



Speech By
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SUMMARY OFFENCES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (2.46 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the bill before the House. The right to peaceful assembly is a cornerstone of democracy. This right is enshrined in Queensland through the Peaceful Assembly Act and now the Human Rights Act. The right to dissent, the right to express views not in accord with the government of the day, is essential in this democracy. I am too young to remember the Joh days which have been invoked in many submissions. I was in primary school at the time, but he was a prominent figure in our house growing up. I grew up going to Labour Day marches and hearing stories of the Springbok and anti-Vietnam protests. Growing up in the western suburbs, I was amused by the running commentary provided by the ever-changing anti-Joh messages scrawled across the side of the Walter Taylor Bridge.

As I remarked in my first speech, I think it was quite a shock for my parents when I opted for a career in uniform. Not that they were disappointed, I don't think, but because the narrative in our house was not particularly positive for the blue uniform, which was often seen as the extension of an autocratic government. To explain my choice in careers is both simple and complex. In essence, it is due to the love of my country and my state. I grew up lucky: I grew up with privilege; I grew up with opportunity; I grew up in Queensland in the 1990s. It was a Queensland that has changed for the better and a Queensland that was worth defending for the rights of Queenslanders to feel safe, to be productive and to access the same opportunities I had. It was something worth preserving and protecting.

Obviously, I have come into this House from a policing background—20 years of uniformed policing—straight into this esteemed role. In my former life I policed major events here in South-East Queensland. I have been a member of the PSRT. I have worn the helmet, padding and other PPE. I have undertaken crowd management roles, including during major events such as CHOGM. I am also someone who has attended protests, marched in the street and waved banners and placards. I have even taken my children to some street marches, but I do not see these two facets of my life as mutually exclusive or at odds with each other.

The rights conferred upon citizens under the Peaceful Assemblies Act, much like those under the Human Rights Act, are not absolute. Let me explain. I will refer back to my committee's scrutiny of the Human Rights Bill when it was presented to the House. In their submissions many stakeholders commented that our human rights, including those under the Peaceful Assemblies Act, are not absolute; that is, some of these rights can be limited by other competing rights and other important interests in society and they may be subject under law to reasonable limits that are justifiable.

Where is this line? What are the limits that are justifiable? When does the right to dissent, the right to protest, collide with the other rights of Queenslanders? I will tell the House where I think it is. It is when exercising those rights injures others or puts others at risk of injury. The committee was repeatedly told during the public hearing by a number of submitters that the devices listed in this bill, the dangerous attachment devices, were harmless and that no-one had been injured using those devices. While the devices, inert and unused, in and of themselves are not inherently dangerous, the actions required to remove persons from them are. Angle grinding through steel or cutting concrete

within inches of a person is inherently dangerous. Ask people in the construction industry and they would absolutely consider it dangerous. Their workplace health and safety would not allow it. Our rescue services undertake these actions but only in instances of immediacy and where lives are at risk, and even then they acknowledge the risk.

The reason why injuries are not more common is due to the professionalism of those officers undertaking these duties—the same officers who many submitters were quite happy to denigrate. I do not think anyone joins the Police Service thinking they will be required to undertake specialist training in concrete and steel cutting, but we are expecting them to have this skill in the name of public safety. Cutting through metal and concrete in close proximity to people's limbs cannot be considered as anything other than risky—to the individuals locked on as well as those operating the machinery.

What surprised me during the hearing was the realisation that those locking on retained at all times the ability to self-release. The use of a self-release device is present in almost all instances of sleeping dragon devices; that is, at any time a protester may release themselves and avoid the risky cutting process, but they opt to stay on. They opt to put police through this inherently dangerous activity. They choose to. I was interested to note that one reason why some do not self-release is that the use of these devices actually caused them to lose feeling in their arms, for their arms to swell and for them to lose the ability to move their fingers. How is that for harmless?

As I stated earlier, when police undertake the process of cutting people free of these devices that does form part of their role in preserving public safety, and that is their job. It is one of the functions of the Queensland Police Service—to keep the community safe. I might add that I find comments from certain sections of the community that those who are protesting should come to some harm as quite abhorrent—specifically those with large media platforms suggesting that protesters should be run over. These are certainly at odds with the many professional oaths I have undertaken in my adult life.

I do have great concerns for instances where deliberate actions of members of the community place our police officers at unnecessary risk. As a society, we rightly condemn the actions of individuals whose foolishness places our first responders at risk. I obviously retain some solidarity with my former colleagues in blue, and I take a dim view of those who would take deliberate actions that place at risk our hardworking officers. This would not be acceptable in any other workplace.

I believe in the right to protest. I do not believe these laws will prevent the operation of the Peaceful Assembly Act. I note words that were said out the front of this House only yesterday: 'These laws are not going to stop protest.' That is right. As commented by many submitters on this bill, civil disobedience and protest have often been the catalyst for long-awaited and needed social change. Marching in the streets, striking and collectively organising to exert influence have all been tactics used and they will continue to be used. Merle Thornton and Rosalie Bogner could still chain themselves to the bar at the Regatta Hotel and not enliven these proposed laws. Muriel Matters, who was referenced in quite a few submissions to this committee, would still be able to chain herself to a grille if one still existed today and not enliven this bill, though I am sure the Speaker would still have a dim view of this and other actions she took in the British parliament.

The proposed bill is silent on the issue to be protested, the reason for the protest. These laws are not about why people protest; they are about the manner in which they protest. I understand that those who are currently protesting climate change feel this is a direct target of their cause, but I have attended climate protests as recently as last month. While I do not disagree with the cause, I do not accept that people operating under that cause have the right to place others at risk. What this bill seeks to do is to ensure that dangerous and unsafe tactics have no place in our peaceful assemblies. As I said earlier, I take my children to various marches and rallies for causes that I believe in. I feel that this is an important part of being brought up in a democracy in Queensland—understanding one's right to protest and demand change, but not at the expense of, or when it endangers, other Queenslanders.