




Speech By
Peter Russo

MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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VICTIMS' COMMISSIONER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE REVIEW BOARD BILL

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (11.51 am): I rise to speak to the Victims' Commissioner and Sexual Violence Review Board Bill 2024. In its report No. 9 of the 57th Parliament, tabled in this Assembly on 19 April 2024, the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee recommended to the Assembly that the bill be passed. The overarching objectives of the bill are to establish the Victims' Commissioner to promote and protect victims' rights and establish the Sexual Violence Review Board to identify and review systemic issues in relation to the reporting, investigation and prosecution of sexual offences.

The bill takes important steps in providing recognition and support to victims of crime. In establishing the permanent Victims' Commissioner, the bill addresses systemic issues relating to how victims of crime are treated. Too often, victim-survivors have reported feeling retraumatised and unsupported by the criminal justice system. It is time to change this. One in five women and one in 20 men have experienced sexual violence. As few as 13 per cent of sexual assaults are reported to police. That alarming statistic is not totally surprising because of the traditionally taboo nature of sexual violence and because the experience, from police to jury trial and verdict, has been described by the chair of the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce as 'traumatising, confusing, disempowering and slow'.

In early 2023, the former Legal Affairs and Safety Committee inquired into the support provided to victims of crime. The terms of reference for the inquiry included how to achieve better coordination of services for victims, how to ensure victims are heard and included during the criminal justice process, the functions and effectiveness of the Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2009 and the impacts of any recommendations. The former committee made 18 recommendations for government. These included recommendations for reviews of victims' rights, improved coordination of services, increasing access to information and trauma informed training, investing in victim support services and improving access to restorative justice and youth justice conferencing. The report also supported the taskforce's recommendation to establish a statutory role of a Victims' Commissioner in Queensland and a review of the charter by the Victims' Commissioner, once established. At that time, the committee found the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner would go a long way to addressing many of the issues raised by the courageous witnesses who appeared at the public hearings.

The functions of the Victims' Commissioner, except its complaint function, will apply to all victims of crime within the definition of 'victim' as outlined in clause 6 of the bill. Beyond the person who suffers harm, the definition includes their family members or dependants and a person who suffers harm as a direct result of intervening to help a person who had domestic violence committed against them.

Several submitters raised the importance of the Victims' Commissioner conducting community engagement and consultation so that those most in need of the services are, firstly, aware of them and, secondly, willing to engage with them. Some victims may be aware of the services but, due to a lack of trust in or fear of the system, may not be willing to engage with the services. Multicultural Australia said that there are significant barriers, posed by language and culture, to the reporting of sexual violence offences in particular and spoke of the stigma around crime and identifying oneself as a victim. The

organisation noted that the systemic review function of the Victims' Commissioner, in particular, will assist in breaking the multilayered barriers to multicultural victims accessing justice. Overall, the committee was satisfied with the appointment criteria provided for in the bill and that the Victims' Commissioner will be an independent statutory appointment. The committee acknowledged that many submitters spoke of the over-representation of marginalised groups as victims of crime.

All submitters who suggested changes relating to the membership of the board said these were necessary to accurately reflect the diverse community of Queensland and noted the benefits of increased representation at high levels in breaking down the barriers that marginalised people face in accessing justice. In response to these concerns, the department reiterated the requirements outlined in clause 69(5)(a) requiring the minister to ensure that the appointed members reflect the social diversity of the Queensland community such as those with a disability, lived experience of sexual assault and/or legal experience. The department also confirmed that it is intended that more than one member of the board may be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

I am proud to be part of a government that has taken real concrete steps to address these serious social issues. On behalf of the committee, I thank those individuals and organisations that made written submissions on the bill. I also thank our Parliamentary Service staff and the Department of Justice and Attorney-General. I commend the bill to the House.