



Speech by

JOHN ENGLISH

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

Hansard 7 November 2001

CORRECTIVE SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL [No. 2]

Mr ENGLISH (Redlands—ALP) (5.46 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Corrective Services Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2001. I would like to begin by complimenting Minister McGrady for his handling of the Corrective Services portfolio. We recognise that it is a quite difficult portfolio, and the minister has handled it with style and grace. This minister is a reforming minister. He has improved access to our corrective services.

In the dark old days of Joh, the state government and government departments were not accountable—not open. This minister has reformed the corrective services area by allowing unprecedented access to corrective centres. He has provided increased levels of accountability by the media into what was traditionally a closed and secretive world. As the member for Callide stated, reports of escapes now are released in media briefings and press releases. They are not leaked secretly to members of the opposition. We are a very public and accountable government, and this is exemplified by Minister McGrady letting the public of Queensland know when there are problems within the system and that there are people escaping and absconding. No system is perfect, and that is to be recognised. But Minister McGrady is responding admirably to this task.

It is important to understand what the community expectations of corrective services are. The role of corrective services is multifaceted. It has the punishment role, and that is to be acknowledged. If people commit offences against society, there is a reasonable expectation that, if caught and convicted of a serious enough offence, they will be punished by having their liberty removed and being placed in a secure facility. I know that a lot of members of this House speak very glibly about this punishment—'he should have got a stronger sentence'. I believe that, at times, it is not for us to second-guess the sentencing judges.

Having been inside corrective services facilities on numerous occasions in my former role as a police officer, I know that they are not pleasant places. You can have as many TVs as you like and as many gyms as you like, but at the end of the day it is important to acknowledge and understand that these people do not have freedom. Every time I have gone into a secure corrective centre it has left me quite ill at ease as that door slammed behind me and I knew I was in there. And I was well aware that I was going home an hour or two hours after my work there had been done, but it was still not a pleasant experience to be locked up for any period and have my liberty taken from me. It is a horror that I cannot begin to imagine.

Whilst we acknowledge that the purpose of the corrective services is to punish people who have committed serious offences against society, it also has an important role to play in their rehabilitation. The old adage of 'lock them up and throw away the key' is not cutting it anymore. We need to try to rehabilitate those offenders. We need to teach them skills to survive out in the world. If we fail to do this, we are condemning them to becoming habitual offenders.

If a person has limited educational opportunities and, as a result, makes a choice to resort to crime to put food on the table and make ends meet, when they are caught, sentenced and punished it is reasonable to expect that the corrective services system will provide them with an education and opportunities so that when they are released they should have the skills to find another way to put food on the table. That is what rehabilitation is about. Again, it is not always perfect; we do not always get it right. Some people do re-offend; that is a fact of life.

Another role played by corrective services is the deterrent factor. I have been inside many of these facilities and it is not a pleasant experience. To many people the fear of being locked up does act as a deterrent to committing crime. It ought to be acknowledged that it is a reasonable expectation of the Corrective Services Department that it will promote that fear. However, to modify behaviour across society is a difficult thing to achieve.

I compliment the staff on their commitment as they undertake a difficult job both inside correctional centres and inside community corrections departments. They work with a difficult client base and their commitment and dedication to maintaining the security of the centre and the security of the inmates and to providing a rehabilitation program for them is to be commended.

In his speech the member for Callide challenged government members to stand and defend the government's record in relation to corrective services. I can do that quite easily in two words: Brendon Abbott.

An honourable member: Has he sent you a postcard yet?

Mr ENGLISH: That seagull should hang around the National Party's neck for a long time.

Mr Briskey: Albatross.

Mr ENGLISH: Yes. They are big, white, fluffy birds.

Under the guidelines written under the now repealed Corrective Services Act 1998 there were a range of eligibility dates which staff in the corrective services centres had to plan for and calculate and adjust. Those dates ranged from release-to-work programs to home detentions. In some cases they were 10 months prior to parole dates or four months prior to parole dates. It was a very confusing regime which provided little clear guidance for the people making the decisions and for the prisoners involved.

During the preparation of the Corrective Services Bill 2000 the issue of the appropriateness of prisoners being released into the community under these forms of community release before their parole eligibility was considered. It was decided that releasing a prisoner into the community prior to their earliest parole date was inappropriate and out of step with community expectations of punishment and deterrence. That is an example of this government listening to the community's expectations and acting on those—hardly the hallmark of an arrogant government.

In addition, the earlier administrative scheme of progression was release to work, home detention and then parole. That stepped or staged approach lacked flexibility and did not meet the needs of the clients. It was recognised that it is important to allow the community corrections boards sufficient flexibility to determine the most appropriate form of community release for each offender, according to their needs and the risk they presented. This staged approach was inflexible and did not allow the community corrections boards the flexibility they needed to judge such things as whether a person was a white collar criminal; whether they were possibly a violent offender; what was the nature of their crime; what is the nature of their rehabilitation program; and how they have responded whilst they have been inside.

This bill allows that flexibility. Some offenders may be suitable for release directly on parole while others may need a more structured progression. The scheme of the Corrective Services Act 2000 allows this flexibility, whilst ensuring at the same time that prisoners will serve an acceptable portion of their sentences in custody prior to becoming eligible for release into the community. There is no easy out for prisoners under this government. This legislation ensures that the only eligibility dates on which prisoners are to be considered for community release are those provided in legislation, not those applying under some administrative scheme or administrative guidelines. To do otherwise would be to subject the whole scheme of post-prison community based release to inconsistent application for years to come. I commend the bill to the House.
