



Speech by

Mr BRUCE LAMING

MEMBER FOR MOOLOOLAH

Hansard 14 November 2000

CORRECTIVE SERVICES BILL

Mr LAMING (Mooloolah—LP) (12.32 a.m.): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak to the Corrective Services Bill. As the shadow Minister has already spoken, I do not need to go into the detail of the Bill as carefully as he did. I will be restricting my comments to some wide-ranging matters in relation to corrections.

Two or three members of the Public Works Committee are present in the House this evening. It is a very interesting committee, and many members have had the opportunity to serve on the committee over the years. As honourable members would know, the committee has opportunities to have inspections and hold inquiries on some very interesting subjects. The committee has had occasion to visit correctional centres at Stuart in Townsville and at Wolston. The men's and women's facility at Wolston prison are very new and compare favourably with some of the older facilities that we saw in Townsville.

Some people in the community believe that prisons these days are something like two or three-star motels. Whilst they might be clean and modern, when you hear the big door slamming behind you, even when on an inspection, it is a reminder that it is nothing like a motel. It is definitely a prison. It is not a place to be found in if a person has an alternative.

At the Wolston prison we inspected the women's facility. I was surprised at seeing the youth of some of the women prisoners. I think the average age of the prisoners was somewhere in the early twenties. I do not believe a woman can be admitted to the facility under the age of 18 years. A lot of the prisoners seemed to be between the ages of 18 and 30 years.

We moved further through the facility and found that a number of the inmates had babies and toddlers in the prison with them. These children remain with their mothers until they are of school age. That was of great concern to me personally. It is unfortunate that young mothers have to rear their children in prison. I suppose as the children grow older they will remember their early days when they were locked up in a prison.

I asked one of our escorts why so many young women were in prison, and I was advised that in many cases it was to do with drug-related crimes. This is a modern phenomenon. It is something that Australian and overseas Parliaments must address. A great percentage of men and women are in prison because of drug-related crimes.

Because the community looks at the justice system fairly closely, Governments look at it in the same light. We tend to concentrate on crime and punishment. We see the crime and we see the punishment, and we do not think about it any more because these people who have been convicted of serious and violent crimes disappear into correctional centres. We no longer think about them because we do not see them. The visible face of the problem is crime in the streets and police officers carrying out their duties.

Many of us quite often call for longer sentences, particularly in relation to serious and violent crimes. This leads to more people in prisons. It also means that we have to have more prisons. I believe the shadow Minister spoke of the cost of keeping people in prison.

I was going through some Public Works Committee records earlier this evening and saw the cost of building prisons. It is a huge cost because of the unique construction of prison facilities. It is a burden on the community to construct prisons and keep prisoners in them.

Where is the real problem? Is it simply that there is more violence in the community these days than there was years ago? Are more people affected by alcohol or drugs?

We have a particular problem with the ATSI community. When we visited Stuart prison at Townsville we noticed the percentage of ATSI prisoners there. ATSI people are very much over-represented in our prisons. A lot of thought has gone into this matter. Governments will need to continue looking very closely at this issue.

One wonders where these problems originate. Only last evening I was reading a newspaper clipping from 1884. It referred to when the British moved into New Guinea and claimed that area to stop it from becoming a German colony. The newspaper extract refers to a Commodore Erskine, who told the native chiefs that the land had been placed under the protection of the British Crown to ensure the rights of the natives against the evil influences of low-class whites. He went on to say, "Should bad men come amongst you bringing firearms and gunpowder and intoxicating liquors, you are not to buy them and are to give notice at once to the Queen's officers and such men may be punished." So in those days liquor was seen to be a problem in the community and something to be kept away from the people.

I dare say that, over a longer period, such has been the case with our Aboriginal community, who have been exposed to detribalisation, then boredom, frustration and alcohol. I think that has contributed greatly to the problem. So it was right up until 1958, when I made my first visit to Papua New Guinea, that the native peoples there were not allowed to have alcohol at all. They were not even allowed to handle it. When I went back there to work in the 1970s, alcohol was available to them. In that short space of time—a little over 10 years—I could see that it had had a tremendous effect on the community there. I am sure that if any of us went to New Guinea today, we would see that the disintegration of tribalism and frustration has led to those people being affected by alcohol. I do not know whether drugs are a problem in New Guinea; I suspect by now they are.

What we have seen happening in New Guinea in a short period of time—perhaps in a lifetime—is what has happened in Australia perhaps over three or four generations. Although nobody has been around long enough to see what has happened in Aboriginal communities over that time, we can see that it has certainly happened in a short time frame in Papua New Guinea. That gives us an opportunity to identify some of the problems—the frustrations, the anger, the alcohol, the violence—that lead to crime.

