



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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CORRECTIVE SERVICES BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (12.56 a.m.): I intended to say a fair bit on this Bill but, given the late hour and given that many of the points I wanted to raise have already been raised, I will concentrate my speech on Mareeba and Lotus Glen, a very large prison facility inside my electorate. I wish to address in particular the relationship of the prison with Mareeba and the watch-house there.

Important points raised included the strip searching of prisoners, being able to hold prisoners for four hours and so on. Anyone who knows Mareeba would know its position relative to Lotus Glen. I have raised this issue with the Minister. On a Sunday afternoon in Mareeba there is only one police crew on duty, if we are lucky. That means one car with two guys in it and one guy in the control room. For example, that crew could be attending a fatal traffic accident for an indefinite time, especially if a car has gone down a creek bed or there is a fatal accident on the Barron River. When an incident of that nature occurs no police are available in Mareeba to respond to a strip search.

That needs to be addressed in one of two ways: either by increasing the police manning levels at Mareeba to cover this eventuality at Lotus Glen or by changing the Bill so that that does not apply to Lotus Glen—and I do not think that would be workable in the long run. I ask the Minister to look at this very important issue of police response times to calls from Lotus Glen. The police there are incredibly efficient and do a very good job. They have my full support. But getting out to Lotus Glen is a very difficult proposition for them if they are tied up on jobs in Mareeba. Police emergencies have to come first at all times. They have to be able to provide a service to the people of Mareeba and surrounding areas. We also have to take into consideration the fact that the Mareeba police cover a huge area. The Mareeba police district is bigger than the City of Brisbane; it is probably bigger than south-eastern Queensland. There are only a few police covering a large area that has within it a prison with maximum security areas. This is a very important point and I sincerely ask the Minister to address this in his summing-up. The Mareeba police in particular have asked me to raise this.

The other point is that the Mareeba watch-house is a substandard facility. The Minister knows this. It has been raised with him by the Police Union and by the policemen at Mareeba on numerous occasions. The Minister knows that the watch-house at Mareeba is incredibly substandard. As far as the union and I are concerned, it does not meet any of today's standards for a watch-house. I know the Minister is aware of this. He said that the Government is going to fix it. I know the police up there are still waiting. The watch-house is substandard. A watch-house that has a workload the size of that at Mareeba watch-house, which is in close proximity to a courthouse, needs to be repaired. The police are working in dangerous conditions and prisoners are being held in dangerous conditions. This is not suitable at all, especially given the notion in this Bill that prisoners could be held in that watch-house for a longer period than is now the case. Given the current condition of the watch-house, that is totally unacceptable. That is a message that needs to be hammered home today. I sincerely ask that the Minister give us some sort of time frame for the completion of that work.

An honourable member interjected.

Mr NELSON: Exactly, especially in light of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Mareeba watch-house has a high turnover of Aboriginal inmates. That watch-house has had problems in the past. I know that the Minister is aware of this, but I am just making it quite clear—

Mr Barton: Funding is an issue.

Mr NELSON: As I said, we have been waiting for quite some time. Given that we are in an election year and all that sort of stuff, that is one issue that I know will become very important in Mareeba for the next year.

Mr Veivers: Next year's the election year.

Mr NELSON: The honourable member knows what I mean. How long does he want me to talk for? Five minutes or 10 minutes? The other thing is use of force.

Mr Veivers: Are you sure about that? You said "this year".

Mr NELSON: I said "next year". The honourable members are just wasting time.

The next point I want to make is on the concept of being able to search prisoners. It has always amazed me that we can have a drug problem in a prison, which is a controlled facility. If we really wanted to stamp out drugs in prisons and if we really wanted to make sure that none of these dangerous articles could get to prisoners, we would have the same sorts of things that are in place in some of the really high security prisons in the United States and in the UK, where people cannot have contact with prisoners unless they have been strip searched. This is the validation: a prisoner with a known history of drug use who mixes with people who are drug offenders and who then receives visitations in prison should have some sort of watch put on him. He is a prime candidate to be handed drugs while he is in prison, especially if he is willing, if he has the means outside of prison to be able to pay for those drugs and if he has an ability through close visitation to have those drugs handed to him in prison. That is an issue that has often been brought up with me. I cannot understand how we can have a controlled facility such as a prison with drug problems.

