




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 25 May 2023

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.03 pm): This particular inquiry exposed the committee to a lot of things that we would prefer not to see in our communities. We heard from many submitters who have ideas about reform. We had hoped to address more in the report about recommendations on issues subsequent to decriminalisation around health, housing and welfare service delivery. Ultimately, within the process we did not deal with the many underlying issues of poverty, homelessness and entrenched disenfranchisement. Through many of the committee's other recommendations we tried to recognise the reality of what we found on the ground. Public places should be free from begging, public intoxication and urination. Unfortunately, we did not really get to see the disproportionate responses to those offences and many foresee the continuation of the difficulties in dealing with these acts of crime, as they are now.

With significant serious issues confronting many of our communities, some submitters questioned why the government is simply following the other states and territories with legislative reforms that fail to strengthen legislation and that repeal laws that maintain and improve existing behavioural and community public space standards. It was very evident to us that unless we do a lot of work first then none of these reforms will be welcomed by members of our communities. We support many submitters who expressed concerns with the proposed repealing of these legislative provisions.

I highlight, in particular, the local government submitters and the police who overwhelmingly said they would prefer to see non-government organisations and government agencies tasked with the health and welfare of vulnerable persons being part of co-responder arrangements. The recommendation to repeal fails to acknowledge the lack of services and funding and the capacity of other agencies to respond to reports of public intoxication, which creates an environment where police do not have the power of law to ensure community safety and amenity.

Of major concern to the LNP members of the committee was the apparent impact on police banning notices in the safe night precincts from the proposed repeal of sections of the Summary Offences Act 2005. Police must establish that an individual is behaving in a disorderly, offensive, threatening or violent way and with associated behaviours, including urination or being intoxicated. That is why we could not support the changes proposed to the safe night precincts.

The committee received many submissions with references to the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which was held in 1991. That shows how long these issues have been around in our communities. Other jurisdictions in Australia are experiencing the same issues. We cannot see that the decriminalisation of public intoxication in other jurisdictions has led to any improvements, particularly when there is not the key infrastructure needed to support those who need to be diverted.

During the inquiry submitters and individuals spoke about many issues, but there was one issue that highlighted the failures to adequately action recommendations 79 to 91 from the deaths in custody report relating to the diversion of First Nations people away from police custody. Throughout the inquiry, LNP members of the committee continued to prosecute the point that the evidence being presented regarding public intoxication was about lack of health and welfare capacity and is not so much a police issue.

What remains of great concern is the lack of evidence addressing alcohol abuse as a societal, health and medical problem. Of course, everywhere we went that was a consistent issue that we would prefer we did not have to deal with. Much more needs to be done to address the disparities in public health, social welfare and community safety amongst vulnerable Queenslanders, particularly our First Nations people. Key areas of concern, in particular, are north and west Queensland and the Gold Coast where immediate assistance is needed. We must acknowledge that 30 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody we have failed to adequately deal with the increasing and serious societal problems in relation to intoxicated persons in our communities.

The inquiry proved the need for the immediate implementation of targeted 'sobering up centres' where intoxicated persons can be taken overnight and then dealt with in a more humane manner. Investment in appropriate diversionary centres is inadequate in many of our communities. Universally, every volunteer or employee the committee spoke with highlighted the serious and urgent need for more beds.

I must say that, despite the efforts of successive Commonwealth, state and local governments to address Indigenous disadvantage, progress has been mixed at best. In some areas, minor improvements have been cancelled and the situation is worsening, as we have seen particularly with Closing the Gap targets. Tangible and trusted evidence is lacking on the performance and effectiveness of many Indigenous programs. I say again, as I have said so many times, that we must get to the core of the funding. We must be auditing the organisations that take so much, promise so much and deliver so little. I think time is up for those organisations. They must be held to account. Everywhere I went, most of the organisations tried to justify their actions and could show few outcomes, yet they are working on behalf of the most vulnerable Queenslanders who just want governments to look after them, provide services and make sure that funding reaches those who need it most.