IN THE SUPREME COURT OF FLORIDA

JEFFREY W. COULSON,

Petitioner,

v. CASE NO. SC99-155

STATE OF FLORIDA,

Respondent.
_____/

ON DISCRETIONARY REVIEW FROM
THE FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL

RESPONDENT'S BRIEF ON THE MERITS

ROBERT A. BUTTERWORTH
ATTORNEY GENERAL

KELLIE A. NIELAN
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
FLORIDA BAR #618550

KRISTEN L. DAVENPORT
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
Fla. Bar #909130
444 Seabreeze Blvd.
Fifth Floor
Daytona Beach, FL 32118
(904) 238-4990

COUNSEL FOR RESPONDENT

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CERTIFICATE OF FONT AND TYPE SIZE

The undersigned counsel certifies that this brief was typed using 12 point Courier New, a font that is not proportionately spaced.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

The Prison Releasee Reoffender Act does not violate the separation of powers doctrine or due process. Setting mandatory sentences is a proper matter for the legislature, and enforcing such a statute is a proper matter for the executive. Contrary to Coulson's argument, the statutory scheme does not usurp the power of the judiciary. The trial court still fulfills its proper role -- deciding whether the defendant is eligible for this sentencing enhancement and imposing the sentence itself.

ARGUMENT

THE PRISON RELEASEE REOFFENDER ACT DOES NOT VIOLATE THE SEPARATION OF POWERS DOCTRINE OR DUE PROCESS.

Concerned about the early release of felony offenders and the resulting impact on Florida's residents and visitors when such offenders continue to prey upon society, the legislature determined that public safety could best be ensured by providing for lengthy mandatory sentences for those who commit new serious felonies upon their release from prison. Accordingly, the Prison Releasee Reoffender Pun shment Act was enacted, effective May 30, 1997. Ch. 97-239, Laws of Florida.

Under this statute, an individual who commits certain enumerated violent felonies within three years of being released from prison must be sentenced to the statutory maximum term of imprisonment. § 775.082(8), Fla. Stat. (1997).

Coulson contends that the prison releasee reoffender act is unconstitutional, as it violates the separation of powers doctrine. According to Coulson, the legislature has improperly delegated the sentencing power of the judiciary to the executive. In other words, by invoking the mandatory penalties required by the statute, the executive has become the sentencing entity. This claim must be rejected.

First of all, it is well-established that setting penalties for crimes is a matter of substantive law within the power of the legislature. McKendry v. State, 641 So. 2d 45, 47 (Fla. 1994);

Smith v. State, 537 So. 2d 982, 985 (Fla. 1989). Accordingly, arguments that mandatory sentences violate the separation of powers doctrine have been uniformly rejected by this Court. See, e.g., Liahtbourne v. State, 438 So. 2d 380, 385 (Fla. 1983), cert. denied, 465 U.S. 1051 (1984); Scott v. State, 369 So. 2d 330, 331 (Fla. 1979); Sowell v. Stat&, 342 So. 2d 969 (Fla. 1977).

Coulson's argument here that the mandatory sentences for repeat offenders infringes on the power of the judiciary should likewise be rejected. The legislature acted well within its authority in setting these mandatory sentences.

The statute also sets forth a procedure whereby the executive initiates the sentence enhancement process. Contrary to Coulson's argument, this procedure does not mean that the executive has usurped the power of the judiciary. While the executive initiates the process, it is the court which decides whether the defendant qualifies under the statute, and it is the court which imposes the sentence itself. Cf. Young v. State, 699 So. 2d 624, 625-27 (Fla. 1997) (state attorney has sole authority to initiate habitual offender proceedings).

Coulson contends that the sentencing procedure here is infirm because there is no requirement of a jury finding of the underlying basis for the mandatory sentence. To the contrary, the statute does in fact require such a finding -- the jury must find the defendant has committed a qualifying felony on a certain date. The trial court then applies this finding to the provisions of the

statute -- examining, for example, whether the defendant had been released from prison within three years of the date the jury found the crime had been committed.

The Prison Releasee Reoffender Act gives the State Attorney no greater power than that traditionally exercised in the charging decision, and it in no way infringes upon the sentencing power of the judiciary -- which still has to evaluate whether the State has proven that the defendant qualifies for sentencing under the statute and still has to impose the sentence itself. McKnight v. State, 727 So. 2d 314 (Fla. 3d DCA), rev. granted, case #95,154 (Fla. Aug. 19, 1999).

This Court should adopt the well-reasoned decision of the district court in McKnight, and Coulson's separation of powers argument should be rejected. See also Woods v. State, 24 Fla. L. Wkly. D831 (Fla. 1st DCA March 26) (agreeing with McKnight, rejecting separation of powers challenge to PRR statute), rev. granted, case #95,281 (Fla. Aug. 23, 1999); Speed v. State, 732 So. 2d 17 (Fla. 5th DCA) (same), rev. granted, case # 95,706 (Fla. Sept. 16, 1999).

