




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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MOTION

Mine Safety, Parliamentary Inquiry

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (6.31 pm): According to statistics, most young people caught up in the youth justice system do not reoffend. The core issue is a small group of repeat offenders who are responsible for multiple crimes, and dealing with the root causes of their recidivism requires complex strategies. Issues addressed in this bill include the length of time children are held in watch houses.

This bill amends the Youth Justice Act to make clear in the charter of youth justice principles that proceedings started against a child for an offence should be finalised as soon as practicable—something we would all agree with. The bill requires a child who is arrested for an offence or for a breach of a bail condition and is in custody to be brought before the Childrens Court as soon as practicable and within 24 hours after arrest. If it is not practicable for the court to be constituted within 24 hours of the arrest then the child must be brought before the court as soon as practicable on the next day the court can practicably be constituted.

There is plenty of evidence and research that there are disproportionate numbers of young people in detention with developmental disorders, such as learning disabilities, communication disorders, foetal alcohol syndrome and so on. We also know that around 70 per cent of young people in the youth justice system were known to the child protection system.

Young Indigenous Queenslanders are most at risk of entering the system. It is very concerning that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders accounted for 66 per cent of young people in detention in Queensland, while making up only about six per cent of all young people aged 10 to 17 years. Also, the majority of young people in detention are on remand and 70 per cent are Indigenous children who are locked up simply because they do not have a suitable place to stay.

We know the scenario for young people is particularly bleak in small towns and remote parts of the state lacking infrastructure and resources. We have seen children in watch houses because we have allowed an all-too-common scenario of a magistrate sitting in the Childrens Court with a tearaway kid who is, say, aged 14 years before them. If the kid lives in a chaotic family environment and there is no responsible adult who can supervise the kid until the court can deal with the matter, then the kid has to be remanded in custody. If they live in Central Queensland, my part of the world, Cairns, Townsville or the north-west they will be brought under escort to Brisbane.

It was interesting on my last trip to Cairns to see a number of police officers with a number of detained young Indigenous boys being taken through the domestic terminal to get on the same Qantas flight I was coming back to Brisbane on. These kids were quite scared and distressed. I think everyone in that airport was somewhat confused why children would be paraded through a domestic airport.

We know children need to be detained in appropriate facilities such as youth detention centres. Under Labor, children as young as 10 have been held in watch houses for weeks on end while they wait for overcrowded detention centres to have space available. As at 10 May 2019, 89 children were

held in watch houses across the state. Since the revelations about children being held in watch houses, there has been a significant concern around the length of time children are held in watch houses. We heard of a child being detained for 45 days.

Unfortunately, for our community's safety we see those opposite worrying more about political theatre rather than asking hard questions about what actually will reduce recidivism and most effectively promote the rehabilitation of young offenders. Some will claim that punishment and deterrents may in fact be counterproductive to the basic goal of dealing with offenders. We cannot allow this government to continue to go soft on crime. Youth crime in Queensland has skyrocketed. The statistics as of this morning were: robbery up 128 per cent; armed robbery up 88 per cent; unlawful use of a motor vehicle up 49 per cent; assault up 33 per cent; serious assault up 31 per cent; and unlawful entry up 34 per cent.

It is important that a balance is struck between holding offenders in appropriate facilities and keeping repeat offenders off Queensland streets. The safety of the community is paramount and community safety should always be favoured over offenders. It is of real concern when it is obvious that Labor is weakening the bail laws in an attempt to reduce the number of children entering overcrowded youth detention centres. Labor has made these amendments to help take the pressure off Labor's youth detention centre crisis which was sparked because of Labor's failed transition of 17-year-olds from adult prisons to the youth detention system in 2016.

Under Labor's bill there will be more youths who commit serious offences putting the community at risk. The goal with juvenile offenders should be to move them through a pathway toward full engagement and return them to normal society. People are much more useful as citizens and taxpayers, fathers and mothers and all the rest of it than languishing in jail or in a detention centre or watch house and remaining on the margins of society.

It is important to discuss the length of time children are held in watch houses. Labor should be ashamed of the conditions children were held in, including claims of a young girl who was placed in a cell next door to two alleged paedophiles and numerous suicide attempts. We have heard many other horrendous examples in the debate tonight.

By keeping children in watch houses, Labor has shown a blatant disregard for children's human rights, something which Amnesty International and the newly established Human Rights Commission has protested. We also share concerns about the time children may be held in watch houses. That is why the shadow minister's amendments to restrict the length of time children can be held in watch houses to 72 hours should be supported.

In conclusion, I support the shadow minister's proposed amendments. I ask all members to consider strengthening this bill to make sure we are doing the very best for our most vulnerable and that is the youth in our community.