



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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CORRECTIVE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (12.29 p.m.): I take part in this debate to place on the record the history of some of the things that occurred in 1988. As the Deputy Speaker will recall, at that time the prison system was not in good shape. It was under the control of a department until I was made the new Minister. That was the last job on earth that I thought I would ever get. Mike Ahern was the Premier at the time and I was hopeful of getting a Ministry. I thought it would be Lands, involving something really exciting like watching grass grow. I thought that that would be a nice start. When Ahern said, "I want you to do Corrective Services", I nearly fell off my chair. He said, "Do you want it or don't you? Take it or leave it; you please yourself." I said, "Yes, I'll take it."

Before I was sworn in as the Minister, I went inside a jail for the first time. I remember Justice Einfeld and Brian Burdekin of the Human Rights Commission being in the Premier's office, expressing their concerns about something that they called the black hole. I had never heard of the black hole much except on television, so I decided to have a look. I had never been to Boggo Road either. When I went through that place, they put the lights out and did all sorts of things.

I came out of the jail and went to meet my departmental masters. Peter Jones was the departmental head. I forget the name of the other fellow, but he is a good bloke. Morale within the department was down. People in this place who talk about a rise in the morale in the prison system do not know what the word means. In any prison system anywhere in the State, country or world, morale will not be high at any time because it is a very difficult, demanding and depressing portfolio. Anyone who has worked within the portfolio—be it the current Minister or any other—knows only too well what I am talking about.

Obviously, people such as the member for Springwood, Mr Musgrove, have no experience whatsoever in the field. The member is very wet behind the ears when it comes to matters such as this, which one can gain a knowledge of only from experience and heeding the lessons of the past. That applies to both sides of the House. I did that. The member is an extremely impudent brat. It is a pity that some people do not take the time to understand difficult portfolios. I have had 10 years' experience in Government and in Opposition in the law and order portfolios, and I can tell honourable members that one never stops learning, and members from both sides of the House will never stop learning. Such portfolios provide a good learning curve as one sees all sides: the people in the prison system, those in the police system and the community. If one wants to learn something about people, that is not a bad place to start. As I said, morale within the department was shot. Of course, there are no votes in prisons, so no Government ever gave them much money.

I said to the departmental officers, "Okay, I am a brand new Minister and I would like some advice. The black hole: what do I do? Leave it open or close it?" This is typical Yes Minister stuff, and I did not blame them for it. Indeed, I felt sorry for them. They said, "If you close it, Minister, you will have a strike. The prison officers will walk out. If you leave it open, the prisoners will riot. Please yourself." I said, "Thanks for that." I went back to Ahern and I said, "The black hole is closed; I will make the decision myself", and it was closed. I believe that that was the right decision, even though I know that the prison officers needed support.

The system was rotten. It was corrupt right the way through and had been for the past 20, 30 or 40 years. Something dramatic and drastic had to be done. I wanted a total review of the system. To do that, I had to find someone who would actually take on the job, and do it well. I needed someone who

would do it thoroughly—who would tear the system to pieces, put the nuts and bolts everywhere, and then put it back together. Several people were suggested: retired Chief Justice Harry Gibbs, another retired judge from New South Wales Justice Moffitt, and Major General Stretton of Cyclone Tracy fame. I spoke to them all to see whether they had what it takes to do what we needed so desperately. Somebody—I forget who—suggested Jim Kennedy. I chatted to them all. I will not mention names, but I was told, "Jim Kennedy won't do; he's the wrong politics." I said, "Okay", and I talked to a few others. I came back to Jim and had another chat with him. Then I rang Ahern. I said, "Who makes the decision? Me or someone else?" To his credit he said, "You." I said, "Good. It's Kennedy", and it was.

The prison system benefited from the appointment of Jim Kennedy. I do not think Jim has come under too much criticism in this debate, and he should not. When he took on the job I said to him, "I know nothing about prisons", because I knew nothing at all. I said, "But it's fascinating and it grabs you. If you really want to do something of value and come out the other end knowing that you've been through the hoops and some fire, you will do this. Once you are in it, you won't want to get out of it." That is the way I felt then and I still do, after 10 years' experience. The portfolio is fascinating. Achieving something in that particular portfolio is probably the most difficult of all challenges. Jim took that challenge. He felt as I did.

Jim Kennedy wrote a very thorough report. I remember the skulduggery we engaged in to get his recommendations approved by Cabinet, because obviously they meant money. Cabinet was not inclined to issue too much money to prisons. We used every trick in the book and we were granted the money for the new commission. We decided that we had to move away from a department, because the department was in dire straits. We needed to distance the system from the Minister. We always knew that it would probably come around full circle one day, as it has today. That is quite okay, because no system lasts or works forever. One has to keep moving it around.

