



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 3 April 2001

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Fine Defaulters Amnesty

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice) (10.10 a.m.), by leave: Members may be aware that when parliament introduced the State Penalties Enforcement Act in 1999, it provided for the establishment of the State Penalties Enforcement Registry. Coinciding with the commencement of that registry last year, an amnesty was introduced by our government on 27 November for an initial period of four months. I am pleased to inform the House that our government has decided to extend the amnesty period for fine defaulters to 30 June this year.

To give effect to the amnesty, the registrar of the State Penalties Enforcement Registry—SPER—recalled and cancelled some 460,000 outstanding warrants of commitment for unpaid fines representing \$93 million owing to the state. The initiative taken by our government has provided an opportunity for people to pay outstanding fines and remove the arrest warrant for all time. Importantly, it has been a valuable step in keeping fine defaulters out of prison.

Locking up people for fine defaulting does not recoup the money owed to the government and to the people of Queensland, and it costs the people of Queensland enormous sums to hold those people in prison. In December 1999, there were 397 fine defaulters sitting in Queensland prisons. Since our government introduced the interim State Penalties Enforcement Registry call centre in February last year, that number has been falling dramatically, so that today I am pleased to inform the House that a mere four fine defaulters remain in our prisons. I am confident that the proactive approach taken by SPER, with its range of measures to recover moneys, will ensure that this trend continues and that prison cells are available to protect our society from more serious offenders.

In the four months of the amnesty to 27 March, payments have been received against 26,500 of the recalled warrants, generating \$3.5 million for the state. This is a strong and positive response, considering that Christmas, the school holidays and the state election, during which all amnesty advertising was suspended, had a heavy impact on public awareness of the amnesty. The response since the state election has been outstanding. In the last month, in the run-up to the 27 March expiry date, the SPER call centre has almost gone into meltdown. Operators have answered an avalanche of over 58,000 calls and are actively responding to a further 20,000 voice mails left by callers.

In the last 10 days, over \$1.5 million has been collected. Our feedback suggests that many people are only now learning about their unpaid fines and the opportunities provided by the amnesty. This response has convinced the government that an extension to 30 June will benefit many people who wish to clear their fine debts and avoid future enforcement action.
