




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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**EXPANDING ADULT CRIME, ADULT TIME AND TAKING A STRONG STANCE
ON DRUGS AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Ms JAMES** (Barron River—LNP) (7.40 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the Expanding Adult Crime, Adult Time and Taking a Strong Stance on Drugs and Anti-Social Behaviour Amendment Bill. Far North Queensland felt the crime crisis first and we feel it the worst. There is a long way to go to turn things around in our region. Labor's core beliefs are that people under the age of 18 who have broken the law should not be in jail. Labor believes that the age of criminal responsibility should be increased to youth over the age of 14. Labor believes that possessing drugs like meth, cocaine, heroin, ice and MDMA in small personal-use quantities on the streets is okay. Labor believes it is okay to urinate and defecate in public on our streets. Labor believes that youth breaching bail is not a crime.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr O'Shea): Member for Barron River, could I ask you to be relevant to the bill before us.

Ms JAMES: I am referring to the antisocial behaviour. Labor believes that youth breaching bail is not a crime and they should get another chance. Labor believes that detention should be an absolute last resort, and even if a youth criminal has committed crime after crime and has a rap sheet that is significantly larger in number than their age they still should not go to detention. Labor believes that youth criminals who do not get bail should be able to apply for bail as many times as they like until they get bail from the court. Labor believes that criminals are the victims and we should give them countless chances to turn their life around.

The compounding effect of weakening laws over the past decade has not just increased crime, it has allowed it to spread. Crime, particularly youth offending, does not exist in isolation; it spreads just like a virus. We saw during COVID how quickly one case became 10, 10 became hundreds and entire communities were impacted. That is exactly what is happening here. A small group of serious repeat offenders are not just committing crime; they are infecting others with it—recruiting, influencing, normalising this behaviour and pulling more young people into the cycle. One offender becomes five, five becomes 15 and before long the problem is no longer contained, it is embedded.

This did not happen by accident. Every decision to weaken laws, to remove consequences, to lower the bar has acted like removing the safeguards that stop that spread. Far North Queensland is now feeling the full force of that policy failure. The member for Cairns and former Labor representatives supported those changes. What we are dealing with today is the consequence of those decisions because every action has a reaction. In Far North Queensland the reaction has been the rapid, visible and deeply damaging spread of youth crime through our communities.

The Crisafulli government will not weaken the laws. This bill delivers on a key election commitment to make Queensland safer. Antisocial behaviour in Far North Queensland is also out of control and the police unfortunately do not have the laws they need to do anything about it because Labor weakened them. Small businesses in the Cairns CBD are suffering and closing because of

antisocial behaviour. We have several problem streets—Grafton Street, Mulgrave Road and Sheridan Street. A spate of business owners who are not even in my electorate are coming to my office for help as they have been able to get nowhere with the member for Cairns. There is a never-ending pattern of drinking in public, people urinating and defecating in doorways and aggressive or sexualised antisocial behaviour that is very confronting. It is impacting businesses to the point where they are shutting down as they just cannot retain customers or staff and there is constant damage to their business and reputation.

This is also happening in my electorate, in particular in Kuranda and other suburbs in the northern beaches. As a tourism town where one in six people are employed by tourism, it is an embarrassment to our great city. That is why this new legislation is so important. This bill recognises the impacts of antisocial behaviour and promotes community safety by creating new designated business and community precincts, giving our police the laws and resources they need to restore safety to our shopping centres, community hubs and business districts. This bill allows the government to declare high-risk areas—for example, the Cairns CBD and major shopping centres—as designated precincts and gives police stronger, clearer powers to restore order.

Key powers for police include 24-hour move-on directions and banning notices for one month or more. There are also provisions for escalation to banning notices for repeat behaviour. These new laws matter for Far North Queensland. They target repeat youth offenders disrupting our CBD and high-traffic community spaces. They help restore confidence for locals, businesses and tourism. It gives police the practical, on-the-ground tools they have been asking for and moves from reactive policing to proactive prevention. The bottom line is that it is about taking back control of our public spaces and supporting police to act decisively to ensure our business precincts are safe, usable and welcoming again.

