

Speech By

Hon. Deb Frecklington

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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JUSTICE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. DK FRECKLINGTON (Nanango—LNP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister for Integrity) (8.30 pm), in reply: I thank honourable members for their contributions to the debate on the Justice and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026. As I outlined earlier, JOLAB makes amendments to various justice portfolio legislation. At the outset, I want to be clear: at its core, this bill is about making Queensland safer.

I will touch on metal theft first. We have listened to industry, the community and Queenslanders, and we are taking decisive action to combat the incidence of metal theft across the state. The bill amends the Criminal Code and the Second-hand Dealers and Pawnbrokers Act to disrupt the theft, sale and disposal of stolen scrap metal in Queensland.

We are sending a message: metal theft is far from a victimless crime. When offenders target copper wiring, telecommunications infrastructure or other critical metal assets, the harm extends far beyond the value of the metal itself. Indeed, in many cases, offenders think they are getting copper wiring when in fact this is not the case at all. Instead, they are damaging expensive fibre-optic cables which have no value at all on the scrap metal market but ultimately cost taxpayers significant amounts to restore. The consequences of these abhorrent behaviours were starkly demonstrated by the incident at Deeragun in January this year when the attempted theft of telecommunications infrastructure contributed to a significant communications outage as the Townsville community prepared for Tropical Cyclone Koji.

Unfortunately, Townsville is not alone. Communities across Queensland continue to experience the impacts of metal theft, and businesses suffer costly disruptions. Critical infrastructure is also damaged, as we have heard. Essential services are interrupted. Workers and members of the public are exposed to significant safety risks.

The bill delivers a range of robust measures to hold offenders to account and strengthen regulatory oversight of scrap metal dealers. The new measures will ensure law enforcement is better supported to trace stolen scrap metal in the market.

Importantly, the bill has the support of industry. In its submission to the committee, Arrow Energy indicated its support of the bill to disrupt the theft, sale and disposal of stolen metal. In confirming that metal theft, particularly from sites containing heavy machinery and high-voltage electricity, presents a significant danger to the community, Arrow commended the government for introducing measures aimed at addressing this serious and growing form of criminal activity. Likewise, the Waste and Recycling Industry Association of Queensland, the peak body representing Queensland's waste and recycling sector, has welcomed the Crisafulli government's comprehensive reform package for metal recyclers. Importantly, the association acknowledged that the bill delivers on the very reforms it had been advocating for over the last 15 years to strengthen the regulatory framework for the scrap metal industry. The Waste and Recycling Industry Association wrote recently. Their correspondence reads—

Congratulations on giving Queensland the biggest metal theft stick in the country alongside a set of practical regulations that will actually work for legitimate metal recycling businesses.

That is a significant endorsement from the industry's peak body. It reflects the fact that these reforms have been developed in close consultation with stakeholders and are designed to ensure Queensland's scrap metal laws are robust, modern and fit for purpose. It also demonstrates that when those opposite were in government, they did not listen to the repeated warnings and concerns from industry. Rather, they allowed the incidence of metal theft to rise unabated.

It is a familiar story. Labor inherited a comprehensive inquiry, received clear recommendations and was presented with a road map for reform back in 2023. Labor failed to implement the recommendations, failed to act on stakeholder concerns and failed to address a growing crime problem harming Queensland communities, but then tonight apparently it is all our fault. In 2023, the inquiry into metal theft identified the problem and set out a pathway for reform.

Perhaps the most telling evidence received by the committee considering the bill came from the City of Moreton Bay. Its submission demonstrates just how long stakeholders have been calling for action. The council noted that it wrote to the parliamentary inquiry back in September 2023, while Labor was still in government, to highlight the sharp increase in copper theft across its local government area. The council detailed the thefts from streetlighting, sporting fields, school grounds and new development areas. They left sporting clubs unable to train, communities without lighting and public safety compromised. Yet, despite all of those warnings and the advocacy of councils, despite the concerns of industry, Labor, as we know, failed to act.

It has taken the Crisafulli government to deliver the comprehensive reforms that stakeholders have been seeking for years. These reforms respond directly to the concerns and will provide a stronger, more effective framework to deter metal theft and protect Queensland communities. That is why the reforms in this bill are so important. The contrast could not be clearer.