Coulson alternatively contends that the statute may be saved by giving the trial court the discretion to apply the statutory exceptions to mandatory sentencing. § 775.082(8)(d), Fla. Stat. (1997). This is the position adopted by the Second and Fourth District Courts of Appeal. See State v. Wise, 24 Fla. L. Wkly. D657 (Fla. 4th DCA March 10), rev. granted, case # 95,230 (Fla.

Aug. 5, 1999); State v. Cotton, 728 So. 2d 251 (Fla. 2d DCA 1998), rev. granted, 737 So. 2d 551 (Fla. 1999) (case # 94,996).

The State submits that these decisions ignore the clear statutory language, as well as the legislative history of the statute, and should therefore not be followed by this Court.

The statute provides that "[u]pon proof . . . that a defendant is a prison releasee reoffender as defined in this section, such defendant is not eligible for sentencing under the sentencing guidelines and *must* be sentenced as follows..." § 775.082(8)(a)(2), Fla. Stat. (1997) (emphasis added). This language clearly provides that sentencing is mandatory, not discretionary.

The legislative history supports such a finding as well. The court in McKnight thoroughly examined the relevant legislative reports, quoting extensively from staff analysis reports as well as impact statements. These statements clearly reveal that the statute was designed to leave no room for discretion where the State has met its burden of proving that the defendant qualifies for PRR sentencing. 727 So. 2d at 316.

The McKnight court further noted that allowing the statutory exceptions to be applied by the trial court would lead to absurd results. For example, the trial court would be in no position to conclude that prison releasee reoffender sanctions should not be applied because "the testimony of a material witness cannot be obtained" or "other extenuating circumstances . . . preclude the just

prosecution of the offender." § 775.082(8)(d), Fla. Stat. These statutory exceptions clearly apply to the decision of the prosecuting attorney, not the trial court, and accordingly the trial court's role is clearly mandatory. Id. at 317.

This Court should reject Coulson's argument that the trial court is not required to follow the clear statutory mandate. The district court's decision affirming Coulson's sentence as a prison releasee reoffender should be approved.

CONCLUSION

Based on the arguments and authorities presented herein, respondent respectfully requests that this Court approve the decision of the district court.

Respectfully submitted,

ROBERT A. BUTTERWORTH
ATTORNEY GENERAL

KELLIE A. NIELAN
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
Fla. Bar #618550

KRISTEN L. DAVENPORT
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
Fla. Bar #909130
444 Seabreeze Boulevard
Fifth Floor
Daytona Beach, FL 32118
(904) 238-4990

COUNSEL FOR RESPONDENT

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I HEREBY CERTIFY that a true and correct copy of the above Respondent's Brief has been furnished by hand delivery to Barbara C. Davis, Assistant Public Defender, 112 Orange Avenue, Suite A, Daytona Beach, Florida 32114, this 2nd day of February, 2000.

Kristen L. Davenport
Assistant Attorney General

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JEFFREY W. COULSON,

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STATE OF FLORIDA,

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PESPONDENT'S APPENDIX

ROBERT A. BUTTERWORTH
ATTORNEY GENERAL

KELLIE A. NIELAN
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
FLORIDA BAR #618550

KRISTEN L. DAVENPORT
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
Fla. Bar #909130
444 Seabreeze Blvd.
Fifth Floor
Daytona Beach, FL 32118
(904) 238-4990

COUNSEL FOR RESPONDENT

AB 9-23-99 94-1-6612 Corrente

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA
FIFTH DISTRICT **JULY TERM 1999**

NOT FINAL UNTIL THE TIME EXPIRES TO FILE REHEARING MOTION, AND, IF FILED, DISPOSED OF.

JEFFREY WARD COULSON,

Appellant,

v.

CASE NO. 99-1188

L.CT.CR98-10592

STATE OF FLORIDA,

Appellee.

Opinion filed December 17, 1999

Appeal from the Circuit Court for Orange County, Frank N. Kaney, Judge.

James B. Gibson, Public Defender, and Barbara C. Davis, Assistant Public Defender, Daytona Beach, for Appellant.

Robert A. Butterworth, Attorney General, Tallahassee, and Carmen F. Corrente, Assistant Attorney General, Daytona Beach, for Appellee.

HARRIS, J.

We affirm on the basis of *Speed v. State, 732 So.* 2d 17 (Fla. 5th DCA 1999), rev. granted, Table No. 95,706 (Fla. Sept. 16, 1999), but certify conflict with *State* v. Wise, 24 Fla. L. Weekly D657 (Fla. 4th DCA March IO, 1999), rev. *granted,* 741 So. 2d 1137 (Fla Aug. 5, 1999).

AFFIRMED.

DAUKSCH and COBB, JJ., concur.