



Speech by

Hon. T. McGRADY

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

Hansard 18 August 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
Woodford Correctional Centre

Hon. T. A. BARTON (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Police and Corrective Services) (10.02 a.m.), by leave: In 1995, the then Police and Corrective Services Minister, Paul Braddy, ordered that a special unit be incorporated in the design of the Woodford Correctional Centre. The idea behind this special unit was to manage those intractable prisoners who have either proven to be a threat to staff and other prisoners or were at high risk of escape. This unit was proposed to be the most secure unit in Queensland's prisons—in effect, it was to be a prison within a prison. The MSU was built but was never actually used by the Borbidge Government as a maximum security facility.

It was not until the Borbidge Government was put under pressure by the Labor Opposition following the mass escape of Brendon Abbott and associates that the MSU was finally used as it should have been from the beginning. The Borbidge Government had to be shamed into putting these violent, high-risk prisoners into the MSU—a place where they should have been to start with. The poor handling of the Corrective Services portfolio was one of the main reasons why the Borbidge Government was thrown out of office in 1998.

When some inmates of the MSU, with the assistance of the Prisoners Legal Service, took action against the Government over their treatment, the Queensland Corrective Services Commission, as it then was, assured me that the legislation allowed for these prisoners to be held in the MSU for long periods. But just to make sure that the treatment of these prisoners could not possibly be deemed as inappropriate and to make sure there were clear-cut guidelines in place, I decided to introduce legislation into the Parliament earlier this year setting out how the MSU should be run. I took this step to ensure that these prisoners—the worst and most dangerous prisoners that we have—stay where they should be. This Parliament fully endorsed this approach and passed the legislation unanimously.

Subsequently, last month, the Supreme Court found in favour of the prisoners and the Prisoners Legal Service. However, the legislative change effectively meant that this court action was a very hollow victory. Nothing has changed. These prisoners remain under the tightest security we can provide, and they will stay there until they can show to prison management that they can be trusted to the same extent as the general prison population. In fact, we are in the process of building two more MSUs—one at the Sir David Longland Correctional Centre and the other at the Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre.

By taking this legal action, the Prisoners Legal Service has performed a major disservice to the majority of its potential clients—those who are in the general prison population. I am sure that these prisoners do not want some of the MSU prisoners who have killed other inmates returned to the general prisoner population. The Prisoners Legal Service has defended its action as standing up for a principle of law and people's legal rights. The prisoners in the MSU did not take into account the niceties of the law when they were killing, maiming or robbing their victims.

I would like to also clear up an incorrect impression given when this issue came to a head last month. The MSU was continually referred to as some form of solitary confinement. This term gives the impression that these prisoners do not have any contact with the outside world. This is entirely untrue. Certainly, they are removed from the general prison population, but they are also allowed limited and closely monitored contact within the MSU. They are allowed visits from family, friends and legal representatives and, depending on the risk assessment of the individual prisoner, some of these visits

can be contact visits. They have the same cells and the same food as the mainstream prisoners, and they do have access to exercise areas. They do not have the same limited freedom of movement that some prisoners have within the prison, but then again, these prisoners forfeited these privileges when they murdered other prisoners, escaped from jail or attempted to escape.

The Beattie Labor Government will never resile from its responsibility to properly manage these prisoners. Until these prisoners can show that they are no longer a risk to staff and other prisoners or are no longer a risk of escape, they will be staying in the MSU.
