



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

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DRUG REHABILITATION [COURT DIVERSION] BILL

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (3.27 p.m.): It is a pleasure to rise to support the Drug Rehabilitation (Court Diversion) Bill. This legislation is a very important development in this Government's strategy to address not only crime but also its causes. In that sense, it is a very important move because it recognises one of the fundamental elements of this particular form of crime: people commit drug-related crimes due to a combination of an illness—a sickness—and criminality. Some people become involved in a very unfortunate addiction to drugs and then enter a cycle which leads them to various other forms of criminality, especially property crime. Indeed, the main focus of this legislation is property-related crime rather than more serious assault or sexual offences.

This is a very important issue for the community. The community is now very conscious of this cycle. Through Neighbourhood Watch schemes and the various citizens groups in our communities, people are conscious that a very stark connection exists between the property crimes affecting our citizens and the illness that is drug addiction. Drug addicts find themselves trapped in this very unfortunate spiral.

This legislation is about breaking the cycle. We must go much further afield in our attempts to break the cycle. I commend the very good work of the Minister for Police and Corrective Services in his efforts to try to break the cycle in our prisons. We must ensure that we sever the connection between criminality and drug addiction. We have situations where people with a drug habit are sent to prison. These people run up an expense account while they are in prison in order to feed their habit. They are released from prison and they commit further crimes in order to pay off the debt which they have incurred. This is a cycle which must be severed. The drug court will have a large part to play in breaking the cycle.

The drug problem has caused an enormous amount of frustration in the community. We are almost helpless when it comes to dealing with this growing problem. The problem is almost overwhelming. Members of this Parliament find ourselves frustrated and shaking our heads when we look at the drug problem. Yesterday, I was advised by the Minister for Health that there has been a 30% per annum increase in the use of disposable syringes. It is expected that these figures will continue to increase.

We wonder what we are missing. Is there something that we need to do that we have missed? In this Parliament we have often debated the prospect of increasing penalties, but one wonders whether such action would be effective. We look at what is occurring in other countries, we do our research and we end up becoming increasingly frustrated.

The community frustration is boiling over into palpable anger because of the way in which drug users are treating our local communities. The people of my electorate have asked me to express that anger in this place because they are sick and tired of going to their local parks and having to tell their children to be careful about walking on syringes. I have spoken to many parents, including people involved with the P & C, and my constituents have had enough of this problem. We must try to get the message through to drug users that we have had enough of this. This problem is affecting our personal lives and the lives of our children. I know there has been some debate about retractable syringes, but it is time that society as a whole took stock of what is a horrid blight on our community.

We live in fear that our children will go to the park and stub their toes on a syringe. It is not sufficient for us to be informed that no-one has contracted a disease as a result of such contact with a syringe. That is not going to satisfy the parents in my electorate. I do not want my daughter to be the first person to be injured in this way. We want to be able to walk in the park with our kids and feel confident about our safety.

This is a matter for our whole society. We must start turning our attention to this voracious problem. It is something that has occurred in our own generation; it was not evident when we were children. The problem is increasing at an unnerving rate.

We must adopt a bipartisan approach to solving this problem. The whole community must become involved. Treatment and care are important aspects with regard to handling this problem. We must treat the people who have already entered the cycle, and we must also care for people who may be about to enter the cycle. The reason why people enter the cycle can often be traced to one particular cause, and that is alienation. We find that kids are not able to find work. They are not able to find a meaning in their lives. They do not appear to have a spiritual essence in their lives. We must re-focus on the problems that are arising in the community.

I welcome the debate that will be taking place tonight in relation to the issue of retractable syringes. This question is symbolic of the need to adopt a bipartisan approach. I call upon the Health Minister to keep an open mind with regard to this issue and to adopt an open approach. We must ensure that all options are canvassed. We must work with communities in Australia and in other areas of the world in an attempt to find a technical solution to this problem. Unfortunately, it is still part of the sickness. Ultimately we must go back to the fundamental cause of this problem which, as I said, is alienation.

