



Speech by

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CORONERS BILL; CREMATIONS BILL

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (5.09 p.m.): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in support of the Coroners Bill and the Cremations Bill. In doing so, I am very pleased to indicate that these bills are as a result of a lot of lobbying by many people over the years, including myself. I have written to the current Attorney-General and to his predecessor about this issue because this is a topic that has indeed been important to many people in the Greenslopes electorate who have made representations to me over the years. As I tell my constituents, taking these matters up eventually gets us somewhere and I am very pleased to see that this is the end of a long road of representations and pleas by a number of people. It is indeed a responsive approach by this government and the Premier to these circumstances and is a proper reaction to the review undertaken in 1997 into the system of the coroners courts in Queensland to examine better practices for this state—that is, the 1997 review of Queensland's coronial laws.

This is also very important reform because it represents another step in the general array of necessary institutions to provide the foundation and framework for a proper running state. Since 1989 Queensland has seen a progression of Labor governments establish all of the necessary institutions that make a modern state what it is. We have seen those institutions put in place post the Fitzgerald process with the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission and its various organs which have gone on to establish all of the appropriate committees of this parliament, the checks and balances necessary in the state and the various relevant law reform matters that bring us into line with the rest of the world in terms of providing protection for citizens and accountability for governments and the institutions of government.

This is another very important step in that process of establishing those institutions for one very good reason: it is about the most sacred and important thing to all of us, and that is human life. Indeed, it is about the prevention of death and it is about dealing with preventable deaths. Nothing could be more important nor sad in our society than the death of a person that could have been avoided in some way, especially those that occur in the case of young people and babies. This is an important measure to ensure that everything that can be done in this state to prevent death is done in the future. It remedies a situation which I think was best described by the Wellington coroner, who summarised the situation in terms of the creation of a chief coroner in New Zealand when he said—

The establishment of an Office of the Chief Coroner for New Zealand is urgently needed if the dignity, usefulness and effectiveness of the Office of Coroner is to be preserved, developed and enhanced. Until such time, coroners will continue to act in a fragmented and uncoordinated way.

Indeed, that is exactly the circumstances we are addressing in Queensland where individual coroners have done very fine work over the years.

We must recognise that fact in the course of this debate, because coroners have been working individually all over this state since the inception of this state within the framework and institution of the coroner that goes back further into British legal history. Those people have done a fantastic job and they will do an even better job under this framework. This is a framework which not only provides a statewide apparatus for deaths to be examined intelligently and with great scrutiny but also extends to a national perspective with connection to a national database throughout the Commonwealth structure. That is a very fine move because it will give us a far greater capacity to examine the causes of death and to look at national trends and to pick up these causalities right across this nation.

Why is this necessary? I think it is particularly necessary today and increasingly necessary today because of the sheer complexity of our society. The amount of technology we deal with and the range of toxic substances within our environments domestically and in the wider environment are increasing. The range of contingencies in terms of industrial accidents, et cetera, simply continues to increase in terms of diversity and complexity. These are matters that we need to have a clear handle on as a society to understand exactly what is going on. If there are trends developing in relation to deaths and injury, then we certainly need to establish the chain of causality and start to address the fundamental roots of the problems we are confronting in terms of public health.

The many deaths that occur across society beyond direct homicides in Australia accounted for 7,000. When we start to break these down into the various other categories of suicides and other deaths that were in one way or another preventable, there is a lot of work to be done. If the result of this bill means that one life is saved out of that process, then we have certainly done a good job here today and I congratulate the minister and the Premier on their foresightedness in doing so.

The other very important aspect of the coroner under this structure is that the coroner will be able to bring in whatever professional expertise is necessary to attest to the cases in question to provide appropriate advice to the coroner. I believe that this bill provides wide-ranging powers for the coroner to be well informed about the causality of deaths and, beyond that, to also then have an adequate ambit of power to comment and report in relation to specific findings about a death or a range of deaths to the relevant institutions. That is a fundamental feature that will be of great assistance in our society. I wish the future State Coroner well in his or her endeavours. I am sure that, in the great tradition that has already been established in this state through the individual coroners, this institution will now move into a new and great phase and the outcomes will be immeasurable in years to come.

The Cremations Bill 2002 complements the coroners laws in terms of ensuring that cremations do not occur until appropriate authorities have been advised and all necessary measures are undertaken to ensure that investigations into the causes of death have been carried out. I commend these bills to the House and wish those involved in their implementation well.