



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard 9 March 1999

CORRECTIVE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (12.38 p.m.):
I move—

"That the Bill be now read a second time."

The objective of this Bill is twofold—first, to abolish the Queensland Corrective Services Commission and the Government owned corporation Queensland Corrections and their boards; and, secondly to provide a head of power for the management of maximum security prisoners within the correctional system.

I would like to provide the House with a brief summary of the report titled Corrections in the Balance—a Review of Corrective Services in Queensland. This report, prepared by Mr Frank Peach and his team, was tabled on 9 February 1999 and fulfils obligations to review the operation of the Corrective Services (Administration) Act 1988 and the Corrective Services Act 1988. The report made 58 recommendations for improvements to the corrective services system.

It was recommended that the Queensland Corrective Services Commission and Queensland Corrections be abolished and replaced by a Government department. All assets, liabilities and staff of the two agencies will be transferred to the new department. It is important to note that, in making these changes, the Government has made a commitment that no permanent staff will lose their job as a result of the restructure.

In the course of the review, Frank Peach and his team undertook extensive consultation with staff about the operation of the corrections system and their role within it. As Minister, I spoke personally with most staff across the State in a series of meetings and telephone link-ups in relation to the recommendations. I have told staff that I am determined that these changes will be made with the least possible disruption to ensure safety for the community through the continued efficient operation of the correctional system and stability for staff.

As recognised by the Peach review, the Queensland Corrective Services Commission board had accomplished the outcomes it had been designed to achieve. Before the commission's establishment in 1988, the prison system was in crisis. The current commission and board structure was designed to increase community input into reforms to overcome that crisis. The board's work was an important part of preparing our correctional system for the 21st century.

But times have changed. Today there are many more opportunities for community input into the system, for example, freedom of information, judicial review legislation and regular stakeholder meetings—to name just a few. The proposed Bill will further enhance these remaining avenues of community input through the establishment of a ministerial advisory council, which will be broadly representative of stakeholders. From a political perspective, this structural amendment reinstates clear lines of accountability between the prison system and the Minister responsible for that system.

At the end of the day as Minister, the people of Queensland hold me responsible. As it stands, if there is an escape or a death in custody, it is not the board—the policy makers—who are responsible; it is me in my role as Minister. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition appears to agree. In the Courier-Mail on 24 October 1998, Mr Borbidge was reported to have said—

"There has been a tendency in recent years for Governments to hand control of the public administration of certain policies to unelected commissions or councils."

He continued—

"They are not interested if the Government of the day has delegated responsibility to someone else because, at the ballot box, the someone else is not accountable."

He further said—

"Governments have not had their hands on the levers and have paid the ultimate political price."

We are now regaining hold of the levers and restoring the direct lines of accountability to the Minister.

I would now like to turn to the amendments to the Corrective Services Act 1988 that provide a head of power for the management of maximum security prisoners. The Bill outlines conditions necessary for a prisoner to be placed on a maximum security order and then accommodated within a maximum security facility. The purpose of these facilities is to provide intensive supervision and management of prisoners who have been assessed as highly disruptive within the correctional system.

Of the group presently accommodated within the maximum security unit at Woodford, 55% have committed murder. Of those, 15% are multiple murderers and 45% have been convicted of, or are under investigation for, murders within a prison. This "hard core" group of prisoners have a propensity for violence and must be managed accordingly. And 75% of prisoners in the maximum security unit have either tried to escape and succeeded—many on more than one occasion—or have put staff in danger through their involvement in attempts to escape. The proposed amendments also set out the basis for a maximum security order to be authorised. These orders will be limited to six months' duration. However, consecutive orders can be made.

These provisions are required urgently, as are all of the above amendments. We need a system that keeps pace with the demands confronting it, a system that cannot afford to relax in the eyes of the community, yet a system that has a responsibility to rehabilitate and integrate offenders as best it can to ensure the community's safety. Queensland needs a system that improves on the successes of the past, a system which provides the security in our prisons which the public demands and is entitled to expect.

I commend the Bill to the House.
