



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGERIE

Hansard 19 August 2003

CORRECTIVE SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algerie—ALP) (9.13 p.m.): At the core of the Corrective Services Amendment Bill is the need to protect community safety. This must remain the paramount aim of our corrective services system and the management of offenders. Every effort must be made and is being made to prevent further offending. Central to this is the need for offenders to undertake effective education, victim empathy and rehabilitation programs. For many serious violent offenders who have total disregard for humanity, these programs will have no positive effect. But for effective management and rehabilitation of most other offenders, the system must have incentives to encourage participation in programs and opportunities for conditional release. Easing back into community life is very important. There must also be tight controls over these release provisions. I commend this amendment bill and the minister's efforts to make the system much safer.

I can recall a time in my life when I got the fright of my life. I was riding a pushbike in Dutton Park to visit a friend. A tall guy in jeans and a blue shirt jumped out from behind some bushes with what looked like a big silver revolver out of a western movie in his hand. He yelled at me to get off the bike and run into a house. I did not know who he was. When I got into the house the woman inside said that there had been a break-out from Boggo Road and that I had better stay calm and stay put. I was in there for four hours because we were hearing reports of how one of the escapees had been recaptured. He was found in a wardrobe, so we went carefully around this house checking all of the wardrobes and looking in corners. I must say that I was very frightened for that four hours until the police came and escorted us out of the house.

That highlighted to me the importance of tight security for prisons. It also made me think much more about the fear of crime. I realise that people need to have a reasonable level of caution and fear, but too often and for too long we have actually had escalating fear that is well beyond the reality of the likelihood of people being victimised. This amendment bill is a very important amendment bill because it certainly brings more safeguards into the corrective services system. For instance, if the CEO receives sound intelligence that a prisoner on a post-release order poses an unacceptable risk of fleeing or committing an offence, the post-release order can be suspended. Governments and, I must say, opposition members have a very particular responsibility to reduce the fear of crime experienced by the public to enhance their safety rather than rev up scaremongering about crime being out of control.

Ms Nolan: It is very cheap to play on people's fears.

Ms STRUTHERS: It is very cheap political point scoring that we have seen over past decades. Thankfully, we have not seen the irresponsible law and order election campaign auctions that have featured in political campaigns in Queensland in past times. These did little more than send the blood pressure levels of the public soaring. They did little more than send the prison and police budgets soaring. They had no real positive effect on crime reduction or prevention.

I have been very encouraged by the responsible way in which the Beattie government has focused on being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. Crime is at a nine-year low in Queensland, and escapes from custody from correctional facilities in Queensland have been rare in recent years. I commend the Minister for Police and Corrective Services and acknowledge the efforts of the Queensland Police Service, including my own local police in the Acacia Ridge, Calamvale and Forest Lake areas. I commend the non-government agencies and groups such as Neighbourhood Watch for the collective efforts that are resulting in these reduced crime rates. I do not have any

particular evidence to back up this claim, but I would not be surprised if the policy directive, programs and funding support to these programs—being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime—is contributing significantly to this positive result.

I will say a couple of things about community corrections and the prison-as-a-last-resort principle. As I stated, our police and corrective services system must do everything possible to prevent crime and protect community safety. Some offenders through our justice system do not pose a threat in a physical or intimidatory way to the public. These kinds of offenders ought to be putting back into the community rather than being locked away behind bars and razor wire at a cost of more than \$80,000 to the public purse.

I have received recent representations from a local Neighbourhood Watch group. It is supporting a strengthening of our corrective services system to get non-harmful offenders to carry out more supervised community service. Its concern is that there appears to be insufficient supervision resources for the number of available candidates through the system for community service. I would ask that the minister continue to have a good look at this area over coming months and years. These people in the Neighbourhood Watch group support the sentencing principle that prison ought to be the last resort. I am well aware that there is substantial public pressure to lock many offenders up and throw away the key. We have heard from members tonight that there are many people who fit that category, who should never really be released back into the community. But there is also a large number of people who are not of risk to others. There is a delicate balance that must be struck between both ends of this continuum.

Our judicial and correctional systems must be able to selectively cater for the no-risk offender through to the serious violent offender. I think the system is getting better at this, but I fail to understand why the offenders who pose no risk and who have the skills that can provide a significant payback to our community are locked away.

Tonight as we speak on this bill there are men and women sleeping behind bars who need not be there. They are facing up to their punishment, but they should be serving our community, not costing our community. For example, many people in recent weeks have been disturbed by, and have seriously questioned, our former Chief Magistrate being locked away. Our judicial and corrective systems must be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but fair-minded people in our community are accepting the view that non-violent, low-risk offenders ought to pay back for their crime, serve the community for their crime, rather than doing their time behind bars. Our system must be more responsive to this call into the future.