



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 3 October 2000

CHILD CARE AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (4.46 p.m.): On Tuesday, 11 April the Queensland Government tabled an amendment to the 1991 Child Care Act. Since the announcement was made, the media has portrayed home-based child care as "backyard, unsafe and dirty". There are approximately 8,000 home-based carers registered with Medicare. There is no doubting that in this, as in many other industries, there are those who abuse the system and deserve the derogatory names they are often given such as "cowboys" and "shonks".

The often horrifying tales reported in the media, although stating instances that are true, do not reflect the whole truth, and that is that the vast majority of home-based carers take pride in their businesses and the quality of care they adopt with their young charges.

Parent satisfaction with these home-based carers can be, and has been, demonstrated by the fact that some parents forgo the child-care assistance subsidy in order to exercise their right to choice of child care for their children.

I rise to speak on the Child Care Amendment Bill 2000 to bring to the House concerns which are described by many in the industry as serious. This legislation does not address the full issues of safety or quality care for the minors to whom it is directed by pushing for only a minimum standard.

As has been stated in correspondence I have received, together with other members of this House, legislation should be about placing children in appropriate care rather than taking away quality care and services which have evolved from the direct needs of the community. In other words, this legislation aims to establish what the Government wants rather than what families throughout Queensland want and need. This is perceived as contrary to the direction of the consultation paper which was recently circulated.

No-one denies that there is a definite need to make changes to the Child Care Act, and those in the industry desire legislation that will outlaw shonky practices in all aspects of child care. It has been said that surely any legislation should promote policies that focus on prevention which is, after all, in the best interests of the very people we are endeavouring to protect—our children—and not rectification after an event. It could be an event which, quite frankly, may very well have devastating effects on the child and the child's family for years to come.

The data on complaints as published by the Courier-Mail on Tuesday, 21 March quotes statistics from the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care for the financial year 1998-99. These statistics show that of 265 substantiated complaints, 231 involved centre-based care, 23 involved family day care, seven involved outside school hours care and only four involved other care services. This clearly shows that home-based care is not a major source of complaint as far as parents are concerned.

A communique I received states—

"... after reading the details of the proposed amendment I hold fears that safety and quality of care have not been adequately addressed. The focus is not on prevention of unsafe practices, as monitoring will only be done on a complaint basis. This means that an unsavoury incident must actually occur before anything is done. The legislation provides there be no need for

home-based carers to be registered and no provision for regular checks. Sadly there is no process whereby feedback for the passing of 'best practices' between carers can be shared."

The desired consequence of legislation should be to enhance an industry and to allow it to grow. My concern with this legislation is that it will have the opposite effect in many areas and many child-care facilities will be forced to close.

I also have concerns about an 18 year old caring for six children. Most people with only one or two children would say that it is an arduous task and I believe that most parents would be more at ease with a primary carer being 21 years of age as a minimum. The Government has chosen a model which has been stated to be the most cost-effective for Government. In stating this, I believe that the Government has placed a greater value on money than it has on the care of children and their safety.

With this legislation, as with many pieces of legislation that are proposed in this House, I see that the Government has not taken into account the different needs of rural areas, which often have only one child-care facility—and that is if they are really lucky. In lower socioeconomic areas there may not be an option of going to the next suburb to access child-care facilities as there is in the cities and larger regional centres. Many people in my electorate who access child care often travel up to 40 minutes to avail themselves of this service. Some of these towns with populations of only 300 or 400 people have only one facility in a private home. The next facility could be in the next town another half hour or so away.

I would appreciate the Minister reviewing this area of the Bill—and I did speak earlier at some length with some of the Minister's advisers about this matter—which limits the number of children to the size of the dwelling by allowing child-care operators in a town with a small population the option of appealing for a dispensation on the number of children at the dwelling with the proviso that two carers be in attendance. Many people have stated to me that they would much prefer two adults minding their children to one, for obvious safety reasons, and if only for the fact that one carer may get through the checks.

There also exists a possibility that where a child is in the care of a home-based carer the child's sibling may not be able to attend that same care centre, it being the only one in the town, because of the limit already being reached. In larger regional centres there is the option of choosing another facility. This is not so in small communities. In small rural towns a lot of parents actually travel a long distance to get to work and therefore the child-care centre is filled rapidly. Without the provision of an avenue of appeal, I can see that some parents, particularly women in rural Queensland, would find it necessary to remove themselves from the work force. I do not believe that is the intention of this Government, but it will be a consequence of this legislation.

I support the intention of this Bill to protect children in the child-care industry, but in many ways I would have preferred it to be stronger. Many people in the House have spoken on those issues, so I will not go over them again. Having visited some child-care facilities, I can see that this legislation does in fact allow centres to operate at a standard lower than that which I have seen in some of the so-called backyard home-based carer operations. I will support this Bill, but I ask the Minister to please address the issues affecting rural Queensland.
