



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard 27 October 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Prisoner Security

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (9.58 a.m.), by leave: Last week we had the totally unacceptable situation in which a high security prisoner was able to escape during his appearance at a community corrections board meeting. Since then the Department of Corrective Services has taken steps to prevent a repeat of this unfortunate incident. I would like to make it clear to the House that the security arrangements surrounding the escape had been in place for a number of years. High security prisoners have appeared before community corrections boards from time to time and have done so without handcuffs or any form of restraint or supervision at the request of the boards themselves. In fact, under the current corrective services legislation enacted in 1988, prisoners have the right to appear before a board hearing and have exercised that right on numerous occasions during the years.

As I said, it is not a new practice. Since 1995, 2,000 prisoners have appeared before the Brisbane community corrections boards without incident. However, from now on this is all going to change. This escape has shown that at all times the safety of the community has to be the absolute first priority of Corrective Services. This is especially true for the safety of the board members, who, after all, are placed in potentially dangerous circumstances as representatives of the community.

From now on, all high security prisoners appearing before the community corrections boards will wear a body belt and will have their hands cuffed to their sides and their feet shackled. Medium security prisoners to a certain risk assessment will be handcuffed. A duress button will be fitted in the Brisbane board's meeting room and for all regional community corrections boards which meet outside secure prison facilities.

As members of the House would be aware, the corrective services legislation is currently going through an extensive review and I intend to introduce new legislation next year. As part of that review I have asked the department to reassess the right of prisoners, particularly those who constitute a significant security risk, to personally appear before the community corrections board and to investigate the feasibility of introducing teleconferencing or video link-ups for board meetings. I know that some civil libertarians will object to the restriction of a prisoner's right to a face-to-face meeting with community corrections boards. However, frankly, I do not care about the finer libertarian points of this issue when public safety is involved.

In a perfect world there would not be any need to introduce these restrictions, but this incident on Thursday night only proves again that we do not live in a perfect world. If prisoners are upset about the removal of this right and the new security procedures put in place, they can thank Christopher Damien Richards. The old procedures in place last week were based on trust and until last Thursday they had not presented a problem. Last Thursday that trust was breached and it will no longer be extended to other prisoners.
