



Speech by

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OFFENDERS (SERIOUS SEXUAL OFFENCES) MINIMUM IMPRISONMENT AND REHABILITATION BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (8.39 pm): It is with pleasure that I make my contribution to the Offenders (Serious Sexual Offences) Minimum Imprisonment and Rehabilitation Bill—private member's bill—this evening. The purpose of this bill is to impose minimum periods of imprisonment on persons convicted of serious sexual offences as well as ensuring that these criminal perpetrators successfully complete rehabilitation programs prior to their release from imprisonment. Currently many serious sexual offenders are not imprisoned for their crimes. Those who are imprisoned are not successfully rehabilitated before their release back into the community, which raises the very real prospect of their reoffending by preying on innocent people. It also creates some very real fear for their previous victims. It is a very sad indictment on our society today that such strength of legislation is necessary. However, a short perusal of the daily court cases in any newspaper will highlight the enormous crime rate. The numbers of serious sexual offences, such as rape and paedophilia, seem to be on the rise—they are not on the decrease—and the numbers of reoffending serial criminals is appalling.

Schedule 1 of the bill outlines what constitutes a serious sexual offence. I have no intention of going through those offences, but from this list it is obvious that this legislation would not apply to minor crimes. The crimes outlined are heinous. These are atrocious crimes that head the list of atrocities committed on innocent victims. Those innocent victims are mostly young people and women. This bill does not refer to minor crimes but refers to actions that are appalling and are against all levels of human decency. The government has an obligation to ensure that society is protected. Only increased penalties can act as a deterrent and echo public feeling that any real message can be sent to perpetrators.

Quoting from the Department of Child Safety annual report, 12,985 individual Queensland children were verified as victims of abuse in 2004-05. These cases, of course, involve many of neglect but also sexual abuse. The number of sexual offences against young people that go under the radar—in other words, do not even get to the court—is also a matter of real concern. Thank goodness that at last the community at large is trying to face this problem. For far too long these matters have been swept under the carpet as not being acceptable topics of conversation, and there have even been denials that these things could actually be occurring. Tragically, they are occurring, and the victims are innocent children caught up in situations beyond their control.

Recently I read some media releases from Barbara Biggs, who is a campaigner against child abuse. This particular media release was about 55 lenient child abuse sentences that were currently under review in Scotland. The reason that these sentences were under review was the issue of emotional attachment of the victim to their abuser. In one case a man received 90 hours of community service because a girl, then eight-years-old, said she was in love with her abuser. This is one of the typical methods of how these individuals operate. The abusers play on their victims' emotions. Barbara Biggs' comments on this are that, in her view, far from making the crime less serious, this emotional attachment, which is so common in cases where there is no violence, is the most damaging aspect of the abuse of children. It gives girls in particular a very skewed idea of love at an age when they are forming their new adult self. This warped

view often prevents victims from forming healthy relationships for the rest of their adult lives. For far too long adults have previously been excused in these issues, but thank goodness, at long last, the community has had enough.

Many paedophiles and potential paedophiles are hardened, evil criminals. I have no doubt that many of these people are not remorseful and are, and always will remain, a danger to the community. Statistics show that some of these people have a predilection for children because of situations they have been through. Many of these potential and convicted paedophiles have been victims themselves.

In countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand there are community based programs, 24-hour helplines and adolescent offender programs where it is possible for a potential offender to get help well before they may end up in jail. There is much evidence in the global community to show that rehabilitation programs can work and are working. This is not an area that Queensland or Australia has concentrated on. Child abuse prevention is better than the cure. Rehabilitation does work in many cases. Rehabilitation must be directed at potential offenders.

Unless a paedophile can successfully complete a rehabilitation program, they must not be released back into the community. There are far too many documented cases where perpetrators are released to simply reoffend again. The fear and anxiety caused to members of the community has been well documented in press articles over the last couple of years. However, when these people are at large again, there is real fear and anxiety. The previous victims also have a real fear when they know that these creatures are roaming free again.

I cite a very sad case in my electorate where an intellectually handicapped person, who lives independently in a unit, was raped by a neighbouring resident in the same block of units. The alleged perpetrator has been charged and released on bail but has gone back to where he lives. It is little wonder, as members can imagine, that in this instance the victim is absolutely terrified and she will not, and cannot, return to her home.

Currently there are not sufficient deterrents in the Queensland legal system for potential criminals, and the sentencing is far too lenient. The community is crying out for tougher laws. Listen to the community! The members of the community are crying out for tougher laws to protect them. This is an extremely sensible and much-needed piece of legislation.

I call on the members on the other side of the House to listen reasonably to the debate tonight and seriously consider the bill before the House. The message is strong and clear. I know that every member in this House shares our abhorrence of these crimes. The time to act has come.