



Speech by

GEOFF WILSON

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Hansard 3 October 2000

CHILD CARE AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WILSON (Ferry Grove—ALP) (3.45 p.m.): This Government has an obligation to act in the best interests of children. This Government through the Minister, Anna Bligh, has done exactly that through the Child Care Amendment Bill 2000.

My electorate is one of the fastest growing electorates in the State with over 30% of the population 17 years or under. Over 20% of the population is 12 years or under. That figure has been rapidly increasing in the last six to eight years. There are parents in my electorate who look to this Government to act in the best interests of children and they see this legislation as doing exactly that—and that is regulating in a balanced and proper way what is unfortunately called "backyard care".

The right to child care has gradually evolved over the past 10 to 20 years and, fortunately, has become well entrenched within the culture and expectations of Australians. But what we look for is affordable, good quality and safe child care in whatever form we may be able to obtain it. If there is one area of diversity in service that is provided in the community it is in the area of child care. Parents in my area—and I am sure in Queensland generally—are looking for protection in the exercise of the choice that they make either through lifestyle choice or through economic pressures to choose safe, affordable and good quality child care. Unfortunately, and increasingly, economic circumstances are putting pressure on families and requiring that they use whatever child-care avenues are available to them, and more and more pressure is placed upon them to use informal child care such as that regulated by this legislation.

With the growing casualisation of work, the increase in part-time work and the virtual destruction of security of employment in the sense of permanent long-term employment, many single parents are very much dependent upon access to child care. It is not just working parents. Shift work is another feature of economic life now that puts much more pressure on families to use child care.

In those circumstances, we have a Federal Government that has basically cut the guts out of the funding for child care in Australia. The withdrawal of Commonwealth funding, the closure of child-care centres and fee increases in many child-care centres are additional economic pressures created principally by the bloody-minded approach of the Federal Government to funding in this area that are compounding the pressure applied to the backs of parents who, through their own working circumstances, have the economic pressures to seek and use as much child care as they can. So more and more the pressure is for them to look for the cheapest child care that they can get. It is our obligation to make sure that, whilst they might be able to access cheaper and more informal child care, that is nonetheless safe and well-regulated child care.

This legislation brings Queensland into line with all the other States. It sets a number of basic standards. Firstly, it sets a maximum of six children under the age of 12 who can be looked after by one carer at home and no more than four of those children, including any children of the carer, can be six years of age or under. Secondly, the legislation states that a carer must have no criminal history, especially for offences of a sexual or violent nature. A screening process will be put in place to ensure that that provision is well and truly implemented. Thirdly, the legislation states that carers must take out public risk liability insurance to the value of no less than \$5m. As the member for Mundingburra said earlier, that is to reassure parents that, in the unfortunate circumstance that a compensation claim is

made because of negligence, there is the financial security to underpin such action. Fourthly, the legislation states that the home-based carer must be 18 years of age or older.

This legislation is very clear. Despite what might be suggested by the Opposition, it maintains the right of parents to choose the form of child care that is appropriate to their circumstances. Throughout the years, people's circumstances may change and they may make a different choice of child-care facility throughout. I believe that this legislation also maintains at the lower end of the affordability scale the appropriate balance between the cost of informal child care and the quality of child care that is provided.

Finally, the legislation provides a complaints mechanism so that parents who are consumers of this type of child-care service can contact the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care to ensure that these new regulations are appropriately policed. As has been said by a previous speaker, the implementation of this legislation has been delayed so that home-care providers are given an appropriate opportunity to make the necessary adjustments to their arrangements so that they conform with this legislation.

Overall, I believe that this is excellent legislation and I commend the Minister for it. I look forward to further innovative reform strategies coming forward from this Minister and this Government so that this sector of Queensland is given better protection and provided with a good-quality, affordable child-care service.