Mr Palaszczuk: It worked then.

Mr COOPER: Yes, it was the right thing to do. I said to Jim, "Now you've taken the system apart and put it back together, you can run it for a while." He said, "Righto, I will." He did the same thing with Q Corr. He was the right man for the job. We certainly involved the community in the formation of the commission. Most people were chosen for their qualifications and the community was very well represented, as most people know. The system started to run well. Then we decided to close Boggo Road.

Probably the deepest impression that was made on me when I went to Boggo Road to look at the black hole was the sight of 600 people lying on cement in wire cages. I thought, "What a futile waste of humanity. Surely we can do better than this?" Therefore, one of our decisions was to close Boggo Road and raze it. We wanted to raze the culture of the prisoners, the officers and their families. Everyone was intertwined and intermingled, and it was extremely bad. Indeed, I was disappointed that I could not drive the bulldozer when it was first proposed that the jail be razed. The Labor Party came to power and, unfortunately, left the jail open and that culture spread into the other prison systems, which was tragic. We wanted to cut it off, to get rid of the culture totally and start afresh. It is a pity that the cancer spread to other parts of the prison system. However, that is history.

I acknowledge Jim Kennedy and his successor in Q Corr, Des Knight, who came in for some undeserved abuse from people on the other side of the House. That should never have happened, because Mr Knight is a fine person. He is an accountant and a friend of Jim Kennedy. He is totally dedicated and devoted. Such people do not deserve that sort of treatment. I place on the record that I totally support him and all the people who have served on the commission, especially those who served in the beginning. They have given their all to make the prison system more productive and useful, and to ensure that it turns out better people rather than making them worse. That was our dictum and desire, and we tried to achieve it. We want to ensure that that aim is continued, regardless of which party is in Government.

When we lost Government in 1989-90, Glen Milliner took over the prisons portfolio. I said to him, "Just keep following the Kennedy line and his recommendations. Keep trying to work them through. It always takes time. It may take 10, 15 or 20 years. We will look back and see whether or not we have made any improvement, but it is worth trying." He did that until such time as his Government let him down, because he required funding. As I said, there are no votes in prisons and, therefore, that Government cut funding. That is when morale started to slip and escapes started to occur.

The member for Springwood said that there were a lot of escapes during our time in Government. What about the escapes that have occurred under Labor Governments? We literally had a revolving door prison system. I have referred many times to the fact that the system was akin to a zebra crossing. The sign read "Prisoners cross here". The age and class of prisoners did not matter; they were just out there. The drug problem was unbelievable. "Keep'em high, keep'em happy" was the management motto, especially at places such as Borallon. It was an absolute disgrace. When we came back into power, there needed to be a lot of tightening up. That caused some pain. It always causes

pain when the system is tightened up. People will always—and they did—try to undermine the Minister. There were a lot of conspiracies at the time. It was pathetic stuff. I was most disgusted with the people at the management level.

I was recognised as being a hands-on Minister. I make no apology for that. I knew that we would get nothing done unless I took that approach. That is the way the system works. I had to get in and do it for myself, even to the point of being accused of interfering. I say: so what? The Public Service says that a good Minister is one who does nothing, gets out of the road, signs the papers and clears off, and that a bad or annoying Minister is the one who makes them work. I did make them work. I make no apology for that. We achieved a lot of good things. People should remember that. It could have been a hell of a lot worse.

I took down with me some of those people who would not do their job. I said, "If I have to stand in the firing line for this, you're going to stand in the firing line, too, and see what it is like." Prior to that time, there was no accountability and nothing mattered. Back in 1987 I had to board a plane at midnight following an escape in which five prisoners went over the top after tying sheets together. It was real Dad'n'Dave stuff. It was unbelievably pathetic. Sheets were dangling from the wall. It was the stuff of comic strips. I arrived at the scene at 2 o'clock in the morning. After I had carried out an inspection, the prison manager, who was still shuffling around in a pair of slippers with pompoms on them, wiped the sleepy dust out of his eyes and said, "Can I go to bed now?" I said, "Yeah, you go to bed, pal. Stay there. I never want to see you again." Those were the sorts of people we were trying to deal with. They did not give a damn. I often found that the management, even in later years, looked after themselves pretty well. They always drove new shiny cars and had plenty of good gear.

