



Speech by

GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 25 March 1999

CORRECTIVE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (11.55 a.m.): I am pleased to speak in support of this Bill before the House today. I do so as a member of this Parliament who, when he was first elected, joined the then Corrective Services Minister, the Honourable Glen Milliner, as a member of his legislative committee. I had the opportunity, as a member of that committee, to visit a number of prisons within this State. I feel that anyone who would say that prisoners get it good and that they live in hotel or motel-style accommodation has not visited prisons. I believe that they are quite chilling places. Certainly, in my experience, they are not places that I would want to frequent on a regular basis.

There are a couple of aspects of this Bill on which I would like to comment. After listening to the debate so far, I do not believe that these issues have been raised; however, I believe that it is important to emphasise them. One in particular is the fact that the Minister has given a commitment that there will be no job losses. That is extremely important, particularly when one considers that we are abolishing the Corrective Services Commission and the Government owned corporation Queensland Corrections, and their boards. I note that the Minister has gone out of his way to speak to a large number of staff throughout the State to assure them that their jobs are secure. At times, we have not been good at talking to the people who work for the Government. When changes such as this are being made, and in order for there to be a fairly smooth transition without any great upheavals, we need to be able to take with us the people who work for us. That the Minister has gone out of his way to do that and to talk to the staff will go a long way towards ensuring that the transition to the new Government department will be reasonably smooth. That is a plus.

The other issue that I wish to raise is the report that was brought down by Frank Peach and his team, who undertook fairly extensive discussions with staff about how they felt that the system should change. I am sure that the fact that Frank Peach actually sat down and listened to the staff and talked to them about the changes that needed to be made helped them in their deliberations to ensure that the model that members have before them today in this debate will be a model that will last for some time and will serve this Government very, very well.

I recall vividly that in 1993 when I was visiting prisons throughout this State, the prison population—and I can only go on approximate figures—was some 2,100 people. Some six years later, we have approximately 4,900 prisoners. That growth rate of something like 130% is quite extraordinary. It puts quite a strain on Governments in terms of finding the necessary finances to ensure that we are able to build prisons and accommodate prisoners in a proper way.

Members who were in the Chamber during the debate last night heard the rhetoric of members opposite on this subject. If members opposite had their way and we threw away the key every time we put a prisoner in jail, I think that, within a very short time, we would probably be looking at something like 10,000 prisoners. I do not know how the system would cope with that. As we all know, costs continue to rise. As a result of our tax revenue base, we struggle to find the money to build our new prisons and accommodate prisoners. The Minister has been able to convince Treasury and members of the Government that the new prisons are needed.

I note that a private member's Bill relating to fine defaulters was introduced into the House today. I understand that the Attorney-General has made a public statement and indicated that he will be bringing forward some proposals in relation to fine defaulters. That is long overdue. Those proposals

will be very welcome, because they will reduce the pressure on our prison system. I will leave my comments on the fine defaulter issue until the debate on that private member's Bill.

As the Minister pointed out in his second-reading speech, under the old structure he was kept at arm's length from the decision-making processes, but at the same time the citizens of this State would hold him accountable for what might or might not have happened. The Minister had to try to run the system with both hands tied behind his back. The changes in this legislation will assist the Minister in that regard. At the end of the day, the buck stops with the Minister. He is the person who is accountable to the citizens of this State for what happens in the corrections system. The amendments in this legislation provide him with the power to run the system in the way that the Government would like it to be run.

Clause 5 of the Bill provides a head of power for the management of the maximum security prisons. That is very, very important. In his second-reading speech, the Minister pointed out that it should not be underestimated what difficult prisoners the people in maximum security prisons are and how difficult they can be in terms of disruption of prison life. The Minister has pointed out that a number of them have tried to escape on not one occasion but on several occasions. They have caused bodily harm to and even tried to kill other prisoners. Dealing with those people is not easy. To try to build facilities and to ensure that those prisoners are kept separate from other prisoners is not an easy task while trying to ensure that they are treated in a humane way.

Clause 5 allows the chief executive to make some decisions in relation to isolating maximum security prisoners. I have always been a great supporter of the work done around 1993 when prisoners helped in the clean-up operation after the Charleville floods. Prison outreach centres were spread around rural and regional areas throughout Queensland. The former Corrective Services Minister and I had discussions with representatives of various councils who were keen to have that sort of facility in their region. Last evening, I was talking to a principal of a school in central Queensland who used low-risk prisoners to do a lot of work around the school. If we can have those sorts of facilities for low-risk prisoners in the regional areas, prisoners could do more community work. Obviously, that would help their rehabilitation.

The drafting of this legislation has been difficult. I believe it will serve both this Government and this State well in the future. I support the Bill.
