



Speech by

WARREN PITT

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard 11 April 2000

PETFORD TRAINING FARM

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (6.39 p.m.): Tonight, I rise in this debate to support the commitment of Geoff Guest, his wife, Norma, and the work that they have done on behalf of young people at risk of consigning themselves to a lifetime of crime.

The mover of the motion before the House, the member for Indooroopilly, is guilty of gross hypocrisy. On the issue of funding, the hands of his colleagues, State and Federal, are far from clean. His interest in this matter is merely one of political expediency. His pious and sanctimonious behaviour is shameful and an affront to those who genuinely support Geoff Guest. He has no credibility regarding the issue and deserves none.

Let me say quite categorically that I support the existence of a training facility in far-north Queensland that can cater for that section of the juvenile justice spectrum that has slipped through the cracks. Equally, I support preventive measures that deflect at-risk youngsters from antisocial and criminal behaviour.

The issues surrounding the Petford Training Farm are complex and emotive. On the one hand, we have Geoff Guest, whose work has received widespread acclaim. The vast majority of former Petford clients view him with a degree of reverence not usually accorded to individuals in their own lifetime. His methods are a mixture of compassion and strict regimen. The facilities at Petford are spartan and the onus on his charges is to take responsibility for their own actions. Geoff Guest's supporters are not the lunatic fringe of our society who solve all antisocial problems by promoting the return of the lash. They include thousands of ordinary citizens, including teachers, police, the judiciary, medical professionals, university professors—the list goes on. The support for the work of Geoff Guest in far-north Queensland is strong because people are convinced that his methods are producing positive results.

On the other hand, we have the detractors, not the least of whom are members of the former board. In my view, the former board must take responsibility in large part for the Minister's earlier decision to withdraw funding for the facility. There is ample evidence of nepotism, financial mismanagement and general administrative incompetence. On these grounds alone, the Minister was compelled to consider the suspension of funding.

There is a long history of negativity in regard to Petford by some who cannot tolerate approaches to juvenile justice that fall outside the square. There are those who have frustrated the work at Petford at every turn because the work being done by Geoff Guest does not fit the textbook models that they seem to hold so dear.

I refer now to the allegations of physical and sexual abuse as well as those of criminal activity on the part of clients of the facility. I have every faith in the integrity and propriety of Geoff Guest. I ask these questions: what credibility is to be placed upon the accusations of disgruntled staff and a minority of troubled clients? Who would expect choirboy behaviour from hardened individuals at the tail end of the juvenile justice system? Why, when allegations were made, did they not result in prosecution? Should the same strict standards of accountability apply to Government-run institutions?

There is a need to closely examine the Daffen report upon which the Minister has relied heavily in reaching a decision. Without wishing to denigrate the professionalism of the author, it would appear

that he has given extraordinary weight to the Department of Family Services document, the accuracy of which must be seriously questioned. No serious attempt was made to interview significant numbers of former Petford clients to provide balance to his inquiries. I am sceptical of the foundations upon which Mr Daffen arrived at his conclusions. Similarly, the Forde report merely rubber-stamped the earlier report. By admission, no investigation was carried out.

I wish to place on record the following: I do not believe the interests of troubled youth in far-north Queensland will be best served by the loss of a Petford-style facility which caters for those that the system has failed. The Minister's offer of retaining allocated funding in the region and directing it towards early intervention is welcome. I support community moves to fund a program designed to change the behaviour of individuals at the eleventh hour like Petford did. I support a community-supported training farm in far-north Queensland if issues such as financial accountability and the safety and wellbeing of clients can be reasonably guaranteed.

I also call upon the Federal member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, and Senator John Herron to honour commitments that they have made for funding. On more than one occasion this commitment has been repeated. When tenure arrangements for Geoff Guest have been finalised, there will be no excuse for further delay on this matter.

I cannot support the motion moved by the Opposition. It is an insincere attempt to gain cheap political mileage. Unlike the member for Indooroopilly, my commitment to Geoff and Norma is one of 10 years' standing, not one of political convenience—a Johnny-come-lately. I will support the amendment with reservations.
