



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

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STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SAFETY BILL

 **Mr MOLHOEK** (Southport—LNP) (3.49 pm): I rise to make a brief contribution to the Strengthening Community Safety Bill 2023. I want to open by simply saying that, above all else, our young people need leadership, young people need boundaries and, dare I say, young people need to be kept busy. This may well be the fourth or fifth time that we have debated similar laws and similar issues to this in the parliament in my 10 years here since 2012, but over the years in lounge rooms and coffee shops in discussions with local constituents and friends and family the subject comes up often enough in respect of youth justice and the rise of youth crime. Having said that, it also comes up quite often in respect of increased drug use, the ice epidemic and so many other challenges that we face. One common theme comes out, and that is that there is a sense of hopelessness around the lack of boundaries, the lack of clarity and the lack of rules that we provide our young people. Let's think about the last three or four years and the many challenges that our young people have faced. We have never lived through a pandemic, we have a war in Europe, the media is full of conflicting messages—some full of hope and some full of hopelessness—and then there is the world of social media and the many challenges that that presents. It would seem that many of these youth offenders are driven by the need for likes and looking for acceptance, and is that not just so incredibly sad?

Over the last decade or so we have conducted three major inquiries into child safety and protection practices in this state and we are still no closer to dealing with the issues facing young people and children within the state of Queensland. In fact, I note in a recent article in the *Australian* by Mindy Sotiri, the Executive Director of the Justice Reform Initiative, she talks about the fact that there have never been so many young people in prison in Queensland. In fact, there are more children in prison in Queensland than anywhere else in Australia, and I think that is an incredible indictment on us as members of this parliament, the government and the ministry that serves the government of this state. We simply do need to do better.

The LNP has raised three particular concerns with this bill. One is that we need to unshackle the judiciary so that it can make appropriate calls in terms of sentencing, particularly in respect of repeat offenders. We have also advocated very strongly around breach of bail but most importantly—and this is the area that I want to spend a little bit of time on—the need to really audit those preventive services and those early intervention services that we already fund and the need for alternative services. I note that the member for Bonney touched on Men of Business, MOB, a not-for-profit organisation that has set up in my electorate. It has been operating for a number of years and Marco Renai and his family have developed a passion to help young men, but it is no nonsense, it is tough love, there are clear boundaries, there are clear expectations and the young men who attend that school in the main street of Southport know exactly what is expected of them. They know what is expected of them in terms of behaviour, academic performance, how they dress and how they turn up. I would suggest to the House that for many young people that is in fact part of the challenge: they really do not know what is expected of them anymore because we are living in a world that sends out so many mixed messages.

The other challenge we face—it has certainly been a challenge in Southport over the last few years, more so during COVID when so many of our police were sent down to the border for border control—and that has continued is that we have an acute lack of police, so when these young gangs travel down from Brisbane, many of them on the heavy rail and then the light rail into Southport and Surfers and other parts of the coast, we simply have not had the police presence to deal with them. When the police have been proactive and they have been visible, we have seen some great outcomes.

I want to commend the officers of the Southport Police Station particularly for their hard work in fairly trying circumstances. In fact, every year I ask as a question on notice to the minister for an update on police numbers at Southport. It is interesting to note that about 10 years ago the reported number was about 128 permanent positions, over the last three or four years the number has been reported as being 89 and then more recently it was reported as being under 80. I wrote to the minister and asked for some clarification and the response I got, which was, I guess, somewhat reasonable, was that he relies on the department for the information. Regardless of the response and the answers, the fact is that police numbers are down. On occasions I have been privy to see rosters from the Southport Police Station and, out of an allocated 90-odd officers, there have in fact been times when there have only been 40 or 50 staff available to cover the watch house, to cover the Southport policing district, to provide frontline service and support to the Gold Coast University Hospital and to be the front line of support for the Southport Courthouse—and then we wonder why the police are struggling to provide adequate coverage of the electorate of Southport.

This youth crime crisis that we are seeing across the state is incredibly reflective of this government, and the member for Bonney touched on it. It is a government that has been there for eight years. We have heard so many promises, but what we have seen is so many failures and let-downs. We continue to see cost blowouts because it is not able to manage the budgets. We have seen significant challenges within the health system and the health crisis. We are hearing stories of schools that are struggling to retain their staff and teacher shortages across the state. We have never seen so many young people in the child protection system. I am not sure what the current numbers are, but I suspect that it is something like about 12,000 young people who are under child protection orders and I think about 8,000 young people who are not even living in their own homes.

Queenslanders deserve better. There is so much more that we need to do. While we will be supporting this legislation because we do need to move forward with tougher laws, what we do need is consistency. We cannot be soft on crime one week and then tough on crime the next. We cannot keep sending mixed messages to the young people of Queensland or to Queenslanders. We need to set clear boundaries and expectations. Laws need to mean something, and that is why provisions like breach of bail—hopefully to be used sparingly—need to be in place, so that offenders know that the laws are real and that we are serious about our position on crime.