




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Youth Detention

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (2.47 pm): It gives me no pleasure to speak about a sad new chapter in the Palaszczuk government's complete and utter failure to manage Queensland's child safety and youth justice systems. I speak, of course, of what those on the other side of the House do not want to talk about—that is, the ABC *Four Corners* report on Monday that detailed the utterly horrific experience of children in Queensland police watch houses.

Children as young as 10 have been held in maximum security watch houses designed for adults only. Members should let that sink in. Words cannot describe how disgraceful that fact is. More than 500 files released on Monday have finally laid bare the traumatic stories of children who have been held for weeks on end, as well as distressing incidents such as cases of self-harm and a young female placed in a pod with two male alleged sex offenders. It has been further revealed that two children, including a mentally impaired 14-year-old boy, were held in a watch house for 33 days or more. As these watch houses are designed for adults to stay in for only eight hours, it is clear that something is fundamentally wrong with holding children in the very same watch houses for more than a day, let alone 33 days or 40 days.

Some 52 files refer to children 14 or under, including a 12-year-old girl who spent nine days at the Brisbane watch house and was made to wear a suicide smock and an 11-year-old boy who spent one night in the Brisbane watch house as well. Again, something is fundamentally wrong. Just this morning the member for Bulimba said that she does not want young people to stay in watch houses. We could not agree more. Unfortunately, it is a bit rich for the Minister for Child Safety, Youth and Women to say that as of 10.30 am yesterday there were 79 children in watch houses across Queensland. As I said before—and it really needs repeating—some of these children are 10 years old.

Minister Di Farmer herself told *Four Corners* that watch houses are not an environment that are good for young people—again, we could not agree more—but what is the government doing? If the minister thinks that is the case, I would propose that she consider taking what might seem to her and the Premier to be a radical step—that is, try removing the kids from watch houses today. Not surprisingly, I am not the first to suggest this idea to the Palaszczuk Labor government. The incredible efforts of the Public Guardian to bring this shameful child safety saga to light are to be praised. I will quote from the Public Guardian, as it is perhaps her words that are best to use when describing this horrific child safety system that confronts us in Queensland—

I have visited the Brisbane watch house, and seen with my own eyes children who are cold, who are hungry, who haven't accessed any real outdoor air for two weeks or more, and who have little or no access to education. Some are being held in these conditions for weeks at a time.

Again, something is fundamentally wrong here. To make things worse, the Public Guardian has already recommended two viable solutions to the Palaszczuk Labor government to correct this child safety shame—recommendations that will make immediate change. One proposed solution is to build

temporary immediate accommodation at youth centres. If those opposite want help designing this, I can guarantee that we could do it in a hurry. Another proposed solution is to transport youth to the watch house each day from the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre where they have access to fresh air, proper health care, appropriate education and, more importantly, psychological support. These solutions may not be perfect, but it should be obvious to anyone that they are far and away better than children being held in watch houses as they are now.

What makes this entire situation worse—and it is hard to believe that this case could be worse—is that the Public Guardian reports that almost none of these children have been convicted of a crime. Rather, they are simply on remand or are homeless, yet they are forced to endure conditions that not even adult criminals are forced to face. Something is deeply and fundamentally wrong here. The Premier and her minister have failed every single child who has been forced to endure time in these watch houses. As terrible as this watch-house debacle is, it is sadly not the only significant failure of the Premier and the Minister for Child Safety when it comes to caring for children—the most vulnerable in our state. The latest quarterly figures from the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women show that just 44.8 per cent of investigations were completed within the 60-day target. This is down from the already shocking figure from the previous quarter and is way below the 63.6 per cent achieved by the LNP when last in government.

When it comes to child safety, these children are the most vulnerable and they need our help. This Labor government has failed them time and time again. There is nothing more important than protecting our children, but somewhere along the line this incompetent Labor government has clearly forgotten what its role is. The Palaszczuk Labor government's failure to act on child safety has put thousands of children at harm and has seen hundreds subjected to utterly unacceptable conditions by the one authority that they should have trust in to care for them. This government has failed them. Minister Di Farmer is failing to take real action on child safety and Queensland's most vulnerable continue to suffer as a result. I call on the Premier and the minister to right this wrong. Something is deeply and fundamentally wrong here.