



Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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YOUTH JUSTICE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (12.02 pm): I rise to contribute to the Youth Justice and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. I say at the outset that I wholeheartedly support the sensible amendments to be moved by the member for Toowoomba South. Youth justice is out of control in this state and you only have to go to Townsville to see firsthand the impact that these out-of-control youth offenders are having on that community. Residents in Townsville have had an absolute gutful of young offenders tearing the heart out of their community with relative impunity, and they want something done.

Under this Labor government, robbery in Queensland has more than doubled. Assault and unlawful entry are both up by approximately one-third, unlawful use of a motor vehicle has increased by almost 50 per cent and armed robbery is up a staggering 88 per cent. Many residents in areas of my electorate such as Ayr and Home Hill would tell you that they no longer feel safe in their homes. Just up the road in Townsville we are seeing a never-ending crime spree that has spiralled out of control, with daily reports of break and enters, vehicle theft and robbery. To date, the only response they have received is to hold on and wait, even though government MPs in Townsville have asked when the promised extra police will be delivered. Even they were met with silence.

North Queenslanders are sick of the reviews, the inquiries, the reports. They are jaded. They are tired of the rhetoric and they simply want action. Youth justice is an important part of the fight for law and order in Queensland, and that is an important fight to win. Those of us on this side of the House proudly put the safety of the community first when it comes to crime and to justice, but we also recognise that our justice system must be fair. Queenslanders want offenders held to account, but Queenslanders also recognise that watch houses are not appropriate places to hold young offenders for one minute longer than absolutely necessary.

We need to face the facts. Young offenders need to be detained in appropriate facilities, not sharing watch house cells with alleged paedophiles. We all know that the current government has lost control of youth crime, but to be in a situation where children as young as 10 are held in adult watch houses for up to 45 days is beyond belief. If a young person is in custody, the state has a responsibility to do everything possible to rehabilitate these offenders and to ensure the safety of the community. We also have a responsibility to ensure that these young people are kept safe, provided the opportunity to engage in education and provided with the opportunity to change their ways. These responsibilities cannot be met in a watch house. It is for those reasons that the LNP want a restriction on the time that these children can be held in those facilities. I fully support the member for Toowoomba South's amendment to restrict the length of time that children can be held in watch houses to 72 hours.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as a former police officer, I can assure you that the last thing police want to do is keep young offenders in watch houses. That is why the shadow Attorney-General will move amendments to restrict that time to 72 hours. There is a very good reason for that. If you are stationed in remote areas such as the gulf or Cape York Peninsula, it will take you that long to transport. The logistics of bringing young offenders out of some of those localities is not that simple. The practicalities of getting a child before a magistrate from a remote area is no easy task, and there are substantial logistics and resources involved in that process.

I also put on record my support of the member for Toowoomba South's amendment to restore breach of bail as an offence. No-one can deny that Queensland's youth detention centres are overcrowded and, despite repeated attempts from those of us on this side of the House, this government will not increase the capacity of those centres. Let me be clear: the current overcrowding of these centres is the sole responsibility of this Labor government. The bungled transition of 17-year-olds to youth detention centres was the start of a downward spiral. This government's decision to weaken bail laws must be seen for what it is.

The current government, rather than increase capacity at the current centres or, heaven forbid, build a new one, would rather see youths who commit serious offences roaming our streets. Being released on bail should remain a privilege, not a right. Those offenders who commit further offences whilst on bail should be held to account and they should be returned to detention whilst they await their court hearing.

I know for a fact that our hardworking police officers are at their wits end rounding up these kids who rampage through communities like Townsville, constantly placing them before a court only to see them released straight back on to the street to continue on their merry way. I am going to stand up for the victims in Townsville because they have had enough. They have had enough of these kids getting constantly released. The police are rounding up these kids. They are putting them before the courts and then they are straight back out on our street continuing on their merry way.

The community is fed up. They are fed up with their homes being broken into. They are fed up with their cars being stolen and burnt. I had a lady ring me the other day—a single mother with three kids. Her car was stolen and burnt and trashed. She had no insurance, so she is now walking. That was committed by one of these kids who have absolute contempt for the laws of this state. They need to be held to account. We are talking about hundreds of convictions in some cases for some of these kids. Yes, they do know right from wrong.

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Robinson): Order, those on my right!

Mr LAST: For those opposite to come in here and espouse a policy of custody as a last resort, I say this: come to Townsville—and you will in two weeks time—and tell the residents what you are doing to address this crime issue in that community.

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, those on my right! The member will speak through the chair.

Mr LAST: I speak from experience when I say that many of these young offenders are hardened criminals. Let's not beat around the bush here. It might be hard for those on that side of the House to accept it, but the fact remains that many of these juvenile offenders are in detention because they have committed horrendous crimes. They have committed rape, grievous bodily harm, armed robbery and murder, and they are in detention centres like the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre. Their contempt of the law is frightening. Annual statistics for 2017-18 show that 76 per cent of young people facing court have two or more proven offences and half of them have committed four offences or more. Even more alarmingly, more than half of the young people admitted to detention have been there before, and half of the youths admitted to detention have been there more than once that year.

I support the provision of body worn cameras and the capturing of audio. As we have seen in Townsville and other areas, youth detention centres can be dangerous places and any action to increase the safety of both offenders and staff can only be a positive step. I also believe that a responsibly run information-sharing service is a positive. We need to be very clear that detention centres are designed to protect the community and rehabilitate these offenders. If sharing information with the proper controls will assist in rehabilitating offenders and therefore make our communities safer, that is worth supporting.

What I cannot support are the amendments to the bail decision-making framework. Instead of prescribing in favour of bail, we should support the staff who deal with these young people: the hardworking police officers. I want to put on the record my support and respect for the job that all police officers in Queensland do. I can tell you that police officers in Townsville and North Queensland in particular are at their wits' end dealing with the youth crime epidemic that has been going up there for three or four years.

There is no question that juvenile justice is a complex issue, but we have come to a point in time in this state where bold and innovative decisions need to be made in this space. Tinkering around the edges has failed miserably, and there is an urgent need to take decisive action to address the underlying issues around juveniles who commit crime. There certainly needs to be a lot more work done to get these kids to school because, in my experience, kids who attend school are not out there breaking into houses and stealing cars. There also need to be a lot more work done with juvenile offenders when

they leave detention facilities. Simply letting these young offenders out of detention centres and sending them straight back into the home environment with no supervision or control is a recipe for disaster. If this government was fair dinkum about addressing this issue they would put more resources into that area. I conclude by encouraging all members to give proper consideration to the important and sensible amendments moved by my colleague, the member for Toowoomba South.