



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 1 August 2001

APPROPRIATION BILLS—ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice) (4.16 p.m.): I thank all members of the committee for their work in the estimates hearings. As I indicated in the course of the hearings, I believe that this budget demonstrates our government's commitment—the commitment of a true Labor government—to making justice accessible to all Queenslanders. Not only are we providing further protection for people's rights; we are also contributing to our government's goal of making communities safer. It is an opportunity for Queenslanders to focus on the differences between our government and the opposition parties.

We are delivering like never before on legal aid. Over the next four years an additional \$10 million will ensure that legal assistance is available to those who need it most. Two million dollars is being allocated over the same period to community legal centres as a result of a landmark funding formula between the Legal Aid Office and the Independent Community Legal Centres Association. For the first time ever, this will ensure job security for staff in community legal centres and give them the motivation to get on with the job of providing access to legal education, legal information, and advice to communities right across Queensland.

Since we came to office, the state's contribution to legal aid funding has risen by a full 50 per cent from \$14.4 million in 1997-98, the years when the coalition was in office, to \$22.4 million in this financial year. That funding is now a full 150 per cent of what it was only a few years ago. The attitude of the conservative parties, the Liberal and National Parties, to legal aid is best demonstrated by what their colleagues are doing at the federal level currently. They have abandoned disadvantaged Queenslanders and slashed their contribution to legal assistance.

The member for Southern Downs spent some time in the estimates hearing talking about the drug courts. I believe that the drug courts have been an outstanding pilot program. It is true that not as many people are being dealt with through rehabilitation orders as had been anticipated. The level of assistance and rehabilitation supervision provided by Corrective Services and Health staff has been much more intensive than anyone, regardless of the politics of the government, would have anticipated.

I think an average of more than one drug test a week is more than enough in a pilot program. I do not know whether the member for Southern Downs thinks that people should be tested every day, but the reality is that it would be prohibitively costly to run the program any more intensively in terms of the level of supervision than is currently occurring. What I suggest to the member for Southern Downs, or indeed any other honourable member who would like to be better apprised of how the drug courts are operating, is that they go down to the drug courts at Beenleigh or Ipswich and see how they operate. All of the feedback I am getting, not just from government departmental officials but also from people outside the system, is that they are functioning extremely effectively. The relationship that has developed between the rehabilitating offender and the magistrate in these courts is quite exceptional and is truly different in our legal system. It is proving to be a real success.

There are a number of people who fail to complete the program or who from time to time lapse. That is the nature of any addiction, whether it be to alcohol, marijuana or drugs of any kind. But most of those people manage to get back on the rails. It is true that some do not, and for them the consequence is to go to prison. So in that sense the system works. What we are at least doing—and I know the opposition supports this, because it shared the concept in prospect—is seeking to keep out of prison people who have some prospect of rehabilitation. I thank all members for their contributions.