




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR COOPER

Record of Proceedings, 19 March 2024

FORENSIC SCIENCE QUEENSLAND BILL

 **Ms BUSH** (Cooper—ALP) (11.25 am): The role that Queensland's Forensic and Scientific Services lab plays in the upholding of justice cannot be understated. Its sole purpose is to uncover evidence and information for use in the investigation of crime and to provide evidence for criminal trials and coronial inquests. Therefore, trust in that process is very important. Victims of personal, invasive and violent crimes are some of the most resilient people I have met and had the good fortune of working with. They are also very vulnerable because of the nature of events that have occurred that are external to them. When you hand yourself over to this journey it is so important that all of those component parts of the system work both in isolation and collectively. That trust extends further because it relates to the public confidence that we all have in the system. Public confidence matters. It matters for the victims, it matters for the investigators, it matters for the prosecutors and it matters for members of the public. The events that have unfolded have highlighted that there have been some real issues occurring within the administration of justice and it has undermined public confidence. That has been acknowledged by the government and there has been a response to that.

I do know Shandee's case reasonably well. I spoke then about the fact that more work needed to happen and the government has listened to that. I want to say to victims who have spoken out and to all of the public servants who have bravely shared their experiences that the government has acknowledged that there were failings in the lab. We authorised an independent inquiry into that. Recommendations were made to government and those recommendations have been accepted.

During the last sitting week, the House passed legislation to expand the range of criminal charges that can be brought back before a jury on discovery that fresh and compelling evidence was not put forward. It is an historic step for victims of violent crime, particularly victims of sexual violence and the families of manslaughter victims. Through this bill we are taking that reform even further by ensuring that Queensland's forensic health and justice response is one that upholds justice and, importantly, meets community expectations. Victims can be assured that this is nation-leading legislation.

In June 2022, our government announced an independent commission of inquiry into forensic DNA testing in Queensland. The inquiry was established to ensure transparency and to look for opportunities to ensure public confidence in the collection, testing and analysis of DNA undertaken in Queensland and in the criminal justice system more broadly. The commission of inquiry was conducted by former president of the Court of Appeal and retired judge Walter Sofronoff. The commission received thousands of pieces of information and documents, conducted multiple public and private hearings, and importantly spoke to victims about their concerns, views and wishes. The final report provided to the government made 123 recommendations, which the government has accepted.

I want to acknowledge Vicki Blackburn who said, for all the victims who may have been involved in the ramifications of Project 13, that this information should be made public. That is really important. The bill will implement recommendation 121 of the 2022 inquiry that recommended a statutory

framework for forensic services similar to that of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. Sofronoff found that the location of Queensland forensic services within the Department of Health was simply not effective and in fact was not as focused as it could have been.

The bill will help to ensure we never lose sight of that primary role, purpose and impact of forensic services in Queensland. It sets out the key components of the forensic services system and includes various protections for the integrity of the system. The bill establishes the Director of Forensic Science Queensland to lead the provision of forensic services to the Queensland Police Service, the Director of Public Prosecutions, coroners and other criminal justice entities. Forensic Science Queensland will be relocated within the Department of Justice and Attorney-General, as recommended by the Sofronoff inquiry, and will consist of the DNA laboratory, scientists and a range of staff to support research, innovation and administrative activities. An interim Forensic Science Queensland is currently operating within Queensland Health and will be moved to the justice portfolio through administrative processes after the bill has been passed. We heard in committee hearings that work is currently underway to relocate and refocus the service, so victims can be assured there will be no interruption to services.

Further, the bill establishes the Forensic Science Queensland Advisory Council. The council will monitor and review the policies and procedures of Forensic Science Queensland that relate to the administration of criminal justice. The advisory council will be able to give advice to the Attorney-General and give advice and recommendations to the director on its own initiative. The bill sets out mandatory council members to ensure it consists of multidisciplinary representation including police, prosecutions, defence, victim support, independent forensic science and private legal professional representation.

Last year the Bennett inquiry looked further into DNA testing at the Queensland forensic service and, importantly, found no evidence that would undermine public confidence in the current work of Forensic Science Queensland. However, I acknowledge that it will take structural change, appropriate funding, appropriate governance, monitoring and reporting to rebuild the trust between the lab and victims and members of the public.

A lot of work and consultation has gone into this bill, demonstrating the wide range of stakeholders who have skin in the game when it comes to Queensland's forensic lab and the administration of justice. I appreciate that the minister has given both her sympathies and her gratitude to the family of Shandee Blackburn, to the many victims and to Queensland Health staff who bravely shared their experiences in the hope that this would deliver a just outcome for others. I associate myself with those views. It is because of them that we now have such a nation-leading bill before the House, so we owe them a debt of gratitude. I commend the bill to the House.