




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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YOUTH JUSTICE AND OTHER LEGISLATION (INCLUSION OF 17-YEAR-OLD PERSONS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (8.44 pm): I rise to speak to the Youth Justice and Other Legislation (Inclusion of 17-year-old Persons) Amendment Bill 2016. I note that the committee could not reach agreement on the passage of the bill. I share the concerns of the committee members from this side of the House with this particular bill.

This is a significant issue. It is a significant issue not only for offenders but more importantly for communities such as Townsville. Over recent months we have seen the residents of Townsville subjected to an unrelenting and rampant crime spree that shows no sign of ending. On a daily basis I receive calls from residents and families expressing their concern with the constant break-ins, the out-of-control stealing of motor vehicles and the virtual impunity with which these young offenders are currently acting. In short, the residents of Townsville have had enough. They are sick and tired of waking up to find that their homes have been broken into or their vehicles have been stolen and trashed. Many of these residents are virtual prisoners in their own homes, fearful of going out in case these juvenile criminals should target their home whilst they are out. It is so bad that residents are now receiving psychological counselling to deal with the stress of having their property stolen and their homes broken into. Disturbingly, residents have threatened to take matters into their own hands. It is only a matter of time before this ticking time bomb explodes on the streets of Townsville.

The youth justice system in Queensland currently applies to young people aged between 10 and 16 years, with young people alleged to have committed offences as 17-year-olds treated as adults in the criminal justice system. I have grave concerns with this bill relating to the inclusion of 17-year-olds in youth detention centres. I was formerly a mentor at the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in Townsville, so I have firsthand knowledge of how youth detention centres operate and the interactions between youth offenders within these centres. I spent many hours and many days in that centre, and I came to know all of the inmates at that centre during that period of time.

It is bad enough locking up 16-year-olds with 10- and 11-year-old offenders. I have witnessed the standover tactics, the passing on of the tricks of the trade and the way these older offenders influence and manipulate younger offenders. The last thing we need to be doing is bringing 17-year-olds into youth detention centres, because this will simply exacerbate the situation and lead to a further erosion of rehabilitation programs.

I remind the chamber that 17-year-old offenders in the adult prison system are currently segregated, so any suggestion that these offenders are somehow subjected to abuse or improper conduct with adult offenders is rubbish. These offenders are where they belong: in an adult prison where they can access the appropriate adult rehabilitation programs including vocational training. The youth justice system is facing mounting criticism from Queenslanders, and this bill will do nothing to address the escalating crime problem in centres such as Townsville.

The question that also arises regarding the proposed changes is that of parole eligibility. At present, 17-year-old offenders would be eligible for release from prison on parole. This gives some degree of control over offenders when they are released from prison and provides an immediate return-to-prison option to police should the offender commit further offences whilst on parole. I am led to believe that, if this bill were to proceed through parliament tonight, 17-year-old offenders would be processed through the juvenile justice system, meaning that they would not be released on parole, effectively giving them free rein should they resort to the commission of further offences.

In order to accommodate 17-year-olds in youth detention centres in Queensland it will be necessary to construct a new centre, as there is no capacity in current centres across the state. It defies logic that this government will spend in the vicinity of \$400 million to construct a new youth detention centre, with an additional \$44 million per annum predicted in operational costs. I am sure there are many programs and initiatives throughout Queensland that would appreciate and put to good use \$444 million in funding.

The minister cannot elaborate on the operational details of how these 17-year-olds will be accommodated in youth detention centres and that is a clear indication that this government has not thought this through. It is clear that this government has no plan to address spiralling youth crime rates in Townsville and no plan to transition 17-year-old offenders from adult prisons to youth detention centres. You cannot make up policy on the run and it is obvious that those opposite in their rush to bring this bill before the House have not done their homework. I have said many times in this place that the time to target juveniles who are heading down a path of crime is at primary school age. As a former police officer, I can unequivocally say that some of the 15- and 16-year-old youths that I spoke to and mentored at the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre were hardened criminals with several pages of criminal history and they certainly knew the ropes and they knew the legal system inside out. We are not talking about angels here; we are talking about young offenders who have committed the most serious of crimes, and here we are today contemplating the transition of 17-year-olds into our youth detention centres to further poison the minds of these young offenders.

There is no question that our youth detention centres are struggling to rehabilitate and reintegrate youth offenders back into mainstream society. We hear reports on a daily basis of offenders who are released from prison in the morning and who are back offending later that day, and that is not good enough. Why we would add to that problem by introducing 17-year-olds into the mix simply defies logic. We need fundamental changes to the way we deal with juvenile offenders. We need to stop these kids from breaking into houses, stealing cars, trashing people's property and running rampant throughout our community, and we need to get that right before we can even think about bringing 17-year-olds back into youth detention centres. You reap what you sow and the dismantling of legislation brought in by the previous LNP government such as breach of bail for youth offenders has led to an increase in crime and a Police Service which is at its wit's end in trying to deal with this issue.

As members of the Legislative Assembly we have an obligation to our fellow Queenslanders to ensure our police have the tools they need to do their job, that our judiciary has the legislation and the power to deal with the offenders and that our prisons are doing the job that they were set up to do. Unfortunately, we are falling well short of the mark and, despite its rhetoric, it is clearly obvious that this government needs to do a lot more to keep our community safe. Members on this side of the House have a proven track record of getting tough on crime, of stepping up to the plate and making the tough decisions, because that is what our community expects and that is what it demands. Transitioning 17-year-old offenders back into youth detention centres falls well short of what is required to address the crime problem that currently exists in our community. This is an ill-conceived, knee-jerk reaction to a broader crime problem and for that reason I oppose the bill before the House.