



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre

Hon. J. C. SPENCE (Mount Gravatt—ALP) (Minister for Families and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Disability Services) (10.01 a.m.), by leave: On Sunday I joined the Premier to shut down a potent symbol of one of the saddest chapters in the state's history. We took bricks from the wall of the Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre and declared it officially closed. The symbolic dismantling of this monument to the neglect of Queensland children did not come a day too soon. For too long, the Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre has been a byword for childhood misery.

Thanks to the courage of former residents who gave evidence to the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, the centre's history is well documented. The inquiry heard how children kept at the centre—supposedly under the care and protection of the state—became victims of a rigid adherence to the 'medical model'. Children were misdiagnosed and given unnecessary medication, and sedated if they did not submit to the centre's draconian regime.

From the 1980s, the complex itself—outdated and inadequate—heightened the problems. It came as no surprise that the Forde report recommended the closure of Sir Leslie Wilson. I might remind the house that the Goss government had already taken the decision to close Sir Leslie Wilson, but the incoming Borbidge government, to its discredit, reversed that decision. Nor was it surprising that people associated with the centre came together last week to mark the end of an era. Many of the former child residents, although now adults, suffer from the legacy of mistreatment that they experienced in that place. They were born at the wrong time—a time when authorities, sometimes misguided and sometimes cruel, could inflict suffering on children who were supposed to be under their care and protection. Those days are over, and the right to safety and dignity, rehabilitation and education now extends to young offenders.

The government was able to decommission the Windsor facility because we are implementing a 10-year infrastructure development plan for youth detention centres throughout the State. This is in pursuance of Forde report recommendations that we overhaul and close a number of these complexes.

The young people who would have been held in Sir Leslie Wilson are now inmates of the new Brisbane Youth Detention Centre at Wacol. This is built to a national standard and upholds the imperative of ensuring community safety and security. The new centre also provides detainees with security and opportunities for rehabilitation. The government is also in the process of upgrading the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre at Townsville.

One of the keys to an effective youth justice system is balance. While the government will strengthen the Juvenile Justice Act, we are also addressing the causes of youth crime and providing alternatives to detention for our young people. An estimated one in three recidivist offenders did not re-offend after being referred to our pilot youth justice services. Young indigenous people are entering the juvenile justice system at a lesser rate since we came to government. The figure is down from 4.1 in every 1,000 to 2.9 in every 1,000. That rate is still unacceptable, but through measures including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Agreement we are determined to continue reducing it.

The Government also has plans for a charter of juvenile justice principles. The charter will be aimed squarely at preventing children from falling into the patterns of behaviour that bring them into contact with the juvenile—and later criminal—justice system.

There is always a danger that events such as the closure of the Sir Leslie Wilson centre will reopen old wounds. I sympathise with those former residents who, to this day, find the memories of their time there too painful even to discuss. But for many others, the closure and ceremonial dismantling of the Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre reinforces the need to learn from past mistakes and set a steady course for the future.