Once upon a time, the prisons were mainly populated with criminals. In this day and age—although obviously we still have criminals and they need to be in jail—there is an extra dimension to the prison population. They are not only members of the ATSI community; they are also young people. That is very sad. Those young people have also seen the deterioration of their own community in very much the same way as has occurred in the native communities in New Guinea and our Aboriginal community over a longer period in Australia. Young people have been dislocated from mainstream society. In many instances, that has occurred because of lack of work. They then experience frustration and a certain amount of anger, and that leads to the abuse of alcohol and drugs and antisocial behaviour.

It is very important to ensure that these matters are addressed. Rather than regarding prisons as places where these problems can be solved, we have to look at the problems that exist in communities before people find themselves before the court, before they find themselves in jail. People who commit acts of graffiti, road rage and lesser crimes of violence as well as those who commit more serious crimes of violence, such as violence directed towards their partners and children, quite often finish up committing drug-related crimes and, the saddest one of all, youth suicide or die in custody. Of course, deaths in custody are not restricted to the ATSI community; the European community, too, suffers this very sad outcome to a very unfortunate situation in the community.

I do not want to paint a grim picture. However, to be realistic, I believe that the best time to address the problems experienced by the prison population is before young people go to jail. Governments must be vigilant in job creation. I know that both sides of this House and both sides of all the other Houses of Parliament in Australia, including the Federal Parliament, talk about jobs and job creation. We all have to work harder in this area and think outside the square. I believe that there is plenty of work to be done in our communities. There are simply not enough jobs. We have to find ways to convert work that needs to be done into jobs for people, particularly young people.

I believe that work is the best form of welfare. I know that, in the ATSI community, the Community Jobs Program is working very well. The Aboriginal elders have a very high opinion of the benefit of this program. Similarly, there is the Work for the Dole program. Of course, it would be better if there were real jobs available in the private sector for these people. But while those jobs are not there, I believe that the Work for the Dole program is a very good program by which young people can lift their self-esteem and be able to re-enter, or enter, the work force. That program is much better than there being no work at all. We should be looking at programs such as those.

We should also be looking very strongly at the drug issue. I referred to that earlier. This problem must be tackled head-on. We must take a white-knuckled approach to it and impose the strongest possible penalties for those who deal in drugs and a firm rehabilitation program for users to give them as much support as possible to throw off that habit. We also must provide, wherever we can, support for families—for people whose children are addicted to drugs. Of course, not just families that are affected by drug addiction but all families should be given assistance with parenting. These days, a lot of the modern strains on life makes parenting a much more difficult job than it was in our parents' time. We have dislocated families, both in a geographic and a social sense. These issues deserve, need and must receive a lot of attention so that young people grow up without experiencing some of the problems that we have become used to seeing.

I should not neglect to mention policing. I think that the Minister would be surprised if I did not mention policing. It is very important that we have police on the ground. We live in a freer society in which people are able to access things that were not available to a lot of us when we were younger, such as nightclubs and hotels that are open all night. People get around a lot more. Therefore, it is necessary to have more police on the beat so that people—young people in particular—are picked up when they play up in the streets at night. The only way that we can do that is to have police on the beat.

I know that I say this a lot—and I know that a lot of us in this place say it a lot—but I think that we need to have more police on the beat so that they are seen, so that young people will be less likely to get into trouble. I will continue to keep calling for extra police right across Queensland. I do not think that we should just be looking at the police to population ratios in other States of Australia; I think that we should be looking at the need in Queensland. If that need indicates that we have to have 50% more police than the other States have, so be it. Police numbers is a very important issue.

I will continue calling for Queensland to have more police, particularly in my own area. It is an issue that I have raised on previous occasions and I will continue to raise in the future. Those are the things that we need to be looking at. I know that a number of amendments will be moved at the Committee stage, and that is good. I commend the work that is done by the officers in Corrective Services. It is a very difficult and a very tough job.

One of the things I noticed at Wolston was the workshops provided for both the men and women. It is always a balancing act to give jobs to people so that they can be involved in rehabilitation without those industries competing with industries outside the prison walls. That debate has been going on for years and years. However, I believe that there are answers to this. I believe the Government should be ensuring that the industries conducted inside prisons do not compete with industries outside them. A number of import replacement industries that are not occurring outside prison walls could be set up. I have had discussions with senior corrections officers in relation to this.

I turn now to the issue of prisoners changing their name whilst in prison. The prisoner Valmae Beck has changed her name. I do not think that should be allowed inside prisons, particularly with respect to violent and serious offenders. There is also the issue of prisoners lodging compensation claims for things that they claim happen to them while in prison. I am sure the Minister would agree with me that these sorts of things are simply not on. They are not there to have rights. They surrender a lot of their rights when they go into prisons, particularly those guilty of serious and violent crimes.
