



Speech by

Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Hansard Wednesday, 19 August 2009

CORRECTIVE SERVICES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr POWELL (Glass House—LNP) (4.22 pm): I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Corrective Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I note the bill seeks to clarify the interpretation and operation of the Corrective Services Act 2006 to reflect current policy and best practice in the management of prisons and offenders.

As the member for the Glass House, I have state representation responsibilities for Queensland's largest correctional centre, the high-security Woodford Correctional Centre. So I am pleased to acknowledge the intent of this bill is to improve custodial operations in centres such as Woodford. As the minister will no doubt agree, the wardens and the staff at Woodford Correctional Centre are some of the hardest working individuals I have met. They are real salt of the earth people and definitely at the front line of delivering government services.

Many, however, are frustrated by operational practices and administrative decision-making processes that are antiquated and clearly fall short of the noble goal of best practice in the management of prisons and offenders. Unfortunately, having read the legislation and explanatory notes, I fear their more specific concerns will not be addressed by these amendments. My hope is, though, that this bill does go some way to assist these unsung heroes of our state.

Being a high-security prison with some 990 inmates, it is unlikely that the proposed amendments with regard to resettlement and reintegration leave of absence will have significant impacts on the operation of the Woodford Correctional Centre. But I acknowledge that model prisoners—prisoners from other centres who have sincerely sought to reform themselves and transition to mainstream living—will benefit from the streamlining of the resettlement and reintegration leave of absence.

I know more significantly that members of the broader community will appreciate the amendments with regard to prisoner artwork. The community is very accepting of the role that industry training and recreational activities play in the rehabilitation of prisoners. Woodford Correctional Centre has some 15 such industry workshops covering trades such as furniture manufacturing, steel products manufacturing and upholstery. Whilst aligned to current trades suffering from staff shortages and providing skills to the prisoners that will be useful in gaining employment upon release, these workshops abide by the standards of the current act that prevent prisoners from carrying on businesses.

Increasingly, recreational activities undertaken by prisoners, such as art, are becoming more prolific in the community. Some of the art is clearly of a very high standard. But the broader community and particularly the victims of crime have been concerned and uncomfortable with the prospect that this same art is being sold for profit. It is therefore a welcome amendment that brings the transfer of prisoner artwork under greater scrutiny and prohibits the selling of the same artwork.

I do have concerns though when it comes to the proposed amendments with regard to visitors to a correctional centre. Some of the amendments make sense. I know many in my former department, the department of child safety, will applaud the improvements to their access to prisoners. Ongoing access to

family is an intrinsic part of both the ongoing care and development of young children. This amendment will allow for that.

Similarly, law enforcement and emergency services officers have already undertaken stringent security clearances as part of their own employment. Not duplicating these processes to gain access to the correctional system is an appropriate red tape reducing amendment.

But I am concerned about the relaxation of access approval for legal practitioners and for the purposes of maintenance, particularly the latter. I am uncertain as to why such interim access is necessary. It flies in the face of some of the minister's own comments. In his second reading speech the minister states that one of the key aims is to improve community safety. He himself acknowledged that the correctional administrators and staff have a very taxing job working with the most vulnerable, highly demanding and problematic individuals of our society. He said that these amendments will improve safety and security in our correctional centres.

Why then is the Bligh government increasing the risk to safety and security by easing the requirements for access approval? Is this yet another example of its mismanagement and deception or is it a prison system in turmoil? One theory is that this is yet another scrimp and save at the cost of community safety.

The minister was quite proud of the fact that, as reported in the 2009 report on government services, Queensland is identified as one of the most cost-effective correctional providers in Australia, with the lowest cost per prisoner per day. He went on to state that the public's expectations are higher than ever in seeing value for money from its correctional system.

The minister continued by saying that the onus is firmly on the public sector to achieve more with less through innovation and reformation. It may be the case that the public does expect the government to be efficient and effective in its use of public moneys. When it comes to corrective services, the public has other expectations as well—expectations pertaining to security and safety.

In the same report, the 2009 report on government services, Queensland was identified as having one of the worst records for escapes and abscondee in the nation, second only to Tasmania. I believe that the public would be concerned were the government to save money at the cost of security. By not undertaking proper and full access approvals, are we opening our centres up to further instances of escape? In the case of a high-security facility such as Woodford, is that a risk the government wants to take? Is it a risk the people of Woodford and the surrounds are willing to accept?

My concern is that the amendments pertaining to maintenance in particular may also indicate a desire to source the cheapest service provider, not necessarily the provider—be they the sparky, the plumber, the builder—who lives locally and knows the correctional centre, its operation and its security elements intimately? If indeed this is an attempt to make it easier for larger companies to win maintenance contracts at the expense of local small businesses, then I have grave reservations.

These local sparkies and local plumbers and other tradies are the lifeblood of towns like Woodford. Their kids play sport and attend the local school. They spend money in the local newsagents, in the supermarkets and the co-ops. They are also the source of apprenticeships and traineeships for local young people. In places like Woodford where the correctional centre has been opened for more than a decade, these local tradies have an intimate knowledge of its operations. They are also the most conveniently located to ensure quick and responsive service in the case of emergencies. As I said, it is one theory, and I hope it is only that, but for security reasons and for the benefit of local economies I am calling on the government to reconsider this particular amendment.

The bill also seeks to adjust time frames for parole board decision making. The explanatory notes suggest that this is due to the increasing complexity of parole decisions and that the existing provision may frustrate the judicial review process by preventing the Supreme Court from considering an application after the 120 days has expired.

Again, I hope this is the true reason, because it appears that this is yet another example of a struggling prison system—a system where custodial officers have lost confidence in senior management, a system where, despite Labor's promises of Public Service job security, we are seeing evidence of downsizing and cost reduction. A meeting at Woodford Correctional Centre last week confirmed that senior management will begin implementing a process of forced relocations of staff if sufficient staff do not agree to relocate voluntarily. Officers, administrative staff and program staff are outraged, and rightly so. Instead of addressing example after example of mismanagement and cost blow-outs, this government has asked its senior public servants to downsize staffing at Queensland's largest high-security prison—staff who received reassurance after reassurance during the last election campaign that there would be no job cuts under a Bligh government. No wonder they are outraged and no wonder our prison system is in turmoil!

This government cannot manage the day-to-day business of running our prison system let alone a state, and finally the full evidence is apparent to the broader population, including this state's hardworking Public Service. I call on both the broader population and my former colleagues in the Public Service to carefully consider the untruths this government will propagate over the next two years. I ask them to test the truthfulness of Labor's election promises in 2012 on its past record of deception and consign Labor to the opposition benches, where it belongs.