



Speech by

Hon. TOM BARTON

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Female Prisoners

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (10.03 a.m.), by leave: I would like to clear up any confusion caused by a Sunday Mail story on the treatment of female offenders published last Sunday. Anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the justice system would know that Corrective Services have no say on the length of sentences offenders have to serve. If a court decides that a custodial sentence is required for an offence, then Corrective Services simply implements the court's order. This applies equally for men and women, and all prisoners start their sentence at a high-security classification. Depending on the severity of their sentence, their behaviour and a number of other factors, all prisoners then progressively move down through the security classifications.

The decisions on security classifications and graduated release are made by sentence management and the community corrections boards. As Minister, I do not have a say on how quickly prisoners move through the system. I had to explain this to the member for Caloundra when she asked me to reclassify a prisoner from the Sunshine Coast. It would be quite inappropriate for a politician to interfere with the sentence of a prisoner. This is what makes it so frustrating and hypocritical on the coalition's part in this whole argument on sentencing. We have, on the one hand, the member for Toowoomba South accusing us of trying to set up a different sentencing regime for female prisoners and, on the other hand, we have the member for Caloundra asking us to make an exception for a particular female prisoner.

Let me make it clear to the House what this particular Sunday Mail story was based on. And once members know the circumstances, they can get a full appreciation of the standard—or should I say lack of standard—of journalism that this story portrays. The story was not based on a typical interview with a journalist, nor was it particularly timely. This story was in fact based on comments I made during the Estimates hearings in reply to a question about the recently established Women's Policy Unit in my department—in fact, on 6 October 1999. The member for Toowoomba South was present and, I assume, paying attention when I made all the comments quoted in the paper. He did not raise any objections to my comments then, and that is understandable, because the comments were quite reasonable in the context of the whole answer I gave at the time. I seek leave to table, for the information of members, a transcript of my reply at the Estimates hearing.

Leave granted.

Mr BARTON: The transcript shows that I have established the Women's Policy Unit to research why the rate of imprisonment is three times higher for women in Queensland than it is for men. This is at a time when we already have record rates of imprisonment in Queensland. Another element of the unit's work is to develop rehabilitation programs for women, because the recidivism rate for women is higher. The review of corrections conducted last year showed that all of our rehabilitation programs have been developed for men and no modification has been made for female inmates. During the Estimates hearing, I also pointed out a well-documented fact: that when a family's principal care giver is imprisoned, it often leads to the disintegration of the family unit. In most cases, but not always, women are the principal care givers, and the effect of a prison sentence is often greater on these offenders.

I am sure all members would be concerned about the rapid growth in minor, non-violent and non-sexual offenders entering our prisons. The Beattie Government is implementing initiatives, such as

drug courts, a State Penalties Enforcement Register for fine defaulters, improved supervision of community service orders and drug diversion to keep minor offenders out of prison. These initiatives have been given the broad support of the Opposition, and we welcome that support.

Through the Government's task force on the growth in prisoner numbers, other initiatives are being developed to keep minor offenders out of jail. Part of their brief is to look at the problem on jail terms for the family's principal care giver, whether they are male or female, but this will only apply for minor offenders. If a person is a serious offender, they will be serving the court-awarded sentence regardless of their gender. The Sunday Mail story gave the totally incorrect impression that the Government intended to change how serious offenders would be sentenced or that there would be a different sentence regime for prisoners based on gender. I would like to make it absolutely clear that there is no proposal before the Government to lessen sentencing for serious offenders, nor is there any intention to change it. All prisoners will continue to be treated the same regardless of gender.
