



Speech by

Mr S. SANTORO

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Hansard 23 March 1999

DRUG COURT TRIAL

Mr SANTORO (Clayfield—LP) (6.34 p.m.): At the moment, all around Australia, there is a life and death debate being conducted on how Governments can tackle in a serious and sustainable way the trade in and use of illegal drugs, which have afflicted our society and led to an escalation of crime. As an elected representative and as a father, I believe that there is no more serious social issue which we have to face and which we have to try to fashion responsible solutions for.

In early February my colleague the member for Warwick announced that the Opposition would trial Queensland's first drug court, which would provide non-serious drug addicted offenders with an opportunity to seek counselling and rehabilitation. The Opposition looked at the experience in the United States, where the drug court program was established by President Bush. In America, with some 70,000 people having been dealt with by the drug court, only 4% have been repeat offenders, compared with 45% for addicts who have been processed by the normal court system. That is experience that the Honourable the Minister for Health chose to ignore.

The coalition was keen to provide an opportunity for non-violent drug addicted criminals to undertake drug rehabilitation programs instead of serve time in jail. It is important to emphasise that the program we raised and support is aimed at helping, in most cases, those first-time adult addicted offenders who pose no serious risk to the community.

Our drug court proposal is aimed at non-violent, first-time offenders. It would not apply to violent or sexual offenders, repeat offenders or people convicted of drug supply or trafficking. It is a program not motivated by some misconceived social welfare notion that everyone is a victim but

rather that these people have both a serious problem and social and legal responsibilities.

In the United States, people going through the drug court are required to become drug free, undergo random and regular drug testing, obtain, where possible, full-time employment and meet their financial commitments, including child support. In short, it is a program designed to integrate these addicts back into society.

We were and remain conscious of the human dimension of the tragedy that drugs cause to our community and wanted to take a lead—a moral and responsible lead. We wanted to send a signal to this Government that we were committed to not only appropriately punishing violent criminals but also trying to tackle in a tangible, practical and responsible way the causes of much of our property related crime. While the coalition remains of the view that there can be no solution to major crime unless appropriate attention is given to the penalties that criminals receive, we are also aware that a range of strategies are needed to tackle criminal activity.

The Opposition was aware that a trial of the drug court was about to be conducted in Parramatta and that one was soon to start in Victoria—not just New South Wales, but also Victoria. We were not motivated by a knee-jerk law and order reaction but rather by recognising that many addicts need help and that through such help both those addicts and society will be better off.

Initially, the Premier gave some guarded support for a trial, but now he has shown his true colours. He claims that there is not enough money and goes on to the airwaves rattling his jam can, demanding Federal funds. Where were the Federal funds for the New South Wales trial? The simple answer is that there were none, but the New South Wales Labor leader, Bob Carr,

had more gumption, leadership and compassion than does the Queensland Labor Leader.

The Premier knows that if he enacted the coalition's legislation designed to keep fine defaulters out of prison, he would be saving taxpayers around \$23m each year. This would be more than enough to fund a trial for a Queensland drug court. The Premier could find \$2m without any trouble to unsuccessfully attract Baywatch, can find hundreds of thousands of dollars to give to his picketing unionist mates at Gordonstone and can find millions of dollars to fund pay increases to Public Service fat cats, yet he cannot find even a few million dollars to tackle drug related crime in a serious way. This is not just outrageous; it is pathetically tragic. What sort of dud, leaderless, valueless, directionless Government have we got?

The tragic thing about this whole episode is that we have in power a Government that does not have the initiative and energy to pass legislation to keep fine defaulters out of jail or to deal proactively and compassionately with non-violent drug addicts. Many people have seen that this is a can't do and won't do Government, but in this case the repercussions of non-activity, sloth and myopia are tragic for many drug-addicted young Queenslanders.

The Premier runs around trying to get his 30-second media grab but shows no leadership where real moral leadership counts. If the Premier and his increasingly discredited Government is to retain any sort of moral leadership, he should act immediately and ensure that a drug court is given a fair run and that the problem of drug addiction is tackled fairly and squarely, not in the way that this amended motion suggests.

The Minister said, "We are looking at new ways." What are the new ways? The expanded and long-term methadone program? Prevention through education? Treatment and rehabilitation? The promotion of a national approach which involves a talkfest, at which the Premier and the Minister are very good? Enhanced criminal justice responses such as the drug court and works camps?

It is interesting to see that those opposite are still capable of uttering the words "drug court" in their amendment. They should actually become fair dinkum, stop being patronising in terms of this issue and implement as quickly as possible a drug court initiative such as that being proposed by the honourable member for Warwick and the Opposition.

Time expired.
