



Speech by

**JULIE ATTWOOD**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT OMMANEY**

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Hansard 7 November 2001

**CORRECTIVE SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL [No. 2]**

**Mrs ATTWOOD** (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (5.57 p.m.): I rise in support of this bill. I will speak about the aspects of the bill that relate to the number of absconding prisoners and about my involvement as a community member at a number of prisons outside the electorate of Mount Ommaney. In 1997, prior to becoming the elected member of parliament for Mount Ommaney, I was asked to become a member of a community advisory committee at Moreton B prison. I held that role until the closure of Moreton B recently. In the meantime, I became a community member of the Sir David Longland Correctional Centre and the women's prison at Wolston.

Those prisons are located about three kilometres from the boundary of my electorate of Mount Ommaney and, to some extent, have an affect on residents of Riverhills and other bordering suburbs. As a member of the community advisory committee, I am able to have some input into the relationship between prisons and the community. During the time I was a member of the Moreton B community advisory committee, a lot was achieved, including organising wood turning projects and the introduction of the very successful family days near the Christmas period.

The link between the general community and prisons is an important one, particularly when a prisoner finishes his or her sentence and needs to get established back in the community. It is also imperative that the community at large has some idea about how prisons really operate instead of hearing misinformation about the rights and conditions of prisoners. I have been very impressed of late with the way the correctional centres near my electorate have been managed. Staff training and the handling of prisoners and problems associated with their confinement seem to be given a high priority. It is important that education of the local community via the media about conditions in prisons—and not just the controversial issues—is ongoing. Community members, particularly those who live in residential areas near where prisons have been constructed, need to be assured that prisons are secure places.

People need to know that when prisoners are released back into the community, there are watertight procedures followed to protect the security of the community. Except for a very small cluster of highly dangerous offenders who are unlikely ever to be released from custody, most prisoners serving longer sentences will eventually be released into the community at some stage. In most cases, a progression through various forms of community release is facilitated. One important proving ground for prisoners embarking upon community release is the time spent in a community corrections facility during which time they may be granted release to work. Release to work means that the prisoner has the ability to leave the community corrections facility for set hours during a number of days to resume employment. The majority of offenders granted release to work in this way do not reoffend and go on to successfully reintegrate into the community under gradually less restrictive levels of supervision.

One unfortunate consequence of allowing prisoners to take their first steps out of a supervised custodial environment is that some offenders will fail to conform with the conditions of their release. When this occurs, the chief executive or a community corrections board may suspend the order if it either reasonably expects that the prisoner has failed to comply with the order or poses a serious and immediate harm either to themselves or to someone else. If an order is suspended, a warrant may be issued for the prisoner's arrest.

At a later time, a corrections board in possession of all the information in relation to the suspension may amend, suspend or cancel the release order. Of course, while the breaching of the conditions of a release to work order is a serious matter, the most serious outcome is where a prisoner

absconds from a community corrections centre. The community has expectations that the offenders in these centres will obey the conditions of their orders. However, there are occasions when the offenders betray the trust that the community places in them.

The number of absconds peaked during 1995-96 when the Hon. Russell Cooper was the responsible minister at 32 absconds per year. In 2000-01, there were 24 absconds. The Minister for Police and Corrective Services demanded an urgent review of the St Vincent de Paul Community Corrections Centre and the two community correction centres operated by the department after some absconds earlier this year. As a result of this review, the responsibility for allocating suitable prisoners and transferring them to and from community correction centres has become a centralised responsibility of the Office of Sentence Management.

Transfer procedures have been amended to improve community safety by means of more effective assessments of prisoners and placement at the most suitable community correction facility. A range of measures has been put in place by the managers of the St Vincent de Paul Community Corrections Centre, including a tightening up of surveillance procedures during scheduled absences by prisoners. The surveillance procedures include more stringent checks on employers, a cessation of cold canvassing for employment by offenders and a demand for more specific information on leave passes. This is an example of how the Beattie Labor government swiftly and decisively addresses important issues to ensure greater community safety.

The risks posed by offenders during the reintegration phase of their sentences were an important factor leading to the tightening up of the whole system of post-prison community based release under the Corrective Services Act 2000. This bill seeks to bolster the certainty underpinning this scheme and to ensure its consistent application to Queensland prisoners. In addition, where prisoners have not kept their side of the bargain, the bill will allow for a simplified prosecution process before a magistrate for the offence of being unlawfully at large. I commend the bill to the House.

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