

Campbell Newman's pursuit of bikies let paedophiles flourish, inquiry finds

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- Sarah Elks



The Newman government's crackdown on bikies was exploited by criminals of other stripes, the inquiry found. Picture: Scott Fletcher

Campbell Newman's blinkered pursuit of bikies allowed internet paedophiles to flourish and Queensland to become Australia's epicentre of "boiler room" financial scams, an organised crime inquiry has discovered.

Queensland premier Anastacia Palaszczuk vowed to immediately appeal to Police Commissioner Ian Stewart to restore balance to the state's crime-fighting priorities, after receiving the scathing report from barrister Michael Byrne QC today.

The probe found the Newman government's "extreme" crackdown on bikies in 2013 — and the significant extra funding for the police and Crime and Corruption Commission (CCC) to target motorcycle gangs — was exploited by criminals of other stripes, particularly those dealing in child exploitation, financial fraud, and illicit drugs.

Mr Byrne said that while bikies played a major role in drug crime, in the 21 months to June, outlaw motorcycle gang members only accounted for 0.52 per cent of criminal activity in the state. Yet the Queensland Police dedicated more than 200 officers to its anti-bikie Operation Resolute, fewer than 20 detectives to Taskforce Argos which leads the world in policing online child sex offending, and about five for its fraud squad.

Argos has only one civilian staffer responsible for the arduous and heart-wrenching job of identifying child victims in the images, and needs at least two more, plus a specialist forensic computer specialist.

Ms Palaszczuk said she was horrified and would swiftly meet with Mr Stewart.

“I’m ... horrified that there is a movement of such people involved in child exploitation material, it’s disgusting and I’m going to focus on that immediately,” she said. “Obviously there is not enough resources targeted to this area.”

Mr Byrne’s \$6m six-month inquiry found “significant numbers” of the state’s children had fallen victim to secretive networks of online child sex offenders.

The market proliferates on the shady Darknet — the encrypted and anonymous level of the internet — where it is becoming increasingly “depraved and voracious for new material”, including images and video of younger and younger children, and “hurt core” content, which depicts violence and rapes.

Currently, administrators of these sites can escape prosecution under Queensland law, despite encouraging members to hit “VIP” membership targets by posting more child porn.

Mr Byrne recommended Queensland take Victoria’s lead and create a new criminal offence to target administrators. He also wants the government to beef-up penalties for offenders who refuse to handover passwords or encryption keys that can reveal disturbing material hidden on their computers.

The inquiry also urged the government to properly resource Queensland police and CCC to launch a “blitz” targeting known Queensland-based child sex offenders who share exploitation materials on shady peer-to-peer internet platforms.

Another area overlooked by authorities in the haste to lock up bikies, Mr Byrne said, was financial crime — partly because police were under-resourced and blamed the victims.

Queensland has become the “epicentre” for cold-calling investment scams referred to as “boiler rooms”, he said, which authorities are warning are at epidemic and “out of control” levels.

Mr Byrne said the fraudsters were still operating on the Gold Coast and had fleeced thousands of Australians out of millions in savings, leaving victims penniless and, in some cases, suicidal.

“The QPS (Queensland Police Service) has failed to adequately respond to complaints from persons claiming to have been defrauded by people operating boiler rooms,” Mr Byrne said.

“This failure is largely attributable to inadequate resourcing, and likely influenced by an attitude that the complainants have failed to exercise due diligence concerning their own finances.”

He said police’s fraud squad needed proper resources and a taskforce should be formed to crackdown on boiler rooms.