



Speech by
**Mr DENVER
BEANLAND**

MEMBER FOR INDOORROOPILLY

Hansard 11 April 2000

PETFORD TRAINING FARM

Mr BEANLAND (Indoorroopilly—LP) (5.59 p.m.): I move—

"That this House calls on the Government to reinstate funding to Mr Geoff Guest and the Petford Training Farm for juveniles."

It is now more than 12 months since I first raised the issue of Petford and the plight of Mr Geoff Guest in this House. Unfortunately, over this period the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services has not shifted from her decision to withdraw support for Petford and the work of Mr Geoff Guest and his wife, Norma. Every time the word "Petford" has been mentioned in this place, the Minister has done nothing more than arrogantly smirk and grin and shake her head and launch into an attack on someone who has been described as one of Australia's natural treasures.

For over 20 years Mr Geoff Guest and his wife, Norma, have devoted their lives to helping young people, particularly young Aboriginals who have found themselves in trouble with the law. Unfortunately, the Minister cannot bring herself to acknowledge this commitment or to recognise the success of Petford's programs. Minister Bligh has failed to grasp the concept of Petford and has done everything within her power to besmirch the Guests and bring into question the integrity of their mission and the worthiness of their achievements, and their achievements are many.

However, the facts speak for themselves, and more than 2,000 people are the beneficiaries of the experience and training offered by Petford, the beneficiaries of what Cairns District Court judge Peter White described as the "one ray of light" for juvenile offenders growing up in communities where there is widespread personal violence and damage to property. It is also a fact that Mr Geoff Guest was the recipient of Rotary International's highest honour, the Paul Harris Fellowship, and an OAM for services to youth. Despite these achievements and endorsements, this Government and Minister Bligh are still committed to closing Petford and running Mr and Mrs Guest from their land.

In pursuing her various allegations and personal vendetta, the Minister has relied upon a questionable report prepared by Sydney consultant Mr Peter Daffen, which I have referred to on a number of occasions in this place previously. Mr Daffen was once the deputy director-general of the New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services and served alongside Mr Hans Heilpern, the man who Minister Bligh questionably appointed as assistant commissioner to the Forde inquiry. Perhaps it was this relationship that prompted the Forde inquiry to recommend the adoption of the Daffen report despite the fact that the commissioners found that "there was insufficient information to enable the inquiry to reach any clear view, and time and resources did not permit a fuller investigation."

The Minister will champion the Forde inquiry's recommendations for the justification of her stance in this matter, but I doubt that she will admit that it found Petford had nothing more than the hallmarks of a high-risk institution for the abuse of children. What, I ask, are the hallmarks of abuse? The Forde inquiry does not say. It does not offer any examples of abuse and was not able to substantiate any of the 40-odd complaints made by the Families Department against Petford. Mr Guest has been denied the right to defend himself to the Forde inquiry and by a Minister who, I understand,

has not even made the effort to visit Petford—certainly not the last time I checked—to see first-hand what it is all about. It is a classic example of Yes, Minister and textbook social work. The Minister is out of touch with community opinion and appears obsessed with ideology. Of concern, as I have said, it would appear that most, if not all, of the allegations made by the Minister and the Minister's department are without foundation or substance.

In my mind there is no question about Mr Guest's integrity. In fact, I share this view with the Labor members for Barron River, Cairns and Mulgrave, all of whom are on the public record as advocating support for what Mr Guest has been doing at Petford. I refer to an article in the Cairns Post on 8 March 1999 that said that Mr Pitt, Dr Clark and Ms Boyle hoped Mr Geoff Guest would be allowed to continue his work with troubled youth. In fact, Ms Boyle went on to say—

"There was no doubt Mr Guest's rehabilitation methods worked where other systems of rehabilitation failed."

That is not the most that this Labor trio has had to say on the matter. Mr Pitt has been an ardent advocate for Petford. Unlike the Minister, he has been prepared to admit Mr Guest's success and has gone on record with his support. What is wrong with that support? And what support it is! Just weeks after his re-election, the Tablelands Advocate carried an editorial praising the member for Mulgrave for his stand on Petford and supported him for shouldering full support for Mr Geoff Guest and his highly successful approach to rehabilitation of young offenders. The Cairns Post on 9 June 1999 carried more of Mr Pitt's shouldering and quoted him as saying that the Forde inquiry should not have made any recommendations on Petford's fate if it held insufficient information to make a judgment. The honourable member went on to claim—

"The Forde report did nothing to resolve the situation as far as alleged child abuse is concerned. They wasted time including it in the report. They basically just plagiarised someone else's report and rubber-stamped it ... The farm was a success ... It's a program worth preserving."

Those are strong words indeed and true words. That is why I am confident that the member for Barron River, the member for Mulgrave and the member for Cairns will support this motion tonight. It is time for Dr Clark, Ms Boyle and Mr Pitt to stand up to Minister Bligh and use their influence in the Labor Party to force some action on the future of Petford. If they do not, it will be a clear case of hypocrisy and political expediency. The people of Cairns will have a good reason to ask why there is a difference between what they do in this House and what they say in their electorates.

Time is running out for Mr Guest and for the community that so desperately wants to ensure that he is able to continue his work. The Minister has to drop this petty, ideological bias towards Mr Guest and reinstate funding for Petford. The members for Barron River, Cairns and Mulgrave must do everything they can to encourage the Minister to accept this view.

But we go on from that. In recent times, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy has also got into the act, trying to give a knock-out punch as far as the Petford issue is concerned. This can be described only as a vendetta. It would be a crippling blow to the Guests if this were to occur—to take their land from them. It would be a crippling blow following the cut-off of the funding last year for youth rehabilitation programs at Petford by Minister Bligh. The only decent thing, I believe, is to allow the Guests to live in peace by handing back the property they have called home for more than 30 years and where they have transformed the lives of thousands of young men and women who otherwise would have had no hope for a future beyond the downward spiral of crime, violence, and drug and alcohol addiction.

The Guests gave the Queensland Government the land on the basis that, when they were gone, it could continue to be used as a youth camp. Now the Government no longer supports the venture. A native title claim is being proffered as a feeble excuse to force the Guests off their land. A native title claim over land has been lodged, but so have dozens of others across this State. Until such time as there is a determination, there is no justification whatsoever for kicking people off their land. If in future a determination is achieved, provisions exist within the native title legislation for courts to assess the cost of loss suffered by the successful claimant. There are mechanisms in place whereby compensation can be paid by the State and Commonwealth Governments on a 25/75 basis, and I am sure we are all aware of that. To suggest otherwise is a cop-out by political representatives without the stomach to challenge public servants intent on furthering their own agenda by eliminating any program that does not conform with the departmental handbook.

The single-minded determination of this Queensland Government to see the Guests destroyed is difficult to fathom, as is the willingness of two Cabinet Ministers to condone such treatment. I assume that these people have never made an effort to meet Mr Guest and visit Petford. One needs only to spend some time with the young adults who readily acknowledge the Guests as having made a significant impact on their lives to gain some understanding of the successful outcomes. I believe that

Mr Guest is unconditionally a truly Australian icon. His contribution to society should be the subject of plaudits and praise; instead, his name and reputation have been tarnished.

Geoff and Norma are now both in their seventies. They have spent a lifetime helping thousands of troubled youth in this State with a particular focus on Aboriginal children who have slipped through the net—

Time expired.
