



Speech by

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DRUG REHABILITATION [COURT DIVERSION] BILL

Mr WILSON (Ferny Grove—ALP) (4.19 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise to speak this afternoon in support of the Drug Rehabilitation (Court Diversion) Bill 1999. As any member of this House would know from visiting their Neighbourhood Watch committees throughout their electorates, the Neighbourhood Watch system is a good vehicle by which to get a very clear insight into the concerns of people within the local community about community safety, policing matters and in particular, and in a growing way, the concern of the local community about the impact of drugs—not just illicit drugs but drug misuse generally. The Neighbourhood Watch system is a wonderful initiative. We need to do everything we can to build it up.

This Bill is a classic example of a well thought out initiative to try to find imaginative ways of addressing one part of a very complex problem, that is, the drug culture and the impact of drugs within our community. The Bill provides for the conduct of a pilot program in selected Magistrates Courts—Southport, Ipswich and Beenleigh—where drug dependent offenders will be diverted from imprisonment to treatment by ordering the person to attend for assessment, planning a treatment program and making an intensive drug rehabilitation order.

The rehabilitation option will not be a soft option. That is to be underlined. Eligibility for entry into the program will be restricted to offenders who satisfy the following criteria: they are adults, they are dependent on illicit drugs, they are charged with an offence which does not involve physical violence or sexual violence against any person, they have no offences involving physical violence or sexual assault pending before a court anywhere, they plead guilty to the offence, they are genuinely facing a sentence of imprisonment and they are willing to participate in the drug rehabilitation pilot program. The court will also be required to consider whether the dependency was a major contributing cause or factor in the offending behaviour which has brought the offender before the courts. Imprisonment will be suspended for the duration of the order and the sentence will be reviewed if the treatment program is terminated.

When the Beattie Labor Government was elected, we said that we would be tough not only on crime but also on the causes of crime. The drug rehabilitation program is proof of the Government delivering on its promise in this area. The legislation does not just meet the needs of drug addicted offenders; it helps address the concerns of victims of house breaks, car theft and other crimes committed to feed the hunger for more drugs.

As a previous member of this House said this afternoon, so many of the crimes committed in our communities are property related offences. So many of those offences are associated with the drug scene in that addicts need to obtain large amounts of ready cash to help them continue to meet their drug addiction. This program also addresses the concerns of ordinary Queenslanders such as the parents of drug addicted offenders who deserve more than just lip-service to this major and complex issue in our community. If this trial can save the life of just one of their sons or daughters, they will call it a success.

I said earlier that the issue of drugs in our community is of great concern to virtually every person one comes across—and not just at high schools but also at primary schools—parents at schools when they discuss this issue at P & C meetings, members of the community who talk about finding syringes in their gardens when gardening on the weekend and people mentioning the

neighbour who has so many frequent visitors on a Thursday night, perhaps up to 30 cars in the space of several hours. Those visitors happen to visit for only an amazingly short time of 5 or 10 minutes, so popular is this venue. Also, police talk about difficulties in apprehending dealers, and people in the community talk about the problem of syringes left lying in parks and the local vandalism that seems to go hand in hand with the drug culture.

Overall, there is a growing, heightened level of general community frustration and anger about the insidious, corrosive impact of drugs, particularly on young people in our society. Those who are vulnerable to the influences of older people are drawn into the vortex of the drug culture for a whole range of reasons relating to the pressures on young people in today's day and age. In my local community there have been a number of meetings in the last 18 months or so—there are going to be more in the future—trying to raise people's awareness in relation to the indicators of drug use in an attempt to discover if their own children are involved in the drug scene. There was an excellent meeting about 12 months ago at the Ferny Grove Bowls Club. It was very sobering to hear people stand up and say from their own experience how they did not know or it was too late before they discovered that their son or daughter was addicted to heroin or involved in other drug taking. There have been meetings at other places as well.

I go back to a point I made at the beginning of my contribution on this debate—that is, this is a multi-faceted problem. What distresses and disappoints me is that often the public debate around this issue is by people who have a somewhat closed mind who are so terribly convinced by their own particular view of a single solution to what is a complex problem with many parts. It is very difficult to have a sensible, moderate, non-alarmist debate in the community about how to address this problem. Some time ago I attended the first commemorative service on the Gold Coast—from recollection, it was on behalf of the Premier—conducted by a group of people wanting to commemorate the deaths that occur each year as a result of heroin or other hard drug addiction.

No-one attending that ceremony could walk away unaffected by the grief that these parents experience or by the gravity of the drug problem in our community. If that awareness was more widely shared throughout the community, maybe those people we hear on talkback radio or the journalists whose stories we read in the newspapers—who so readily and, in my view, glibly promote a single-view approach to solving the drug problem—would be a bit more circumspect and accept that this is a multi-faceted problem. We need to save the lives of those who are already addicted, and the solution to that aspect of the problem may have nothing to do with what we do to make sure that young people, particularly junior high school and senior primary school kids, are aware of the dangers of drugs.

