

'That governments consider introducing an ongoing amnesty on the execution of long-standing warrants of commitment for unpaid fines'. The purpose of this recommendation is to reduce the number of Territorians who are in custody by reason of failure to pay fines. In this regard, the Northern Territory has led Australia already by its use of alternatives to imprisonment. I quote from paragraph 22.5.102 of the Royal Commission:

In his paper to the conference, Mr Owston stated that when the fine default diversionary program commenced on 19 January 1987, fine defaulters comprised 30% of all prisoners received in Northern Territory prisons. By December 1989, that number had reduced to 17%. The figures are startling: in 1986, 584 persons were imprisoned for fine default; and in 1989 only 170 persons were thus imprisoned. Given the substantial Aboriginal component in the prison population (approximately 70% in recent years) it is clear that Aboriginal people are beneficiaries to a significant degree.

The value of warrants in excess of 10 years old is approximately \$390 000, representing approximately 9% of all warrants of commitment. I commend the bill to honourable members.

Debate adjourned.

CORONERS BILL
(Serial 220)

Bill presented and read a first time.

Mr STONE (Attorney-General): Mr Speaker, I move that the bill be now read a second time.

The purpose of this bill is to reform the jurisdiction and powers of the coroner for 2 purposes: firstly, to implement various recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; and, secondly, to generally improve and modernise the coronial process. In 1990, the then Attorney-General authorised the Department of Law to conduct a review of the Coroners Act. The review focused on 2 areas: those proposals for change resulting from the Royal Commission and those proposals of a more general nature.

I will speak about the background to reform first. At an early stage, it became clear that reform would need to concentrate on the working of the Victorian Coroners Act 1985. Victoria is presently the acknowledged leader in Australia with regard to reform of the coronial jurisdiction. After the Victorian act was passed, the Western Australian and Tasmanian Attorneys-General both set up ad hoc committees to review their Coroners Acts. On the whole, both committees recommended the adoption of the Victoria model. By and large, the drafting of this bill follows the Victorian Act. Jurisdiction to inquire into violent or unexplained deaths has existed in England from at least the time of the Norman Conquest. The jurisdiction in England stems from a number of ancient statutes and from the common law. When Australia was settled, the governor in each colony exercised his prerogative power to appoint justices of the peace and coroners. In time, the coronial jurisdiction was gradually consolidated in the form of the Coroners Act.

I turn now to those aspects of the bill which result from the Northern Territory's response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Clause 4 provides that the office of coroner