Many of the guards at Lotus Glen are quite amazed at some of the contact visits that are allowed between prisoners who are known drug offenders, who have contacts on the outside and who can easily be passed drugs in that situation. There needs to be some sort of change in policy on that issue in general, because drugs in prisons should be totally unacceptable. There cannot be rehabilitation while prisoners still have access to hard-core drugs. It is impossible. It cannot be done, no matter what sort of slant is put on it. That area is one that really needs to be tightened up.

I refer to the use of force. Honourable members have to understand that in some of these prisons, especially in the case of repeat offenders, people who have been in jail two or three times and people who know they are going to be staying in jail for quite some time, the prisoners have nothing to lose by flogging a guard. Basically, if at the end of the week they are pent up or have a lot of frustration, it provides a bit of excitement for them to give the guard a flogging. I have been told this by the security guards at Lotus Glen. We really need that safety factor. We really need to be able to use force to control some of these people.

Unfortunately—and I do not want to get into the background of this—these people sometimes come from a culture of violence. The only thing they understand is the reciprocal use of force to put them back in their place. Parts of this Bill that I have read are very good, because they clear up a lot of issues, especially in relation to the use of deadly force in escapes. Again, sometimes the only deterrent a prisoner has when he is heading for the wire is the guy in the watchtower with a rifle. I have heard of some escapes in which prisoners have actually got to the point where they can escape, but the last thing that stops them is the guards in the watchtowers with rifles. Even if it is only a deterrent, it is an effective one; in some cases it keeps prisoners in jail.

As I said, I did not know we were going to be debating this Bill at 1 o'clock in the morning. I do have a prison in my electorate. It is a huge issue in my electorate, especially given the types of prisoners who are held at Lotus Glen.

The last issue I want to raise is one that was raised with me. I have written to the Minister about it, and I am still waiting for a reply. That is the issue of the response group at Lotus Glen. I have been told by people at the prison that they have lost their pagers. As I said at the outset, Mareeba and Lotus Glen are a fair distance apart. Anyone who has been up there will know that. The response time for the emergency response unit to Lotus Glen is determined by their access to pagers. I have written to the Minister about this issue. He knows full well what I am talking about. I implore the Minister to abandon this very small cost-saving measure and return these pagers to the officers to make sure that these people can be paged on call. In the long run that will provide a higher level of safety not only for the prison and the prisoners who are held there but also for the guards, their families and, in the long run, the people of north Queensland.

On the very first page of the Minister's second-reading speech, he clearly states—

"I have also toughened security provisions in our centres, and we have not had an escape from one of our secure custodial facilities since the Beattie Government assumed power in June 1998."

Given the recent escape in Mareeba, that is no longer true. I cannot hold the Minister to that statement now because, again, he made that and we have the power of hindsight. But a prisoner did escape from Lotus Glen and that is a shame, because Lotus Glen has a good record of being able to hold its prisoners.

Mr Nuttall: Didn't he escape from a prison farm?

Mr NELSON: No, I am pretty sure that he escaped from inside the secure part, not the prison farm. I will stand corrected if that is not true. I hope it is not true. This happened only recently. I am going on the information I have.

Mr Nuttall: You'll stand corrected.

Mr NELSON: I will stand corrected if I am not correct. The point of the matter is that no escape is good. As many of the guards out there have said, if you cut back on any sort of current funding to the prison, you are cutting back on the minimum standards that that prison needs. As far as the prison guards there are concerned, Lotus Glen is running on minimum capacity. Any cut to that is cutting into the bare minimum which Lotus Glen needs to operate. That statement is from people who have been there for 20 to 25 years. They know what they are talking about. They have been dealing with this issue a lot longer than we have.

Having said that and having raised those important points, I do hope that the Minister canvasses especially the subject of the police at Mareeba having to conduct strip searches at Lotus Glen, which will take them out of their police division, take them off the streets of Mareeba and take them away from their primary role, which is protecting the citizens of Mareeba from crime within Mareeba. I hope that the Minister addresses that issue, because that is an issue that has been put to me by the police officers themselves.
