

A congressman spared prison as a teen tells D.C. to be tough on youth

Rep. Byron Donalds sponsored a bill to prohibit the District's council from legislating crime sentencing.

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Perspective by [Petula Dvorak](#)

If it weren't for mercy, an 18-year-old from Brooklyn popped on drug charges back in the '90s may not have the extraordinary life he lives in Washington today, a life that's becoming a headache for the residents of the nation's capital.

Rep. Byron Donalds (R-Fla.), one of three children raised by a single mom in Crown Heights, was arrested for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute when he was 18 and had just moved to Florida for college.

"My pastor always says that everybody in life is 15 seconds away from stupid," he told Amy Bennett Williams, a reporter at the [Fort Myers News Press](#). "But when you're desperate, you're three seconds away. And I was desperate."

Though sentencing guidelines in Florida called for up to 15 years in prison for the charge, Donalds — called a "[Rising Star](#)" by President Donald Trump in 2020 — caught a break. Twice.

After getting a second chance on the drug charge thanks to a pretrial diversion program, he caught a bribery charge three years later. He got both records expunged and proved flexible sentencing can open doors to young people who make mistakes.

Now, as a vocal conservative in the GOP, he's leading the charge in cracking down on young offenders in D.C. — and making a historic challenge to the District's home rule — even though he's not an elected leader representing the people here.

"This bill requires that we treat adult criminals as adults, like the rest of the country does," said Donalds, who was legally an adult when his judges went soft on him.

But it's about more than that.

"This bill would be the biggest rollback of D.C. self-government in a generation," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) said in a speech on the House floor after Donalds's bill, The D.C. Crimes Act, or the D.C. Criminal Reforms to Immediately Make Everyone Safer Act, passed 225-181 in the House this week.

Here we go again.

It's another case of hypocrisy by meddling from House Republicans desperate for election-year fearmongering storylines and terrified of the prospect that D.C. residents will ever get the vote in Congress that we are owed as Americans.

Donalds got some juice when he made noise with the tea party in Florida. So you'd think he would be down with our cheeky license plates in D.C. that say: "Taxation Without Representation."

Instead, he's going all King George on us.

His bill would permanently prohibit the elected D.C. Council from creating any kind of legislation on sentencing, even if the members want to make punishments tougher.

It also proposes restricting the leniency that judges have to grant at their discretion during sentencing. Like the kind that saved Donalds from prison.

He could be presenting himself as a role model for change when he's legislating, not only when he's campaigning. Or he could focus his deep concern about youth crime into the headlines about teen homicide in his home district, Florida's 19th.

Because D.C. has had enough of politicians coming from that slice of the electoral map. Anyone remember Rep. Trey Radel (R-Fla.), who was caught playing around in D.C. snow not long after he got here in 2013?

And not the kind that melts.

Radel was busted after buying \$250 worth of cocaine from an undercover federal agent. Court records showed that he got his nose candy at that particular Dupont Circle marketplace frequently.

He left office after the judge went pretty easy on him with just a year of probation. Huh. That lenient sentencing thing again.

Sometimes, those House members get a little crazy when they win an election and get to the big time in D.C., quickly looking to make a name for themselves.

Donalds made national news last year when he was rumored to be one of the contenders to take over the House speaker job from Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).

That didn't work out, so maybe he's taking from McCarthy's playbook by trying to run things in D.C.

Last year, McCarthy used a carjacking close to Capitol Hill as his platform to launch a sweeping rebuke of American democracy, leading other members of Congress on voting to overturn local crime legislation that the D.C. Council enacted.

This happened while his central California hometown of Bakersfield — the city I chose to honor for being the birthplace of the band Korn — was named the car theft capital of America by insurance adjusters.

Yet he was all about legislation nearly 2,700 miles away in D.C.

This is not what y'all came to the District for, honorable members.

Your forebears will tell you this.

“The District has been starving to death politically for 70 years,” Sen. Matthew Neely (D-W.Va.) said back in 1951, when he argued to get out of local politics and grant home rule to D.C.

Before D.C. finally got independence in 1973 under President Richard M. Nixon, the city was governed by folks stuck with one of the most loathed committee assignments in Congress: the District Committee.

Those members grumbled.

They didn't make it all the way to Washington only to be back in local politics and working on teacher salaries and student bus fares for constituents they'd never meet.

Stay in your lane, honorable members from all over.

Crime in the District has been steadily declining this year. We've got this.

All you can give us is the vote we deserve.