I want to discuss reforms in the bill which enshrine transparency in Queensland's justice system and ensure the media can continue to perform its important role of informing the Queensland community. Quite frankly, we have heard a lot of mistruths in this House. The bill amends the Police Service Administration Act, the Supreme Court of Queensland Act, the District Court of Queensland Act and the Magistrates Courts Act to facilitate the release of alleged offender information to accredited media entities. These amendments provide a legislative basis for what is a longstanding practice. Let me be clear: this legislation simply puts into law the process that has always existed. Media will continue to be able to request information from police after a media release is issued, as they do now. This process has always occurred and allows the media to attend the next court date to follow offenders through the court system and to report on court processes and outcomes when lawful to do so. As I have said all along, this practice will continue under this bill. It is a process that operated under the former Labor government, importantly without any legal basis. Essentially, information was being given to media without any legal authority. This put at risk the very practice of disclosing information to the media and the sharing of offender details. This is the exact process that operated under those opposite, but the difference is that we are making it lawful, as we have to do.

We are a government that wants to support media to be able to report on what is occurring in the courts. We understand that accessing information is critical to a transparent court system and democracy. By implementing these amendments, the Crisafulli government is enshrining in law the longstanding practice of the QPS and the courts providing media organisations with access to essential court information, ensuring offenders remain accountable and the public, importantly, remains informed.

The amendments to the Police Powers and Responsibilities Act will ensure authorised information can continue to be released to the media for the purpose of fair and accurate reporting of court proceedings. In doing so, they provide certainty, transparency and consistency while reinforcing the principle that justice should not only be done but be seen to be done.

Importantly, the bill removes the discretion from police to release the information and ensures the disclosure of information is, in fact, mandatory. Under the current framework, police disclosure is discretionary and requires consideration of obligations under the Human Rights Act before information is released. That was causing delays in the information being released to the media or, in some circumstances, withheld. By putting current practice into legislation, we are removing that discretion, to ensure media can access the information necessary to report on our courts and the appearance of offenders.

Complementary amendments to the Supreme Court of Queensland Act, the District Court of Queensland Act and the Magistrates Courts Act will support the same objective, providing a consistent legislative framework across Queensland's court system. As I noted in my second reading speech, I will be moving amendments during consideration in detail that will further strengthen the ability of accredited media organisations to access court information. This is following the committee process.

Importantly, these proposed amendments have been informed by feedback from media representatives and are designed to provide greater certainty around access to information while remaining true to the bill's core purpose of legislating longstanding administrative practice. The government has carefully considered that feedback and, where appropriate, proposed amendments that are practical, legally sound and operationally workable.

These are sensible reforms. They ensure Queensland remains one of the more transparent jurisdictions in Australia. We are committed to ensuring media can continue to access information to report what is occurring in our courts while maintaining appropriate safeguards and supporting an open and transparent justice system.

I will go back to the media in a second, but I will now address some of the concerns raised during the debate, and some of them cannot be left alone. The member for Gaven's contribution demonstrated one thing very clearly: the shadow minister simply has not done the basic homework on this bill or the budget. The member claimed—and I heard it repeated by the shadow minister for child safety—that the District Court jurisdictional reforms were not properly resourced or consulted on. That claim falls apart the moment we open my department's SDS. I appreciate that might be unfamiliar territory for the member for Gaven, but if the member turns to page 2 she will find that the Crisafulli government is providing $11 million over five years and $2.4 million per annum ongoing to appoint additional Supreme Court and District Court judges.

Before coming into this House and making allegations, the member might have done what oppositions in Queensland should do and what Queenslanders expect of their shadow ministers: read the budget papers. The facts are these: under this government, I have appointed an additional Supreme Court judge, an additional District Court judge and seven magistrates. While those opposite specialise in rhetoric, we are delivering resources. Further, as the budget says, we are investing $39.3 million over four years and $3.3 million ongoing each year for additional judicial capacity, judicial support services and essential justice services.

The shadow minister keeps referencing the Law Society. They have welcomed the extra funding. The member also seems unaware, which is a bit of a worry, that the District Court's monetary jurisdiction has remained unchanged for 15 years. I understand that it was the Chief Judge of Queensland who asked the former government to do it, but they probably do not talk across factions. Over 15 years, governments have come and gone, reviews have been conducted and economic conditions have changed, yet Labor left the system completely untouched. After hearing the contribution from the shadow minister, it would appear it was all just a bit too hard.

