



Speech by
**Mrs NITA
CUNNINGHAM**

MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG

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CORRECTIVE SERVICES AND PENALTIES AND SENTENCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs NITA CUNNINGHAM (Bundaberg— ALP) (8.47 p.m.): I am joining the debate on the Corrective Services and Penalties and Sentences Amendment Bill this evening because I believe the most important issue was overlooked in the debate last week and is being overlooked again tonight. I have no sympathy whatsoever for violent criminals—in fact, in some cases I do not believe they should ever be released back into society because of their total disregard for human life and their total disregard for human suffering.

However, there is a very sound reason why this Bill should be opposed. A parole system has been in place in Queensland for almost 40 years—not because successive Governments have felt sorry for criminals, but because it provides an effective and essential method of encouraging a standard of behaviour in prisons that is manageable. In Queensland prisons we have almost 3,000 employees working as prison officials—people just like ourselves, people with families to go home to. Almost 1,500 of these officers are working in high security prisons with hardened criminals.

It is a job that none of us would do. It is a job that brings very little joy or job satisfaction, but it is a job that someone has to do. It is our responsibility to provide conditions in those prisons that will ensure the highest possible level of safety for those officers.

I do not know if anyone in this House has ever visited inside a maximum security prison or if they have ever spoken to anyone who works in that environment. I have been told by those who have worked in these prisons that the only reason—the only reason—that they are manageable is because there is that possibility of early release for good behaviour. If the possibility of early release is taken away—as is intended by this Bill—and if a prisoner has to serve 10 years with good behaviour or 10 years with bad behaviour, and if he or she has to serve full term regardless of behaviour, then the behaviour of prisoners will make control an impossible task.

We all hear those cries from constituents that sentences are not fitting the crime. But it is not the parole system that is at fault. If violent criminals are given an adequate sentence in the first place—a sentence that is seen to fit the crime—and that prison term is reduced for good behaviour, it is largely accepted by the community. However, I believe that the dissatisfaction in our community occurs when the initial sentence that is imposed is not seen to fit the crime. When that sentence is reduced further for good behaviour, then it becomes totally unacceptable to the community. This is when we get the reaction that we are all hearing from our electorates. I believe that the real problem is the inconsistency and inadequacy of some sentencing, and that is what should be addressed.

It would be totally irresponsible to support this Bill—to jeopardise both the safety of our prison staff and a parole system that has been working—without any investigation of the possible repercussions and without any report being received or any inquiry ever being undertaken. It is very easy to make emotive statements in this debate about getting tough on crime and going on and on about violent criminals or how much of their sentence should be served, but our role as members of this Parliament should surely not be about bringing unworkable Bills before this House or about scoring cheap political points; it should be about providing adequate, workable, responsible and commonsense legislation for the wellbeing of every person in this State, and I urge all members to oppose this Bill.

Further, I have to comment that last week in this debate we were threatened that the names of members who did not support the Bill would be circulated in their electorates as supporters of violent criminals. I believe that the Opposition has really reached the bottom of the pit with this type of standover tactic. I would like to clarify for them that, like Jim Pearce, I am not afraid to stand up, either, for what I believe is right for my electorate and for Queensland.