Drugs are also a major driver of crime and antisocial behaviour in Far North Queensland and that is why it is essential we scrap Labor's failed three-strike, soft-on-drugs approach and restore consequences through a new illicit drug enforcement and diversion framework. We cannot be tough on crime if we are soft on drugs. Too often we hear drug use excused as a response to deeper issues of mental health challenges, trauma, homelessness and instability. It is not a solution, it is a mask. Illegal drug use does not treat anxiety or depression, it buries it. It does not resolve trauma, it postpones it. In many cases it takes people who are already vulnerable and pushes them further away from the help they actually need. Real recovery does not come from numbing pain, it comes from confronting it, treating it and connecting people to proper care and support and for that person to want to do the work to change and heal. That is why these laws matter.

They create the boundary between behaviour and consequence. They are the point where society says this is not acceptable and this is where intervention begins. When Labor weaken those laws, it does not reduce harm, it enables it. It removes the guardrails that interrupt the cycle and we leave vulnerable people drifting further into addiction, offending and disorder without consequence or direction. Clear laws, properly enforced, do not just deter offending, they create the structure that allows intervention to happen before harm becomes entrenched. This is not about being harsh for the sake of it, it is about recognising that without consequence there is no intervention point and without intervention the cycle continues for individuals and for our communities.

Methamphetamine use is at record highs, with users reporting it is easy—even very easy—to obtain, cocaine and cannabis use is increasing, and heroin remains readily available. We are seeing the impact of that clearly in Far North Queensland, with youth criminals high on ice driving up the wrong side of our highway at high speed like they are playing a video game. At the same time, drug offences have risen significantly across Queensland, including possession, trafficking and other serious drug-related crime, following the introduction of weakened diversion settings. The harm is real and measurable. Hospital admissions for illicit drug poisoning are rising. Child protection data shows methamphetamine is present in a significant proportion of cases involving deceased children and young people. National research consistently links drugs—particularly methamphetamine—to both violent and property crime.

We are also seeing young people increasingly drawn into this cycle of addiction and offending. Our responsibility is not to normalise that cycle by saying, 'It's okay to carry a small amount of meth. The police won't charge you. It's not a criminal offence.' This is wrong on so many levels. Using ice one time in many cases means addiction for a very long time. If you are found to be carrying any amount of illegal drugs you should be charged and intervention programs kick in. If you walk out of a shop with something you did not pay for, it is still theft no matter how small. Possessing illegal drugs should be treated the same way. If something is illegal, it is illegal and we should not have a sliding scale of excuses. There is a direct relationship between the availability of a drug and social approval of its use and the incidence and prevalence of drug abuse in the community.

Lastly, I want to talk about the 12 serious offences we are adding to Adult Crime, Adult Time laws. They are not minor offences. They represent the most serious end of criminal behaviour. Far North Queensland has already seen real examples of this harm. We are seeing assault that causes injuries that last a lifetime. We are seeing group-based violence in public spaces. We are seeing abhorrent sexual offences against women and children. We are seeing cases involving abduction and torture type behaviour. What is also clear is that a small cohort of serious repeat youth offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of this harm. These new offences are specifically targeted at the upper end of severity and escalation.

The impact does not stop there. The Deputy Mayor of Cairns Regional Council has agreed for his story to be mentioned because it reflects what many victims are feeling. Recently his family were victims of a break-in during which their car was stolen. During the police response, the offenders were told the property belonged to the deputy mayor. They responded by saying that the house should have been burnt down. That threat has had a lasting impact on the family and they are fearful in their own home. The impact does not stop there because of insurance delays and a three-month wait for their vehicle. Like many victims, they are impacted not just by the crime itself but also by the prolonged disruption and the huge cost that follows.

This is why I support these laws, but I will be advocating for more. Injustice only wins when we let it win. We should not and will not let it win. Across our communities, people do not feel like justice is being served. They see repeat offenders walk free, bail breached within hours and the same cycle playing out again and again. We have strengthened the laws. The courts now have the power to hand down tougher sentences, which is exactly what the community expects. However, here is the problem: too many repeat offenders are getting bail and breaching it within hours. That is unacceptable. If you breach bail then you should go to jail—no second chances, no excuses. Serious repeat offenders being continually released on bail has to end. We have over 60 repeat offenders and our community is sick of it. I give my full support to this bill and will continue to fight for more.

(Time expired)