



## **DAVID MORRIS MP**

**Member for Mornington**

**Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Environment**

**Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government**

### **Youth Crime Response – All Talk and No Action**

#### **Legislative Assembly 24<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

**Mr MORRIS** (Mornington) — On 28 July 2009 the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee reported on strategies to prevent high-volume youth offending and recidivism. In the last sitting week the government responded to that report.

The recommendations had the full support of all committee members: they were unanimous. Prior to considering the recommendations, the committee prepared a statement of principles to act as a framework so that we could check the effectiveness of our recommendations against it.

I was very pleased to see in the government's response that it backed the committee's approach and thought its approach to youth offending and the committee's principles were a good fit. So I was a little surprised when I went on and had a look at the substance of the response. We made 41 recommendations; of those, only 10 were supported, 4 were rejected, 4 were noted — and I guess you may as well as have rejected them; what is the point in noting them? — and 23 were supported in principle.

When you drill down into the detail of those responses, you see that of the 10 that were supported, the government claimed to be already carrying out or had plans to carry them out; they fitted with the government's preconceptions. Of the 23 that were supported in principle, in many cases the sentiment expressed was, 'That would be a nice thing to do'. Sometimes it was, 'Okay, we will have a think about it and decide whether we are going to do it'. And the other thread was, 'We are doing something similar'.

The point is that if the committee had thought these things could wait, or if it thought the somewhat similar programs already in place were working, it would not have made the recommendations. Committee members made them because these things needed attention. As I said, four recommendations were rejected, and I will come back to deal with three of them. The fourth, recommendation 22, was put forward as an option for dealing with fare evasion, people under 18 should have free public transport — not dissimilar to a policy that was put at the last election. Unfortunately that was rejected, and given the stretched situation of public transport, I can understand that.

The four that were noted included a suggested state-wide enrolment data base; that the Children, Youth and Families Division of the Department of Human Services work more closely with local government — once again I would have thought that a pretty practical approach to work on the ground, but no, that was cast aside; the suggestion that the police

cautioning program be put into legislation, because we know that with one or two exceptions we do not have an effective, broadscale diversionary process available for young people — but no, that one was just a bit too hard; and the fourth — recommendation 30 — that the Department of Human Services work together with service providers to develop a new residential forensic medical health treatment centre, that recommendation was unfortunately ignored as well.

Of the three that were rejected, and which I said I wanted to come back to, the first was the need to provide an ongoing analysis of birth group data. There is an absolute paucity of data in this area, and it is critical to long-term policy. There is a longitudinal study for 1984 and 1994 age groups, and we proposed that that should go on. The government response was, ‘You need to be careful with the data, and you should perhaps get academic institutions to do it’.

Academic institutions do not have access to the data; that is the critical problem. They cannot get it. Yes, the data is sensitive, and yes, you need to be very careful with it, but you need to create a process so that it can be done, not simply say, ‘It’s too hard’.

The second of those recommendations was about youth offending teams. That was rejected, because the government claimed there was already collaboration and coordination between key organisations. The fact is that it is failing. What is happening on the ground is important, not what is happening at a policy level — and that is where the coordination is. You need to put people together at a local level to work on particular problems, to work on problems in neighbourhoods and to work on problems with groups of families — that is, the people at the coalface. You are not going to make it work unless you put in the resources and the people to drive it. The fact is that current policies are failing.

The last recommendation I wanted to come back to was the suggestion of introducing a truancy service. The government claim that it is the responsibility of schools to follow up.

However, schools are not following up in some cases. Most are, but some are not, and that is where the kids are falling through the cracks. When we went out to the Parkville and to Malmsbury youth justice centres and talked to those kids, we found that one kid had left school as early as year 5, and I think the longest any of those kids had lasted was to year 7 or year 8. The system is simply not working, and we need to find a way to stop them falling through the cracks.

In rejecting these recommendations the government has failed to grasp the nettle that was there. It is an opportunity that has been lost, and Victoria’s young people are going to be the worse for it.