Another part of the problem is attacking the dealers, particularly the economic gains made by them. Yet another part of the problem is addressing the transmission of diseases that takes place through the sharing of needles. The solution to that problem may require a different attitude and approach from that adopted when addressing the problem of saving the lives of those already addicted. As I have said, another vitally important area is raising the awareness of young people and their parents of the consequences of drug misuse. Beyond even all of those things, as this Government has always said in its approach to crime generally and in particular to drug-related crime, we must attack not only the crime itself but also its causes, which leads us into our policies addressing job creation, skilling and training, continuous education and assisting the unemployed in whatever way we can.

I think this is a brilliant initiative of the Government, and I am delighted that it is receiving bipartisan support. Admittedly, it is a pilot, but it is at least an initiative that we are going to experiment with. If we discover that a need exists for changes to the initiative then, on review, we should seriously consider adopting the changes necessary to make sure that the core and the essence of this initiative is continued in some way. I am looking forward to the success of the pilot, and I am also looking forward, beyond that time, to this program perhaps being made available for juvenile offenders, because a new generation of drug-dependent people is being raised every day.

I recall some statistics that I came across late last year. Recent Australian surveys show high rates of drug use, particularly among 20 to 29-year-old people. A 1996 survey of Queensland school students reported that between 10% and 12% of Year 7 students had sniffed intoxicants in the week prior to the survey being conducted. Given that the number of young people aged between 15 and 24 years living in the north-western suburbs—some of which fall within my electorate—is noticeably higher than the Brisbane average, those figures concerned me. I am pleased to say that throughout the north-western suburbs there are a range of organisations, both Government and non-Government, but especially in the non-Government sector, which have been willing to come together in the last 12 months to develop local strategies to try to provide local community solutions to the problems being experienced by young people, in particular those related to the drug culture and drug addiction.

A youth forum convened last year through the Hills District PCYC, the Piccabeen Community Centre at Mitchelton, the Ferny Grove State High School, the Mitchelton State High School and myself saw over 95 people—mainly local people—in attendance, representing 50 local government and non-Government agencies in some way working with youth. I was delighted that the Minister for Families

was able to attend that youth forum and be the guest speaker. Out of that forum came a range of initiatives. It considered the mental and emotional health of young people, their exposure to drug and alcohol addiction and also cultural and sexual identity issues. An interim report has been circulated, and local community groups, together with a steering committee, are working on local initiatives to try to progress positive activities that will help us address the problems of young people whom we describe as on the edge. In fact, the forum was named the On the Edge project, and we hope it will continue with some success.

One practical initiative to come from the forum is a community service directory which will be made available to teachers, police and youth workers in the local area. It will help them guide young people whom they come across who need to be connected with both Government and non-Government support agencies to assist them with the social and economic crises that are happening in their lives, including the problems of attraction to the drug culture and drug addiction. It happens fortuitously that a Department of Health initiative on the north side of Brisbane was already working on producing such a community services directory for the support of young people, and it is that directory which we are now making available to local teachers, primary and high schools, and police.

The local community has in other ways taken the initiative in raising the awareness of people to the drug problem. A group has been established called the Samford Drug Awareness Group, which will conduct two seminars in a couple of months' time in the Samford Valley, one directed towards parents and the other directed towards young people. Following up on that initiative, the chaplain at the Ferny Grove State High School who is involved in that initiative has indicated that he is happy to work with me and others to set up a similar exercise for Ferny Grove and Ferny Hills. That awareness program stems from a similar program run at The Gap State High School late last year, which was highly commended by the Ferny Grove police division.

We are trying to link together other initiatives in the area. There is the SWAG initiative of Education Queensland at Mitchelton State High School. Students With a Goal is the full name of the program. It works with young kids who need a different approach to education and the crisis issues they are facing in their lives. On the initiative of Inspector Ross Gorrie of the Ferny Grove police division and Senior Sergeant Don Amos of the Juvenile Aid Bureau, a youth coordinator has been appointed to the Hills PCYC to work with young people. This year we are commencing the construction and opening of the North Point TAFE annexe at the Ferny Grove tramway museum to train young people in electrical and mechanical skills for the Brisbane Light Rail project. Many other initiatives are also taking place.

This Government has been and will continue to be tough on crime itself, and it will be even tougher on the causes of crime, not just at a Statewide level but also at the grassroots level in our local communities. We have been working and will continue to work with people and organisations who already have a proven commitment to working in this area, many of whom, I might add and emphasise, are volunteers who give freely of their time and money to work with young people in need.

As I said earlier, I am delighted to be able to support this initiative. In the next six months I look forward to this Government bringing forth further initiatives to help us attack the whole issue of community safety and the drug industry and culture in our communities.
