



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard 25 May 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Sir David Longland Correctional Centre

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (9.49 a.m.), by leave: Two weeks ago, a key went missing in B Block of the Sir David Longland Correctional Centre. It was a serious incident as the missing key was capable of opening three internal doors and a fire escape door. When the key was reported missing, procedures were put in place to immediately secure the block. All doors were deadlocked so that the key was incapable of unlocking any doors, and the fire escape door was padlocked. The only way to open any of the doors was with a master key, and all prisoners were locked in their cells while a thorough search was carried out. All prisoners who moved in and out of B Block were strip searched and passed through a metal detector. The locks on the affected doors have since been changed, thus making the missing key redundant.

I am advised that at no time was security breached because of the quick action of officers. It is an incident which should never have occurred. However, what was more concerning was the initial conflicting reports about the incident. I do not expect the prison system to be incident-free. There will be incidents from time to time because, after all, Corrective Services is dealing with the worst human beings society can produce. The Borbidge/Sheldon Government found out, to its peril, what happens when one ignores the warning signs about impending trouble in our prisons.

They continued to ignore an escalation in incidents, which culminated in riots at the Woodford prison and mass escapes from Sir David Longland and Borallon Correctional Centres. I would like incidents to be kept to a minimum and I have taken steps to ensure procedures are followed through. However, when incidents do occur, I expect to receive quick and accurate information about those incidents. This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the whole missing key incident. When mistakes are made, it is better for people to admit the fault and move to fix it as quickly as possible.

The rewarding of prisoners who eventually came forward with the missing key was also a mistake. I have made it clear to prison administrators that the offering of cigarettes or anything else as a reward or as a bribe is not to be tolerated. In this particular missing key case, officers have been counselled over their actions.

I will not be moving in to sack people indiscriminately, which was the typical knee-jerk reaction of the previous Minister. Every time something went wrong in the prison system under the Borbidge/Sheldon Government—and there were many events—someone's head was chopped off. This created a culture of mistrust and apprehension, which was discovered as a major flaw by the recent review of correctional services by Frank Peach and his team. The review found that officers were fearful of doing their jobs because retribution was often swift and permanent when mistakes occurred. The review recommended that steps be taken to reverse this culture of mistrust and, if anything, the missing key incident was probably a hangover from those times. Finding a convenient scapegoat and sacking personnel will not solve the problem; it will be fixed only by locating where the fault is and improving training and changing procedures. This is exactly what has been done.

I am advised that the issue of keys has been tightened and key rings sealed so that they cannot be separated into individual bunches. Incident reporting procedures have also been tightened and clear lines of communication and responsibility have been mapped out. General managers will closely monitor the effectiveness of these procedures.

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr BARTON: I should take that interjection, because the previous Minister knows only too well that he left me a prison system that was in a despicable mess.

As I said, I will not be overreacting and firing people en masse like the Borbidge/Sheldon Government tended to do. The loss of experienced officers would be counterproductive. I understand that prison staff have a very difficult job to do and, at nearly all times, carry out their duties in a very professional manner. Prison officers have to deal with some very unsavoury characters 24 hours a day; most people would not like to do their jobs day in and day out. However, when problems arise from time to time, I expect them to be fixed and fixed quickly.

The recent review found numerous flaws, which prevented improvements to the prison system being carried out in a timely fashion. The recent changes made to Corrective Services to form a department will help overcome these flaws. The new Department of Corrective Services has been in place only for three weeks and the actual restructuring of the department to make it more effective is taking place between now and 1 July.

As the Minister responsible, I will be doing everything within my power to ensure Corrective Services has the resources it needs to get the job done and that they continue to make our communities safer places to live in.
