



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL AND RADIOLOGICAL EMERGENCY POWERS AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (5.38 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Chemical, Biological and Radiological Emergency Powers Amendment Bill 2003 and recognise that the objective of the bill is to amend the Public Safety Preservation Act 1986. It is an indisputable fact that after September 11 no-one views the world in quite the same way as they did on 10 September. Perhaps the leniency and the lack of concern with which we as human beings have viewed the atrocities in countries at war because they have not touched our shores may have contributed to the horrendous acts that have been perpetrated in the past couple of years. Perhaps the world has not come down hard enough on the perpetrators of such acts. Unfortunately, there are people who think nothing of taking the lives of innocents and the tightened security around prominent individuals and infrastructure has seen civilians die through the perpetrators of terror targeting what is commonly called a soft target.

For most of us, that is inconceivable. We would like to think that our thinking processes and our respect for life are embraced by every country, every race and every religion. Unfortunately, that is not so. We must never forget that while we believe that these acts are senseless, barbaric and cowardly those who participate in them believe that they are martyrs and are serving a very real cause. There is no room for complacency and this bill addresses the issue by amending the Public Safety Preservation Act. In saying that, it is essential that an individual's rights and freedoms are respected whilst ensuring people's safety. If we must be subject to terrorism, it may at times be necessary to err on the side of caution. It is to be hoped that we never have to call on the powers outlined in this bill.

With the trend toward soft targets, we must be realistic that, as a country which has not been subjected to the types of terrorism that many countries are currently experiencing, we have not had our defences tested and may well be seen as a possible soft target. That does not mean that we should terrorise the public through legislation which may be seen as overreacting.

Australia and Queensland, being some of the largest and least populated areas—those populations are also widely spaced—do need to recognise the many varied forms that may be used in any terrorism attack. They may not necessarily be in the form of an explosion but may be more devastating in the long term. Chemical, biological and radiological attacks are very effective forms of creating fear, and it would not take very long for anybody sitting around a table to come up with ways to cripple cities, power grids and so on.

This creation of fear and uncertainty in communities is the object of terrorism; that is, to paralyse our governments and our industries. In such an event enormous drains would be made on our police force and our emergency services personnel. It must be recognised that at such times everybody must play a role which involves eternal vigilance, not just those who have taken on the roles of our protectors. Each and every one of us has a grave responsibility.

The bill relates to powers which do not currently exist in the Public Safety Preservation Act and includes the power to detain a person or people who may be contaminated by chemical, biological or radiological substances. This detainment is to ensure that they are decontaminated and the process is thorough enough so that no-one else will be infected once they go back into the community. People will be able to be detained for medical treatment. The destruction of property that may be contaminated is also allowed for.

However, these actions need to be safeguarded very carefully to ensure that heavy-handed actions do not take place under the guise of possible CBR contamination. I am pleased to note that the

bill states that the public will be able to access compensation for financial loss but that this compensation must reflect the true value of replacing that property.

I and any reasonable person would expect that the isolation of persons contaminated would be conducted in a manner of reasonable cooperation but recognise that some people may have difficulty in accepting being detained under any circumstances at all. I ask the minister to assure all Queenslanders that they would not be detained for any longer than necessary or held on suspicion while perhaps some evidence which may not already be in the possession of the police is gathered. It is essential that the public understands that these powers will be used only as a last resort and are intended to ensure that CBRs do not pose a serious risk to the lives or health of those not affected by contamination.

In essence, this bill allows for the detaining, examination and treatment of persons. It also allows for the seizure and destruction of property if required. Some people may see this bill as a threat to their civil liberties, but I believe and hope that most would recognise that the bill's prime purpose is the protection of all. I also realise that there may be a few in our communities who might agree with and be sympathetic to the views of radical extremists and be tempted to engage in terrorist acts, which are nothing short of cold-blooded murder. I doubt there is anyone who would not be willing to have the gravest penalty issued to address their actions.

This is an area which could be manipulated in an adverse manner, but the protection of all in the event of a possible threat is paramount. The minister has addressed an extremely difficult issue. When anyone's liberty is affected, many groups go up in arms and say that it is an infringement of their rights. But we can no longer pretend that the terror that goes on in the world excludes us. It now includes us and we must be prepared for it. I support the bill and commend it to the House.