



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard 21 October 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Mr S. J. Cowell

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (9.40 a.m.), by leave: On Monday, an inmate at Numinbah Correctional Centre, Steven John Cowell, absconded while on a leave of absence to attend an alcohol rehabilitation program. He was subsequently recaptured on Monday night, and police are to be congratulated on their swift action.

Despite his quick recapture, Cowell's abscond raised a number of issues which need to be addressed. Firstly, why was a prisoner, described by police as dangerous, in a low/open security prison and allowed on an escorted leave of absence? Whenever there is an abscond or an escape, police have a duty of care to warn the public. They described this inmate as dangerous based on his previous offence and to discourage people from approaching the inmate. Police prefer people not to take the law into their own hands and instead call police through CrimeStoppers. This is exactly what happened with an anonymous tip-off leading to the inmate's recapture.

The inmate concerned had participated in all the necessary rehabilitation programs and had passed through all the necessary security classifications up until Monday's event. The inmate had served 84% of his sentence and his record on rehabilitation was considered by the Queensland Corrective Services Commission to be good enough to enable lower classification. In fact, the inmate was considered to be of such reliable character that, under the previous coalition Government, the inmate was paroled in December 1996. He breached his parole conditions for failing to report to his parole supervisor and was placed back in a correctional facility. He managed to work his way through all the classifications up until Monday's event.

The other issue which needs to be addressed is complaints from an unnamed SPSFQ spokesperson about alleged training deficiencies for correctional officers on escorted leaves of absence. I contacted the General Secretary of the SPSFQ, Gordon Rennie, and he was unaware of any concerns about officer training for leaves of absence. In fact, Mr Rennie had not given any authorisation for such comments to be made by any spokesperson, unnamed or otherwise. Despite these unauthorised comments, I have asked the QCSC to review the practice of escorted leave and make improvements.

The Beattie Government is in the process of honouring its commitment of increasing prison officer numbers by 50, above and beyond the forecast increases. This increase should alleviate any problems regarding the need for extra prison officers and ease concerns about officers being put in dangerous situations. However, I will continue to monitor the situation, especially when prisoner numbers continue to rise at a rapid rate.
