tram when he starts pushing a political agenda such as truth in sentencing.

During the Estimates committee hearing, I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about restoring the parole board to a truly independent board. I believe that it is very easy—and in this regard to some degree both sides are responsible—for good politics to be put before good policy. I think that it is appalling that we do not agree that prisoners are to be rehabilitated and that, in that rehabilitation process, the parole process is necessary. Having a person on parole is like having him or her on a string: if that person cuts the string, back to jail he or she goes. It costs \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year to keep a person on parole whereas it costs \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year to keep that person in prison.

I understand that the Minister is going to increase the number of beds available in community correctional places, such as St Vincent de Paul. I commend the Minister for that. There are prisoners who are ready to leave prisons and go to halfway houses and who are ready to be assisted in fitting back into the community. The recidivism rate of people who have gone through the St Vincent de Paul halfway house that is located in my former electorate of South Brisbane is so low that I wonder why we do not provide that opportunity for a lot more people. Again, I congratulate the Minister on doing that.

I chair a community training program in my electorate. We took on a pilot project involving 20 young people who were mostly recruited from the John Oxley Youth Centre. We put them through a 16-week program. We took them to Moreton Island for three days and we made them undergo three types of training: commercial cleaning, retailing and welding. We also fitted into the program literacy and numeracy tests and self-esteem courses. Out of 19 people—one person did not finish—15 people have now found work.

What is the future for these young people from juvenile correction centres? They are dole-collection centres, and they are very, very expensive. We must get back to being fair dinkum about preventing crime and attacking the causes of crime. I think that it is very, very important that we in this Chamber look at how much crime is costing us—a more than doubling of capital works spent on constructing prisons. I do not want to see a prison-led economic recovery. I do not want to see a society that treats its prisoners so harshly that they have no hope of becoming worthwhile citizens again.

The Greeks once said that the test of a democracy is the extent to which they minimise their socially disadvantaged. We should look at how progressive a society we are in terms of the way in which we look after prisoners. It is easy to go along with the masses and say that we need to be very tough on prisoners and inflict upon them all the vengeance that they deserve. However, in the end we should ask people for a bit of compassion. We should also consider our hip pockets. It is appalling that we come into this Chamber and congratulate ourselves on spending so much money on prisons.

Time expired.

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