I recently inspected the Parramatta drug court with my colleagues and the Honourable the Attorney-General, Matt Foley. This was a valuable experience which allowed us to see how important this legislation will be for Queensland. One of the most important things we discovered was that criminality is intertwined with sickness. These matters were dealt with in a cohesive team approach. We were informed by the judge that part of the process involved court conferences where the relevant authorities and experts were able to deal with each case individually.

It was a process that fell slightly outside what might be expected in the normal formal interlocutory and court processes. However, in this case, in which the intention is to provide assistance, a cure and rehabilitation, the need for a recognition of legal precision and complexities was not necessarily the order of the day. It is focused very much on assisting these people to go through the processes.

The next revelation for us was our ability to stand in front of the court and converse directly with the clients on that day. After speaking to those people individually and asking them what was important about the treatment that they were receiving through that court, what were they getting out of it and why it was successful, two main themes emerged. Firstly, the people said that they received an awareness of the repercussions of their actions. I think that is a very salient point, because people going through rehabilitation from serious drug dependency, especially opiate-based drug dependency, have a very long road to travel. It is a road that is marked by people who have lost their way, fallen by the wayside and returned to their addiction. If people develop an awareness of the repercussions of their actions, they then know that if they start taking any banned substances, that will show up very quickly in their urine tests. If they go off the rails the full extent of their sentence—whether that be two, three or more years—will be reinstated and they will be back in prison and on a very different track altogether.

The repercussions of the actions of these people are also very direct and immediate in that drug court, because they can see that they are supported. All of the way through that process there is positive reinforcement. People are able to see through the success of their fellow clients that, if they do well, they can stitch their lives back together—they can have a job, or they can end up employing people.

It was very interesting to watch those people who were successfully undergoing the process day by day, week by week becoming models for the people who were struggling to go through the process. It was also very interesting to see, albeit unfortunately for those people who were falling off just a little bit from that process, that they would leave via the side door of the court, perhaps with the penalty of staying back until 10 o'clock at night in the watch-house, or leaving court to be imprisoned for two or three days. They were very, very immediate repercussions. The repercussions also extended to those who received less forceful penalties. For example, we saw one client who was required to come into the court to read out an essay about the value of that court and the direction in which they were trying to take in their rehabilitation. So that flexibility, that sensitivity, to an individual's particular condition was certainly apparent in that the clients were aware of the repercussions of their actions.

The second theme that emerged was the support that the clients received from the drug court. Given that, basically, those people would receive the same sort of rehabilitation from a rehabilitation program outside the court process, it was interesting to note that that support came from the court itself. That was very apparent in the very caring attitude of the judge at that court and the support provided by the entire court process—the staff and the experts who were marshalled within that court. Although there was a very caring and supporting atmosphere, it was very much a two-edged sword: on the one side, very positive and caring but, on other side, the blade of justice hung very sharply and very near to those people going through that court process.

The drug court is a very valuable, new venture for Queensland. Because it is such a radically different court, it will be difficult for it to settle down. It will require a great deal of cooperation between the various agencies and a new outlook towards supporting these drug-addicted people. It will also require everybody in the community to recognise the value of this drug rehabilitation court as a new step in trying to break the drug-dependency cycle. I call upon the members in this Parliament and people in the community to come together in a bipartisan way and support this court.

The media might wish to sensationalise some innovative aspects of this court, such as giving these kids a ticket to the football if they do really well. People in the community might regard that as something to be sensationalised. However, that is a creative move in terms of being positive and giving these kids a reward for getting through the process. People should not sensationalise the drug court. Instead, as a community, we should adopt a cooperative approach and support it.

I hope that we can adopt the same approach in relation to matters such as reusable needles. It is an important issue to all of us; it is a problem for the whole community and, I hope, one upon which we can adopt a bipartisan and community-wide approach.
