



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 31 July 2001

DETENTION CENTRES

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (12.11 p.m.): With the current consideration of locating a detention centre in Queensland, I seek leave to table a document from the Western Australian hearings which contains recommendations for councils to consider when applying for such a centre into their communities.

Leave granted.

Mrs PRATT: In 1994 the government of the day incorporated the UN charter on refugees into the Migration Act 1958. From that date illegal immigrants would be termed asylum seekers and non-citizen detainees when admitted to the detention centres. At that time these asylum seekers had rights to medical and legal services and other benefits which were often not shared by tax-paying Australian citizens. Though many asylum seekers were genuine refugees seeking asylum in Australia, it is significant that adjacent countries affiliated with their culture and religion did not accept them.

The move for asylum in Australia has become a commercial transaction. Following the introduction of economic rationalist policies by the government, the Australian Protective Service was relieved of its functions in management of detention centres. The contract was given to the Australasian Correctional Management corporation, a subsidiary of the transnational Wackenhut International Security. ACM had already entered the privatised prison arena with Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre in Queensland, Junee in New South Wales and Fulham in Victoria.

On assuming management of the detention centres, there were new waves of asylum seekers, and they continue to come. The Middle East and the Far East became the sources of refugees, including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, in addition to numbers of European visa overstayers. Extra detention centre venues were established and included Villawood, Marybinong, Woomera, Port Hedland, Perth and Curtin. These venues were established already and not purpose built as detention centres.

ACM's aim is profit. Thus basic training for detention centres was primarily correctional custodial with a demanded recognition by officers that detainees were asylum seekers or non-citizen detainees and not criminals. The company therefore had to follow this position in its liaison with the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. At this time there were three groups of stakeholders involved: governments and their agents ACM; non-citizen detainees; and line staff employed as detention officers subject to legislation and company directors under government policy. While the government was carrying out investigations on each asylum seeker to evaluate their status of acceptability as genuine refugees, the numbers were increasing and delays in processing inevitable. The huge costs of the legal appeal services of the detainees often exceeded \$1 million per person.

The serious riots at Woomera, the break-outs into the town areas and the last-option use of chemical agents, water cannon and similar break-outs, riots, arson and assaults have reached the point where a new, fair, firm and controlled regime is necessary to ensure the safety of the officers, the safety of the detainees and good harmony and order. To date, officer safety has been disregarded by failure to supply adequate defensive use-of-force policies and procedures and inadequate disturbance control unit training for line staff, team leaders and unit commanders. In addition, the failure to supply adequate protective equipment—now the subject of litigation—is a breach of the Workplace Health and Safety Act. The lack of direction and support for officers at times of crisis can be and is being tabulated and shows up clearly in videos of various riots and disturbances.

No-one would deny genuine refugee access to all that Australia has to offer, including hospitality, health services and a very warm welcome. However, councils do need to be aware of the concerns about established detention centres in order to ensure that they fully understand and can implement necessary measures to meet all possible problems. There are more people involved in this contentious issue than just the detainees. There are the people who work there and run the centres. They, too, deserve to be considered in any new detention centres in Queensland.