Does the Minister remember the fact that the conditions and equipment of the escort group were a disgrace? As the Minister, I had to find out those things for myself. The Minister knows that I was the one who found out about that situation. We fixed up that problem very quickly. What on earth could be done when the management would not do their job? They ignored any instructions they were given. Some of those people are still there in the departments I have mentioned. The Minister should watch them, because they will tell him anything. Regardless of what the matter is about—be it about security matters, escapes from jails, riots at Woodford or whatever—they will tell him anything. It comes from those at the top.

The people at the bottom are the ones who will tell the Minister the truth. They were the people whom I had to work with. I had to have contacts in the lower ranks in every prison in the State. They used to tell me the truth. I would say, "I have just instigated this measure. I want to know whether this will be implemented. In a few weeks' time you can tell me." They were the ones who would tell me whether or not that had been done. That is the only way to work the system. I have had that experience; others can have it. I wish them good luck.

I wish to speak about the new jail at Wacol and the people called the Littles—little by name, little by nature. They are the people who delayed that program by nine months. They cost the taxpayers of this State hundreds of thousands of dollars to serve their own selfish ends as they schemed and connived to have that jail delayed. We obviously needed new jails and we were having to build them in order to fix up the overcrowding problem, which was our legacy from the Labor Government. In doing that, we were stymied by people along the way. I mention that instance in particular. How can it be that just a handful of people can hold the rest of this State to ransom? It cost the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of dollars for them to have their wicked way. They are a disgrace. I want that on the record. They caused us hell. They are totally and completely untrustworthy.

The former member for Mount Ommaney, Bob Harper, did a top job for his constituents and had to wear all of that dreadful abuse out there at the time. The clown, Peter Pyke, was out there in his silly looking coloured bow tie carrying on like an idiot. All honourable members—every single one of us—knows that he is an idiot. I want to get that on the record, too. I do not want to spend much time speaking about him, because he is simply not worth it.

Mr Palaszczuk: He is a good mate of mine. Mates can do no wrong.

Mr COOPER: Peter Pyke is a mate of Henry Palaszczuk. That is good. That is on the record, too.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! The member for Crows Nest will address members by their correct title.

Mr COOPER: I am happy to do that. We are good mates. Am I allowed to call him "mate", or is that out, too? I managed to get in a little plug about some of the nasty things.

In relation to the good things, in the prison system of today there are about eight maximum security units. I certainly support the maximum security units that we had planned to go into these places so as to allow for better prison management and to provide places for the Brendan Abbots of this world. That escape could have happened under any Minister. That is the annoying aspect.

Under the departmental structure, the Minister was the first in line. That is fair. I do not mind that. A Minister has the responsibility and has to cop it on the chin. However, Jim Kennedy noted that it was always the Minister's fault in respect of every strike, escape or death in custody. With the creation of the commission, that responsibility was shifted to the chairman of the commission or the DG, who had to take the flak and let the Minister perform his or her role of providing the funds and policy. That was supposed to be the way it worked. However, people were always baying for blood when something went wrong. The media was the most at fault. They loved to get hold of someone they could put their foot on and rip about. In my latter time in the Ministry, I thought, "If that's going to be the case, we might as well go back to a departmental structure and be done with it. If we have to be totally responsible, we might as well have control."

Under the commission structure, everything had to be done by written direction, and the process was very slow. A board would meet once a month. Changes had to be made after the escapes of Abbott and company, which involved new techniques using high-powered firearms to shoot into the jail from outside. That had never before been experienced in this State or nation. We had to devise new methods of controlling and handling that situation.

We were able to get the funds, but we then had to put in place various measures to try to make the prison system secure and to ensure the safety of staff. That took a long time. Board meetings would be held to decide whether this or that would be done. I thought, "We don't have time for that. We've got to get something done yesterday if we are going to fix these things." To that end, it was not their fault; it was the fault of the system. The system needs to be conducive to proper ministerial control and direction, because in circumstances such as those we have to move quickly. Riots could happen under any Minister, and it has happened under many of them. Shoot'em up style escapes could happen under this Minister, and I think he knows that. That is his problem now. I am glad it is not mine any more, although I would not have missed it for quids. The experience was fantastic for character building.

Ministers in the tough portfolios have to make decisions, wear the flak and be up front. When something goes wrong, they might as well take it full on the chin, because no-one else will. They have to deal with the issue and then put in place the measures needed to get it right. That will constantly present itself as a challenge. I commend that challenge to the Minister. Also, we understand where the Minister is coming from with respect to this legislation. We will see how it goes over time. Again, it may have to be changed back in 10 years' time. Nevertheless, in the meantime we wish the Minister well.
