



Speech by

**Hon. R. WELFORD**

**MEMBER FOR EVERTON**

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Hansard 31 July 2001

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

**State Penalties Enforcement Registry**

**Hon. R. J. WELFORD** (Everton—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice) (10.06 a.m.), by leave: I am pleased to inform the House that our government's initiative to change the approach to fine defaulters has been an outstanding success. The introduction of the State Penalties Enforcement Registry in February last year has changed the culture that resulted in so many fine defaulters going to jail—many of them ordinary Queenslanders suffering financial difficulties.

SPER's proactive approach to the collection of unpaid fines has resulted in the collection of \$24 million since February last year. More importantly, our jails are no longer clogged with fine defaulters and that means prison cells are available for those who commit serious crimes. SPER has certainly achieved our aim of keeping fine defaulters out of jail while making it tougher for them to dodge their debt to the community.

In November last year, as part of the SPER process, we introduced an amnesty for defaulters. Four hundred and sixty thousand outstanding warrants of commitment for unpaid fines, representing \$93 million owing to the state, were recalled and cancelled. This large backlog of warrants developed because previous governments treated fine defaulters as criminals and issued warrants for their arrest. When our government came to office in 1998, 25 per cent of all prison admissions were fine defaulters, many of them Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. In December 1999 there were 397 fine defaulters in our jails and the number was escalating.

Locking up people for fine defaulting was not working. It did not recoup money owed to the state, it was crowding our jails with minor offenders and costing taxpayers thousands of dollars a week in prison costs. Our government introduced the innovative SPER system to place more emphasis on the proactive collection of money and less on custodial action. Today I am pleased to say that there is not one single fine defaulter in a Queensland prison.

More than 30,000 Queenslanders took advantage of the seven-month amnesty, which has cleaned up warrants valued at \$10 million. The return to taxpayers is actually much higher because some \$24 million, including the amnesty moneys, has been collected since we began SPER in February 2000. Call centre operators have made around 180,000 calls and taken another 260,000 calls from all parts of Queensland in the past 17 months about outstanding fines.

Now the amnesty has ended, SPER is using wide-ranging measures to enforce the collection of unpaid fines. To counter those people who deliberately avoid payment, SPER has strong powers, including the ability to seize assets and suspend drivers licences. Custodial sentences are still an option, but will be a last resort for only the most difficult defaulters. These new laws are fair on people who genuinely cannot afford to pay but will stamp out delaying tactics and soft options.

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