



Speech by

BILL FELDMAN

MEMBER FOR CABOOLTURE

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CHILDREN SERVICES TRIBUNAL BILL; COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE BILL

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—CCAQ) (4.33 p.m.): Like the previous speaker, the member for Archerfield, the members of City Country Alliance are deeply concerned about the general welfare of our nation's children. Therefore, we will vote accordingly in relation to the amendments that are to be moved at the Committee stage of the debate by either the coalition or the Government with respect to these Bills. We wait to see what those amendments contain.

City Country Alliance considers the family unit to be the best environment for a child to grow and develop and realises the importance of parents in providing the basic elements of love, support, protection and discipline to enhance the growth and wellbeing of their children. Today's youth are confronted with many challenges. The issue of child abuse is one of those challenges. Child abuse is a sad fact in our society and a matter of great concern, because the abuse occurs not only within the family home but also outside the family unit.

There are many indecent individuals in our society who prey on innocent and defenceless children and then threaten and terrify them in order to keep the inflicted abuse unreported. The sad fact is that this power is often held by people with some form of authority over the child, albeit temporary authority. Worse still, it is quite common for these abused children to think that they are responsible for having the abuse done to them, that they must have been naughty for them to be punished like that. But of course that is not the case. No child, no matter how bad their behaviour, deserves to be physically, sexually or emotionally abused as a form of punishment, and every child needs to be taught this.

Traditionally, children have been taught the risks associated with strangers. I was part of that educational process at the Morayfield State School where I was an Adopt-a-Cop for over 11 years. I found that many children do not quite understand exactly what abuse is or where it occurs and how to go about reporting it. It was not uncommon for them to be told exactly what is and what is not appropriate touching or what constitutes actual sexual abuse. We have come to learn that child abuse is committed most often by a person who is known to the child and who is often in a position of authority over that child. Teachers, sporting coaches, relatives, friends of the family, scout masters and priests are examples of those who have been guilty of inflicting child abuse on children outside their home.

As the member for Indooroopilly said earlier, it is hard for sporting groups to pinpoint who has a position of authority in relation to a child. We seem to think that it is only coaches and managers. However, in team sports, young children aged between 9 and 13 are placed in teams with older children and perhaps with adults. That is an unfortunate aspect of team sport. They may even be placed in a position where they have to travel with a group of adults to take part in a particular sport because of their talent as a rising child sports star. Therefore, they travel with a group of adults to and from sporting venues. I take the point that the member for Indooroopilly made in relation to travelling with other children and the parents of those children.

We cannot ignore the significant media attention that has been given to this matter lately, especially in relation to the ex-Labor member for Woodridge, Mr D'Arcy, and his convictions on child sex abuse charges. The circumstances of that case were that a person in a respected position of authority, the sole teacher at a small country school, used that position to invade the bodies—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! I remind the honourable gentleman to be very careful in his comments. He knows that this matter is sub judice.

Mr FELDMAN: I am not speaking in relation to any matter that is currently—

A Government member: Yes, you are.

Mr FELDMAN: No, this is a matter that has been decided. I only spoke about the conviction.

Mr Welford: Why do you keep referring to it?

Mr FELDMAN: Why does the member keep—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I ask the honourable gentleman to get on with his speech.

Mr FELDMAN: Yes, I will.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I ask the member to be careful of sub judice. If he is not, I will sit him down.

Mr FELDMAN: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The legislation being debated is aimed at promoting and protecting the rights, the interests and the wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland. It also implements the recommendations of the recent Brighton review and the Forde inquiry.

Many children going through these institutional processes are abused or neglected, and the idea behind this legislation is to protect these children from further abuse. No-one can argue against this, especially when those who prey upon our children and our youth continue to challenge society on a daily basis. Probably right this very moment some innocent child is being abused. The mere thought of this makes me feel very sick.

I sympathise with the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care for having such a complex portfolio to oversee, especially as it deals with such emotive and difficult circumstances as child abuse. I trust that the Minister has taken heed of the report on this legislation by the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee. It made some good points, and I assume that the Minister has some answers to the questions it raised.

One area the City Country Alliance would like to question relates to Part 6 of the commission Bill—employment screening for child-related employment. First, City Country Alliance agrees that only suitable persons should be involved in child-related employment and that children should be cared for in a way that protects them from harm and promotes their wellbeing.

The area of concern relates to the advice in the Minister's second-reading speech that persons already engaged in child-related employment prior to the commencement of the screening laws will not be required to undergo a criminal history check. I ask the Minister: does this not to a degree undermine some of the purpose of the legislation in that it applies only to new employees? How can the Minister be certain that those currently employed in a child-related area, within her own department even, are indeed suitable to be working with children if no screening or criminal history check is carried out on them?

Individuals who victimise children are not readily identifiable. Some may have even made it to an area where they can actually entrap children and go about that related activity. If a check is not going to be done on those who are already employed, we may be entrenching that activity—in a department, an organisation, a sporting body or an association. I feel that screening should be required of everybody. If no screening or criminal history check is carried out, how are we to know?

As I said, individuals who victimise children are not readily identifiable. They come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic levels. The abuse occurs in situations in which the child knows and trusts the adult. Often they present a pleasant image. They are prominent citizens and they are active in the community. As displeasing as it may be, some use their employment as a means of targeting their victims. Therefore I think it is very important for all employees within the Minister's department working in direct contact with children to be appropriately screened.

Research and experience has shown that the impact of abuse upon children in any of its various forms can have a long-term harmful effect on personal development. This may include poor self-esteem, relationship difficulties, self-harming behaviour and substance abuse. I am sure that if we looked at some of the root causes of our youth suicides, abuse and the accompanying psychological problems would be clearly evident.

Children and young people should be protected from all forms of abuse, and any legislation that is aimed at helping to prevent child abuse in our society, protect those children that are currently being abused and help abused kids recover from their ordeals will be duly supported by City Country Alliance. I believe all church, community, educational, sporting, recreational and child-care groups would agree. The issue of screening is one I would like the Minister to address in her reply to the debate.

As I said before, City Country Alliance supports any measure that will increase the protection of children from abuse. We look forward to supporting the Bill. We will certainly be looking at the amendments to be moved at the Committee stage by the member for Indooroopilly and by the Minister. Our support for or opposition to those amendments will become evident as the Committee stage progresses.
