



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

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DRUG COURT TRIAL

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (6.49 p.m.): As I and our Government have a firm commitment to crime prevention, I am very pleased to speak in this debate and support the amendment to this motion. Our Government is determined to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. We are also determined to combat our community drug problem. The two issues are intrinsically linked and strategies to deal with the drug/crime cycle must also be linked.

The drug court strategy has significant potential, but I support our Government's position that it must be carefully evaluated before being applied to the Queensland context. The primary aim of the drug court strategy is to reduce drug-related crime by helping offenders to end their drug dependency. We must view this drug/crime cycle as a dependency problem; it is not strictly a legal problem.

I am encouraged by the support the member for Warwick is showing for drug courts. It is he and his colleagues who tirelessly criticise members of our Government for allegedly being soft on crime when we advocate preventive measures. Preventive strategies such as drug courts are not soft options; they are sensible options. The members opposite are starting finally to see the light in regard to preventive measures.

Rather than acting hastily, we need to know how the drug court strategy is progressing in New South Wales, the UK and North America. We need to know what works and what does not work. We need to have realistic costings. The first trial of a drug court in the USA was in Florida in 1994. New South Wales launched a \$12m two-year trial on 8 February 1999 to operate in Parramatta. It is early days on these issues. There are some promising signs that mandatory rehabilitation, rather than relying solely on a custodial sentence, can be effective in dealing with drug dependency. The US experience is so far showing some very promising results. Between 1994 and 1998, more than 90,000 people have been enrolled in drug court programs in the US. According to figures from the US, 70% had stuck with their rehabilitation. Only 15% had positive urine samples while in the program and 75% who had completed a drug court sentence went on to get jobs. However, we do not know how many went on to commit further crimes.

There are also promising signs that costs to the community can be reduced: costs incurred through managing prisons and the costs of the addicts' criminal behaviour. As the member for Ashgrove stated, drug courts cost an average of \$4,000 per person per year. Prison costs \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year per person. Again, we have to be cautious. Members opposite have used a simplistic figure of about \$1,200. That does not take into account all the support services that are also needed. We have to be very careful in relation to costings. We cannot rush in with this sort of strategy.

Drug courts have some limitations. Firstly, offenders have to be carefully screened for suitability to that program. It does not work for everyone. In particular, it will not work for serious violent offenders. In addition, the offenders' willingness to participate must be considered. They must have a commitment to rehabilitation. Secondly, there must be an integrated response from all parties involved in the drug courts—police, court personnel, health practitioners and community groups. It is clear that offenders need more than detoxification to get their lives back on track. Research is indicating that offenders with drug abuse problems experience many other problems: illiteracy, sporadic work, low education standards and mental health problems. Solving those problems costs money. Those issues need to be considered carefully. To work, the drug courts will need to be linked closely to other arms of Government and the community.

For want of a better expression, I want to say that the member for Warwick is like a cat spraying to mark its territory. He seems intent on taking ownership of the drug court initiative and pushing it through quickly before the limitations and possibilities have been carefully assessed. That is irresponsible. Our Government is giving careful consideration to drug courts. It is consistent with our interest in crime prevention measures and our Statewide crime prevention strategy. We know that crime will not be solved by throwing millions of dollars on prisons. We have to be clever and sensible about crime prevention, not emotional and irresponsible.

If the member for Warwick is serious in his commitment to drug courts, he will let us get on with a comprehensive assessment of the drug courts operating in other jurisdictions. Finally, he ought to have a word to his colleagues to stop the hospital funding scaremongering that is consuming an abundance of funds and energy. We need preventive health measures as well.

Time expired.
