



Speech by

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MEN'S INFO LINE

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (11.25 p.m.): I was pleased to hear of the decision of Premier Peter Beattie and Families Minister Anna Bligh to launch a telephone support line for men. Men's Info Line, as it is called, is a dedicated free telephone providing information, referral and counselling services for Queensland men. It offers advice on relationships, health, and family and domestic violence.

The Minister has said that Men's Info Line is about early intervention and prevention. The Minister said—

"If we can help men tackle their problems early, we hope to prevent personal and family breakdown."

As pleased as I am to see this announcement I am concerned that, if we are serious about early intervention and prevention, there is more that we need to do. I agree entirely that, if men were helped to tackle their problems early, the serious consequences that their problems sometimes lead to for themselves, for their families and for society in general may well be averted—at least in substantial part.

If we think for a moment of the ways in which men in our society signal that they are not managing modern life, we can see that problems for men are widespread. I would count in this category the number of male offenders in prison. I would count amongst them all those men, young and even older as we have recently heard, who have become so depressed that they have committed suicide. I would also count all those angry men who have been unemployed for a long period—many of them single and disenchanted entirely with Governments of all persuasions and with the lives on offer to them. Frequently these men do not have the skills required for today's labour market, and frequently their age is such that their bodies do not allow a choice of manually based occupations.

I would count also the marriage—or rather divorce—statistics through which we see that over the last 20 years the proportion of women precipitating a marital separation and divorce has risen steadily. There are many men, it would seem, who are not measuring up within their marital relationships. Add to them the numbers of men—young, middle-aged and older—who drink alcohol to excess, and those men—not an entirely separate group—who are perpetrators of domestic violence.

Most disturbing, however, is the imbalance that is now occurring in academic results in high schools between girls and boys. As pleased, of course, as I am that young women are embracing a much greater diversity of interests and skills and occupations than ever before in society, I am one of those women who freely admit that it was never, through the women's movement or otherwise, our intention to limit men, to beat men or to in any way leave them behind. Yet that is what some of the figures on academic performance of our boys in high schools are suggesting is happening—that increasingly boys are being left behind.

I have been waiting over these past five years or so for the men's movement in society to really take off. I have been waiting for those men—men who are angry and who perceive that it is indeed inequitable that there are services for women and not services for men—to combine, to lobby, and to use the power they still have and the voices they still have to insist on appropriate men's support mechanisms. But this appears not to have occurred—at least not on a large scale.

While on the one hand through Queensland Health we have some programs targeting men's health, and while I hear on the grapevine that the Minister for Health may shortly announce some

further programs in this area, it is unlikely that this will be enough. The existing situation is such that the health of men goes way beyond the mandate of our public health system. Men's health is, at heart, linked to the very definition by society of what it is to be a man in the 21st century; of what the standards are by which fathers should teach their sons; and what actions or characteristics are those of which a man can be truly proud and be rewarded with respect by society. I dare suggest to members of this honourable Parliament that there is serious confusion in society over the answer to the question of what constitutes a good man in this new millennium.

The Men's Info Line, therefore, is indeed to be welcomed, but it is an insufficient service on its own. Rather, the health and wellbeing of men is a social issue and, as such, needs to be addressed far beyond the walls of this Parliament. This is an issue that men and women right across Queensland singly, in their families, and in their social organisations need to address so that those who are boys now may grow up proudly to be men.
