



Speech by

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CORRECTIVE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs ATTWOOD (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (12.05 p.m.): I congratulate the Minister for Police and Corrective Services, the Honourable Tom Barton, for this forward-thinking legislation which seeks to abolish the Queensland Corrective Services Commission and the Government owned corporation Queensland Corrections. As a member of two community advisory committees for Sir David Longland prison and Moreton A/Moreton B prisons, I am committed to assisting in strengthening the links between the community and the prison system, to establish a better understanding of what prisons are about and to draw the Government's attention to the positives and negatives of the corrective services system.

Regular meetings with the staff of these prisons have allowed me to gain a better insight into prison life and the day-to-day running of the prisons. A number of difficulties that the community advisory committees—CACs—have encountered have revolved around their inability to advise on corrective services matters. Many suggestions have been made over the years by the CACs, but it appeared to be too difficult to overcome bureaucratic red tape, access staffing for any project or get a decision made. I was part of the Moreton A/B committee for at least eight months before I finally received formal written approval from the department to be on the committee.

Many initiatives such as bookbinding and wood-turning have been suggested, but the structure of the prison system fails to allow these initiatives to happen easily. Hardworking staff in the prisons were feeling a sense of insecurity in regard to their careers, wondering how much more of the department would be corporatised. They wondered whether valuable prisoner programs would suffer further financial cuts. Prisoner frustration and unrest existed because of the uncertainty associated with their applications for parole. That was linked to the unavailability of the appropriate prisoner programs. No wonder Abbott was able to escape so easily from the Sir David Longland maximum security prison: morale would have been at an all-time low; the information gleaned through the intelligence networks did not seep through to prison decision makers; and staff were not adequately trained to cope with such an escape attempt.

The Corrective Services Legislation Amendment Bill will return corrective services to a Government department. Queensland Corrections—Q Corr—will become a commercialised unit to operate correctional facilities within the department. The Minister has guaranteed that no permanent staff at QCSC or Q Corr will lose their jobs when the restructure occurs following the review. The report is a clear reaffirmation of the role of the public sector where the need for Government accountability for services is a high priority. Prisons are, and should remain, the responsibility of an elected Government, which is directly accountable to the people of Queensland for their operation and management. Corporatisation and commissions only serve to distance Governments from their responsibilities.

The advent of the Queensland Corrective Services Commission led to a feeling of less certainty in regard to reduced conditions of employment for employees when compared with their Public Service counterparts. The reform agenda of the prisons system was not properly funded and the necessary infrastructure in the face of rising prison numbers was not put in place to ensure its success. That undermined the real objectives of the prison system, which is required to protect the community from harmful offenders and to rehabilitate offenders while incarcerated so that they may then re-enter the community as reformed citizens less likely to reoffend.

The CACs are convinced that prisoners need to be kept occupied and that the community is able to provide more jobs and industries and the teaching of job skills within the system. Ongoing community input is certainly seen by the Minister as an essential component of the operation of a prison. However, effective community interest and input can be achieved without the cost of a board and the administrative burden of preparing papers for the board.

The Corrective Services Advisory Council will provide high level input and community feedback and the Minister—not the chairman of the board—is publicly regarded as the person ultimately accountable for the efficiency of the corrective services system. The organisational structure to be put in place will allow the Minister to be more accessible from all levels of the department. In turn, the Minister will have a more hands-on approach to the operation of the corrective services system.

The Minister must be aware of community opinion in relation to the siting of prisons, particularly where they affect people's living conditions. The prison precinct at Wacol is a perfect example of this. This reserve was allocated as prison land over 40 years ago, but in more recent years residential development has occurred close to the site. There was public uproar when the former Government declared that it was going to build new prisons within 500 metres of the back yards of Riverhills residents.

After much discussion and negotiation, the Government decided to build the large SEQ 1 prisons further away and out of the sight of locals. The Concerned Residents Against More Prisons—CRAMP—group agreed to the new site on the condition that no more prisons be built on the precinct and that an older prison, Moreton A, be demolished. They were concerned about the proliferation of prisons and the increasing number of prisoners so close to residences and primary schools. The feeling was that if a break-out or riot occurred in the "city of prisons" it would be more difficult for police to control and the safety of residents would be at risk. The Beattie Government has kept its promise and commitment not to build more prisons in the area. This is thanks to the close and frequent consultation that the Minister, the member for Waterford, has undertaken with myself and the CRAMP group. He has already shown that he will not ignore the concerns of the community.

There are other issues of concern to the community in relation to drug and alcohol abuse and the perception that approximately 85% of prisoners are in jail due to drug and alcohol related circumstances. Corrective services authorities are taking action to stifle drug and alcohol abuse within the prison system. However, there remains the issue of prevention.

The Beattie Government has set up a Crime Prevention Task Force. I believe that by concentrating efforts on the drug and alcohol social problem; this task force will go a long way towards combating crime and freeing up the prison system. This will take many years to achieve and, in the meantime, the prisons are clogging up. However, the member for Yeronga's initiative in setting up a register for dealing with fine defaulters should decrease the numbers of prisoners in the system. More than a quarter of all the people admitted to Queensland prisons are fine defaulters.

The sentence management system also needs to be reviewed. It appears that there are too many levels of bureaucracy, too much paperwork, and too much difficulty involved with sentence management. We need to find a more effective way of getting eligible people through the net as quickly as possible to alleviate clogging in the system. Perhaps more qualified people and extra resources are needed to process prisoners more quickly. This will free up more prison beds sooner.

The Corrective Services Legislation Amendment Bill is surely a courageous step, and one which will ensure job security for prison workers, make operations more efficient and effective, and allow the Minister to maintain a hands-on approach to prison reform. It will provide more consideration to community and social issues affecting prisons and prisoners. I commend the Bill to the House.
