



Speech by

Mr BRUCE LAMING

MEMBER FOR MOOLOOLAH

Hansard 24 March 1999

CORRECTIVE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LAMING (Mooloolah—LP) (4.42 p.m.): I intend to speak only briefly on this Bill, as the Opposition does not oppose it. I have some comments to make on staffing and I shall make an observation or two on the Minister's second-reading speech. I will also refer to the opening remarks of the Peach report. The Explanatory Notes to the Bill state—

"The Corrective Services (Administration) Act 1988 provides for the functions and powers of the QCSC related to the administration of corrective services in Queensland.

The Bill seeks to abolish the Queensland Corrective Services Commission ... and the government owned corporation Queensland Corrections ... The amendments also establish the Corrective Services Advisory Council and provide a head of power for the new Department of Corrective Services.

...

The Bill also seeks to provide express head of power to support the placement and management of maximum security prisoners and to clarify the powers in relation to the segregation of prisoners by amending the Corrective Services Act 1988."

The report titled *Corrections in the Balance* was the propellant for these changes. It was tabled on 9 February 1999. The investigation was headed by Mr Frank Peach, whose work in Education Queensland is well known to members of this House. The report was a requirement of the Corrective Services (Administration) Act and Corrective Services Act 1988 to review the operations of Corrective Services and conduct a 5 and 10-year review of the effectiveness of the relevant Acts. The report is commonly referred to as the Peach report.

A primary finding was that a statutory authority with a commission and board structure is no longer required. Frank Peach claims that a departmental structure would provide better accountability and reporting relationships. It is stated that the role of the advisory council, which is to be formed under the Act, will be to represent stakeholder groups in corrective services.

Of those groups, people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and staff representatives have been considered for inclusion. I take this opportunity to ask the Minister: will women and ethnic groups, who seem to have been ignored, be considered for involvement? The Bill also states that the appointed members should, but need not, include these people of expertise. This contradicts the Peach report, which states that they should be included. If these important members of stakeholder groups are not included, we will not see adequate and diverse representation or input from these community concerns.

The next question is: how is this council to be appointed? I read that no more than nine members may be appointed by the Minister. The chair is appointed, once again, by the Minister and the Minister may at any time end the appointment of a member for any reason or none. There will be no accountability for the actions of the Minister in removing a member of the council who, perhaps, does not conform. The Minister is able to justify his or her removal without any reason at all. Of course, the question is: does this contribute to openness and transparency if the decisions are made by one person. The Minister will certainly have his hands on the levers of control—both of them at the same time. This could well lead to instability within the council, instability that is not conducive to good performance.

The staff of our correctional services should also be provided with stability. I, and other members of this Chamber, have had the opportunity of visiting correctional centres. I visited a facility in north Queensland with the Public Works Committee. I take this opportunity to commend the staff of that centre, as well as others in the State. They do a marvellous job in very trying circumstances. It is not a job that I personally would like to have. The only time that the staff come in for any recognition is on those odd occasions when somebody escapes. That is a little unfair, because they have a very difficult job to do and I believe that they do it very well.

Stability of employment is very important and it can only be achieved by providing stable support to staff. I ask the Minister: will the Government retain all their services after the departmental start-up date, whenever that might be? Will a result of the amalgamation be surplus staff? The Government has advised the House that there will be no loss of jobs for the permanent staff of the two agencies. What about staff who are not permanent? How will they be treated? Will they have to reapply for their positions or will their skills simply be lost? It would be most unfortunate if this legislation resulted in any loss of jobs.

There is no certainty of retention for the director-general, who will become a public servant and whose expertise may be lost. It is important that we nurture the skills of our staff and not scatter them to the four winds. It is said that the public face of the organisation is the director-general. We cannot afford to lose those valuable assets. The chief executive officer of Queensland Corrections must also be concerned for his future. The Minister has said that these changes will be made with the least possible disruption, and will include stability for staff. What stability can these changes provide for them?

The Minister has also said that there will be no cost involved in the procedure. I find that very hard to comprehend. How can two departments be merged with title and staff changes, yet incur no costs? The Minister might like to refer to that aspect of the change in his reply. Any change, even a potentially beneficial change, comes at a cost, both financially and socially. We are dealing with human resources, with the emphasis being on people. We must provide adequate working conditions for the staff of Corrective Services, and this includes their security. Can we assure these people that their stability of employment will improve and that they will not be scapegoats when operational crises occur? How can constant changes in the senior ranks provide for the stability that is necessary? They are more likely to provide a clear message of uncertainty.

It is acknowledged that change is part of development; that with the ever-increasing number of prisoners in the corrective services system we must deliver custodial and community corrections effectively and adequately for the benefit of the community and the rehabilitation of those within the system. However, we cannot ignore the needs of the staff. We must move forward in our vision, not backwards, and provide intelligent responses to the challenge of change.

