



Speech by

Hon. Margaret Keech

MEMBER FOR ALBERT

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CORRECTIVE SERVICES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. MM KEECH (Albert—ALP) (5.10 pm): After that contribution from the Liberal National Party's member for Kawana, I am very pleased to add some balance and truth into this debate on the Corrective Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I am very pleased to support the bill and I commend the minister for bringing it to the House. I particularly welcome the proposed amendments regarding the sale of artwork. I believe that, when prisoners use the facilities of prisons to develop their skills and then make artwork, the profits from the sale of that artwork should actually go back into the prison from where they came rather than being for the personal benefit of the individual prisoner. I support allowing child safety officers access into prisons. I also welcome the ability to ban visitors who bring drugs into correctional centres.

Today I would particularly like to refer my remarks to changes to parole board decision-making time frames and, in particular, the aspect of ensuring that the safety and security of both staff and prisoners are enhanced whilst also recognising the rights of victims. Parole plays a very important role in our criminal justice system. It gives prisoners an opportunity to be supervised after their release. Parole can help ensure that released prisoners stay on track and do not return to a life of crime.

This government introduced court ordered parole in the Corrective Services Act 2006. This allows courts to set a release date after which a prisoner will be supervised on parole. Court ordered parole has been highly successful. Instead of prisoners being released without any supervision whatsoever, they are now being released on parole. The act recognises that some prisoners are not suitable for court ordered parole. These higher risk prisoners need to prove their suitability for parole after they have served part of their sentence. They will need to behave appropriately in prison and undertake recommended treatment programs. These offenders have to apply to a parole board for release.

Parole boards, as we know, have a very difficult and extremely demanding job. It is not easy to make decisions relating to a person's possible actions in the future. Parole boards have to protect the community and help offenders get their lives back on track. This bill amends the Corrective Services Act to give parole boards the time they need to make parole decisions properly and appropriately.

Under the current act, the parole board must make a decision within 120 days. After 120 days, it cannot consider the application and it is treated as a refusal. I support the fact that 120 days is not enough time for information to be prepared for the board's consideration. This act needs to be amended to allow the parole board up to 180 days so that it can do its job properly and gather all the information before it makes a decision.

To make a good decision, parole boards need to receive detailed reports. It takes time to gather the information for these reports. Prisoners and sponsors need to be interviewed. Suitable accommodation needs to be found and approved by Corrective Services. The prisoner's risk needs have to be assessed. The parole boards also require time to consider this information before they can make a considered decision. In some cases, parole boards need to defer for additional information such as a psychiatric

report. It will often take time to contact the professional involved and then receive the report. These reports certainly take a lot of time to not only prepare but also consider. Parole boards should not feel compelled to make a decision without this important information in order to simply meet the time frame.

Good administrative decision making requires that prisoners are accorded procedural fairness. If a parole board is going to refuse parole, it gives the prisoner the opportunity to explain why it should not refuse parole. This is standard practice for parole decision making but it does take time. We have found that the current time frame is not long enough for this to happen. The time frame of 120 days places undue pressure on parole boards. The parole boards were consulted on this issue and they agreed that more time was needed. The bill increases the time available for parole boards so they can come to a proper decision. As I said earlier, parole boards will now have 180 days from the date of an application to make a decision. In most cases, it will be possible to make a decision before this time, but if it is a more difficult case, then this time is available to ensure that a proper decision can be made.

Queensland's parole boards provide a great service to our community. The bill recognises the very difficult role that parole boards perform and ensures that they have time to make decisions. Before I close, I wish to commend the correctional services staff for their hard work. Like other public servants who work with domestic violence issues or child safety officers, correctional services staff often work out of sight and out of mind, except for those members of the public who have a need to come into contact with them. I commend them for the very good work they do.

I would particularly like to commend one of our local Beenleigh identities, John Crawford. John is a big man with an even bigger heart for prisoner rehabilitation through education. John recently retired after working for nine years at Arthur Gorrie, with his last position being manager of prisoner services. John is well known in our Beenleigh community, particularly as a past president of Beenleigh Rotary. I would like to thank him and all of his co-workers for the tremendous work they do in keeping our community safe. In closing and while commending the work of the staff, I would like to commend the minister, Neil Roberts, and also the previous minister, Judy Spence, for bringing this bill to the chamber.