



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

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PERSONS CONVICTED OF OFFENCES AGAINST CHILDREN

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (6.41 p.m.): As other members have stated firmly here tonight, children must be protected from harm in their home environment, on the streets and in the care of others. The State has a particular statutory responsibility to protect children in its care from harm. Ministers in this Government have taken swift and decisive action to provide greater protection to children. The Forde inquiry and the Child Protection Bill are all recent examples and evidence of our commitment to this responsibility.

I take offence at the comments made by the member for Clayfield earlier in this debate about the Police Minister's lack of support for the paedophile database proposal put forward by Hettie Johnston's group. As is his style, the member for Clayfield was slinging mud in what is a bipartisan approach here tonight. I want to place on the record that the Police Minister is very supportive of the proposal put forward by that organisation and is very keen to continue discussions about it.

I also want to say that, as child predators are not always likely to freely disclose their past behaviour, the onus is on the Government and other agencies to carefully screen applicants for jobs that involve the responsibility of children. Preventing harm is much more effective than punishing after harm has occurred. I was very relieved that the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care acknowledged the need to more effectively screen applicants for jobs in her department and brought about changes earlier this year. That is the key to protecting children: the effective screening of applicants for jobs.

The proposal by the member for Warwick has merit. However, as the Minister said earlier, it focuses on issues after the horse has bolted. We need to prevent and protect—and they are the key words in this debate: prevent and protect—so that the need for punishment does not arise. In the member's proposal, it is likely that a child will be harmed in order for the failure of an offender to have disclosed their previous criminal behaviour to come to the fore. That is a critical issue: it is likely that harm will arise in this proposal before action is taken. We are focusing on preventing this from occurring.

I accept the good intentions of the member for Warwick, but we cannot rush into solutions to this problem. His proposals are very worthy of investigation, but many issues need to be canvassed. For instance, I have the following questions in my mind: what would be the case if two 15 year old youths received a conviction for carnal knowledge five years ago but have otherwise been law-abiding, capable, good citizens? Would they be risking a jail term if they neglected to disclose or possibly inadvertently neglected to disclose that earlier conviction when applying for a job in a child-related environment in the future? Would the young blokes who flashed their crown jewels in a drunken state at the cricket and who received a conviction be liable for a jail term if they neglected to disclose their convictions in applying for work as teachers in another child-related area later in their lives? These types of definition and coverage issues require careful scrutiny. What areas of work are contained in the definition of child-related employment or environment involving children? Hundreds of occupations could be deemed child related or in an environment involving children. Where do we draw the line? We are impinging on people's civil liberties in these areas of disclosure. We need tight definitions so that law-abiding citizens are not unnecessarily exposed to public scrutiny and stigma.

The spirit of bipartisanship evidenced here tonight is extremely positive. It is the kind of bipartisanship, instead of political point scoring, that the public desperately want more of. However, I am

cautious about creating a serious criminal offence attracting a significant penalty without all issues being canvassed carefully. This Government is committed to protecting children from predators. None of us can be watching over children every minute of the day. However, our Government is firm in its resolve to put the right preventive and regulatory mechanisms in place as a matter of priority.

I again reiterate that the focus must be on prevention before the harm occurs. There is no point in having all this heavy action after the problems have arisen. We have to make sure that we have the right process in place to prevent harm from occurring.