I wish to refer to one or two comments by the Minister in his second-reading speech. Firstly, following the Peach review, the Minister recognised that the QCSC board had accomplished the outcomes it had been designed to achieve. At this stage of the debate, it is appropriate to commend the board members for their contribution to corrections in Queensland. In common with the corrections staff, theirs is a pretty unrewarding task. The people doing that job should be acknowledged. Secondly, the Minister stated—

"... the people of Queensland hold me responsible. As it stands, if there is an escape or a death in custody, it is not the board—the policy makers—who are responsible; it is me in my role as Minister."

This is a brave call. Opposition members will be watching to see whether the Minister handles that responsibility. Without wishing the Minister any misfortune, we offer him good luck in doing that. I hope we do not get the opportunity to remind him of that.

I turn to the Peach report. Oddly enough, even though I read it right through, the part that caught my eye was the introduction in the Executive Summary, which is on page 2. In relation to unemployment, Frank Peach states—

"Unemployment, the emergence of an under-class, sensationalised reporting and an increased awareness of crime within the community have prompted successive governments to act by providing increasingly lengthy and punitive sentences through the courts."

That sentence caught my eye. I thumbed briefly through the report to see whether that comment was expanded on in the body of the report. Perhaps that was not one of Mr Peach's terms of reference. He did not appear to refer to that matter again. On another occasion I would be interested to hear more about his observation. That is something that perhaps we as parliamentarians do not address as often as we should. As the member for Toowoomba South said, we are debating legislation on truth in sentencing—I will not go into that any further, as it is before the House at the moment—and we are debating the parole provisions and alternative sentencing, particularly in respect of fine defaulters. That matter is addressed in another piece of legislation that will be debated shortly. Law and order is debated and referred to in this Chamber more than any other subject.

I do not believe we have enough debate on the causes of crime. "Debate" might be the wrong word. We ought to be having a discussion, because the word "debate" implies that there have to be winners and losers. Sometimes the adversarial nature of the Parliament does not enable us to take the opportunity to discuss issues. The Committee stage of Bills can be very productive, because members can chat across the Chamber in a less formal manner and we can make a bit more headway, until a vote is taken, on some of the more interesting aspects.

I do not think we speak enough about the causes of crime—where it all emanates from. We often speak about corrections and security—for example, housing security, security on the streets, road rage and general law and order issues. However, in this place we do not spend enough time addressing why people head towards a life of crime, be it minor crime or the more serious crimes that this Bill addresses. We perhaps do not speak enough about where these problems emanate from, be it because of family breakdown or a lack of parenting skills. The other day I heard someone say, "You've got to have a licence to do practically anything these days, but you can have children—the most important thing— without any training whatsoever." In this day and age, that is causing a problem. I do not believe we are providing enough assistance and support to young parents and teaching children of high school age not so much their rights but their responsibilities as young adults. As they grow older and reach parenting age, I think we can and should do a lot more to educate them.

Recently, both inside and outside this place there has been talk about examining the problems of drugs and gambling. We need to pay more than lip-service to these issues and become more hard nosed in addressing them. We speak about drugs because the problem is considered a bad one. Perhaps we need to look more closely at the effects of alcohol, which at the moment probably does more harm in society than hard drugs. Gambling is also causing concern and problems in families.

A lot of factors contributed to Frank's Peach comment about the emergence of an underclass. He used that term in the context of unemployment. As I said before, there would be few times when I have stood up in this Chamber and not found an excuse to speak about unemployment. Once again, I will take that opportunity today. Generally, when we speak about the unemployment rate, we look at the worst aspect. For example, if we had, say, a 10% unemployment rate, the media tends to ignore the fact that 90% of people who want a job have one. It sounds a lot more positive to speak about the employment rate as opposed to the unemployment rate.

The unemployment figures do not reflect the fact that a lot of people are severely underemployed. I am speaking about people battling along with half a job or a couple of casual jobs, or who are, for example, working one week and not the next. In many respects, those people are worse off than the long-term unemployed people who have developed the capacity to live within their budget. However, people who have lost full-time employment and who were paying off a house have to try to make do with part-time or casual work——

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I hope the member for Mooloolah is drawing some conclusion with respect to the Bill.

Mr LAMING: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for bringing me back to the Bill. I was referring to the Peach report, which stated that we must not overlook the emerging underclass and the effects of unemployment, which causes people to run off the tracks and find themselves in the corrections system. Even though I might have been taking a very long detour—and I will come back to the Bill—I think we need to take on board the fact that we need to look at not only corrections and law and order on the streets but also at why people find themselves falling into the trap of breaking the law. That is a most important issue.