Here we have the extraordinary spectacle of Labor opposing reforms to a threshold they failed to review, failed to modernise and failed to change for a decade. These amendments bring Queensland into closer alignment with other jurisdictions, improve court efficiencies, reduce unnecessary delays and do what the legal profession, including the justices of the court, want us to do. In short, they are sensible reforms that should have happened many years ago.

The member for Gaven also alleges there has been inadequate consultation. I have touched on that, but that claim is as baseless as her comments about resourcing. These reforms have been the subject of extensive consultation with key stakeholders across the justice sector. Stakeholder feedback has informed the bill before the House. The Department of Justice, my office, the Minister for Police and I have all had meetings, received feedback and considered proposals to improve the bill—the shadow minister might want to hear this—from Right to Know and other media organisations.

In fact, the shadow attorney-general's criticism ignores a very important fact. The amendments that she is now complaining about—and given the speaking points everyone has over there—are the direct result of consultation with Right to Know and media stakeholders. Let me make one thing clear: the amendments in the bill will not curtail or limit the current practices of our media organisations to report crime and keep offenders accountable.

For the benefit of the shadow attorney-general, I will explain this. Amendments 10, 15 and 20 amend the District Court of Queensland Act, the Magistrates Courts Act and the Supreme Court of Queensland Act to remove the clauses of the bill that would insert an offence into those acts in relation to further disclosure of alleged offender information and to permit the registrar to disclose the alleged offender information in a way the registrar considers appropriate, including an example of a list that the registrar may provide. I am happy to print it out and give it to the member later. These were concerns raised in consultation, and I have introduced amendments as a direct result. It is clear they hate that consultation.

In response to consultation with RTK, amendment 16 amends the bill to clarify the Police Service Administration Act for when a person who receives information under these provisions may disclose the name of the offender. The amendment will ensure the exception operates when the name of the offender is 'publicly accessible in relation to the offence' rather than 'lawfully accessible to the public'.

We are a government that honours its commitments. We told media organisations that what occurs today will continue to occur after this bill is passed, and this amendment gives effect to exactly that outcome. The member for Waterford advised the House that she has met with media organisations on many occasions to discuss these amendments. This is curious. I looked at the diary disclosures for the member for Waterford and it only discloses one meeting with the organisation, and that was on 1 May 2026.

We know that the Crisafulli government is working hard to make Queensland safer. We are a government that is tough on crime. We want Queenslanders to see that offenders are being held to account, and that means ensuring the media can report on what occurs in our courtrooms. Open justice is a fundamental principle of our legal system because public confidence is strengthened when justice is not only done but is seen to be done.

Those opposite are simply trying to rewrite history when it comes to metal theft. The facts are pretty simple. They established a parliamentary inquiry into scrap metal theft. That inquiry received 12 submissions supporting stronger action, and the committee handed down a report containing seven recommendations, including legislative reforms. After all of that, the then Palaszczuk-Miles government did nothing—no bill, no legislative amendments, no reform—yet they have the hide to come in here tonight and say it is all our fault. Apparently, the fact that they had something but did not do anything is all our fault.

I give a shout-out to the member for Southport, Rob Molhoek, and his family—and there are many of them here—including Isabelle and Zoe. I give them a shout-out, too. I met Zoe when she was about five weeks old, so it is lovely to see her in the gallery tonight.

In stark contrast to Labor, our government is taking action when those opposite would not. We heard the member for Macalister claiming that Labor was drafting its own metal theft laws. If the former government's record could be summed up in four words in relation to metal theft, it would be: too little, too late. There was no reportable conduct scheme and no metal theft legislation—and that is just today—just excuses and unfinished work. Labor had a decade in office and still could not get it done. We have been in office for two years and they still criticise us because apparently we have not done it quick enough.

Following introduction earlier this year, the bill was referred to the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee. I really want to give Marty Hunt, the member for Nicklin, a massive shout-out and thank the entire committee for their hard work. The committee had one recommendation—that the bill be passed. How good is it that the committee thought that the bill should be passed but they forgot to tell the shadow minister that the bill should be passed! Obviously she has other things on her plate at the moment. I thank the committee for their careful consideration.

Once again, I want to thank the Department of Justice for their hard work. I know they have been working on so many of these reforms and, frankly, probably even before we got in. Of course, the former Labor government were never going to do it. We got to work and we are getting it done. I commend the bill to the House.