



Speech by

Hon. M. FOLEY

MEMBER FOR YERONGA

Hansard 1 December 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Annual Reports of Supreme and District Courts

Hon. M. J. FOLEY (Yeronga—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister for The Arts) (9.58 a.m.), by leave: This morning I tabled in the House the annual reports for the 1998-99 year for the Supreme Court and the District Court of Queensland. These reports detail the achievements of the courts and the challenges facing them. The Supreme Court achieved a high rate of disposal of criminal matters—81% within six months of commencement. The District Court of Queensland continued to experience strong growth in workload. Despite this, its disposal rate of cases within six months of an indictment being presented was 80%.

The annual report points out that the number of criminal cases in major centres outstanding at the end of the year was 1,854—an 8% reduction on the number outstanding at the end of last year. In Brisbane there were 1,035 criminal cases at the start of the year, while the number awaiting trial or sentence at the end of the year was 862—the lowest number in the past three years.

It is a credit to the efficiency of our courts that disposal rates remain so high. In fact, the Productivity Commission found Queensland's Supreme and District Courts in the 1997-98 year finalised 90% of criminal proceedings in less than 48 weeks from initiation to finalisation, compared with the national average of 64 weeks.

The determination of the courts to travel throughout the State is to be greatly applauded. The Court of Appeal sat for the first time in Townsville, while the Supreme Court held hearings on Thursday Island for the first time. In April 1999, District Court Judge Robertson conducted the court's first circuit to the remote communities of Mornington Island, Normanton and Doomadgee—an initiative of former Chief Judge Shanahan at the request of the elders of the relevant communities. District Court Judge Bradley conducted the court's first circuit to Kowanyama in May 1999.

In the report the Chief Justice acknowledges the allocation in the 1999-2000 budget of \$1.5m for technology upgrades in the higher courts, with three years of follow-on funding totalling \$1.3m. The Chief Justice's desire to relieve the Supreme Court of aspects of its criminal jurisdiction has been addressed by legislative action to transfer jurisdiction to the District Court for a range of offences such as prison riot, rioters demolishing buildings, sending dangerous goods in a vehicle, obstructing escape from unsafe premises and endangering the safety of persons travelling by railway or aircraft. The recently introduced drugs court legislation also allows certain minor drug matters to be dealt with in the Magistrates Court, rather than the Supreme Court.

Last year, the Labor Government appointed an extra Court of Appeal justice, increasing the number of Supreme Court judges to 24. However, the annual report of the District Court of Queensland points out the courts are operating in difficult circumstances which have accumulated over a number of years. It points out the state of some of Queensland's courthouses is hampering the administration of justice, including lack of facilities for child witnesses and disabled clients, poor jury facilities in some cases and a perceived need for more resources for the judiciary.

There is no magic wand to correct problems which have accumulated over a period of years, however, this Government has acted to address some of the concerns confronting the District Court. For example, new courthouses, such as those recently opened at Cleveland and Gladstone, cater specifically for the needs of vulnerable witnesses such as children, and microphones are now provided as court buildings undergo refurbishment, as has happened at Roma. The heritage-listed Maryborough

Court House is about to be refurbished and one of the first parts of the project will be to improve disabled access.

The burden on the District Court of dealing with minor cases of assault occasioning bodily harm will be reduced as a result of the Justice Legislation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (No. 2) 1999, passed by this House last week, which makes clear that Magistrates Courts are able to deal with those cases.

Unlike the members opposite, who try at every turn to undermine public confidence in the administration of justice in this State, the Beattie Labor Government is taking real and practical steps to address many of the issues confronting our higher courts. The Chief Justice and the Chief Judge have used their considerable advocacy skills to put the case for extra resources for the courts. This will be considered in the context of Budget deliberations. Yes, there is a long way to go, but this Government remains committed to providing access to justice for all Queenslanders.
