



Speech by

Hon. KEN HAYWARD

MEMBER FOR KALLANGUR

Hansard 9 August 2001

INTRODUCTION AGENTS BILL

Hon. K. W. HAYWARD (Kallangur—ALP) (4.46 p.m.): It is a pleasure to rise in the parliament to speak to this bill. The aim of the bill is to provide protection for consumers who use the services of introduction agents and, of course, to ensure that fair and decent practices are carried out in the industry. We are here this afternoon because existing laws have failed to curb consumer exploitation. Some may say that such language is easy to use, but advantage has been taken of lonely people who wish to meet a partner.

As human beings we have a desire or a need to have a partner to share our lives with. That is only natural, but the nature of the society that we are involved in demands—I think in all cases—that we have a partner. Our society has an expectation that a person will have a partner and that that is the norm. People think that other people should have a partner to share their lives with.

I have had an opportunity to think a fair bit about the issues involved in this bill. It is important to recognise why we are here today. I believe that it is because we live in a changing society. Nowhere is that more emphasised than in the nature of work and work practices.

Work commitments now require people to work longer hours. Every day we hear about the growth in technology and the down-sizing of companies, which means that people have fewer workmates. Of course, the growth of small and micro businesses—and as we all know, Queensland is the small and micro business hub of Australia—means that people are too busy running their businesses to participate in social networks. They have too many work commitments. It is important to think about this, because people used to meet and form loving relationships at work. Because of work commitments, people can be isolated and cut off from their usual social networks. That is one result of our changing society.

This is really brought home in cases where someone who has been committed to their work over a long time sees their longstanding relationship come to an end. That person is cut off from what most of us would describe as the usual social networks. Those usual social networks include work, churches and, for some people, youth organisations, mutual friends, sporting clubs and even political party meetings. These networks provide opportunities for people with like interests to meet and to develop a partnership.

The nature of our society is changing and people are getting too preoccupied with running their small business or doing their job to become involved in any other activities. We all know that to be the case. In our electorates, clubs are saying that they need more people to get involved. Clearly, people are not getting involved.

The workplace as a place of meeting and a place for finding a partner is changing for the worse. It is certainly becoming more difficult to do so. Interestingly, conversely, as work activity is becoming more demanding and cutting people off from social networks, if a person is 'unwaged' or unemployed they, too, are cut off from social networks and opportunities. So a disconnection also occurs when someone is not working.

It is important to recognise the valuable role that clubs and voluntary organisations have played historically and, I am sure, now in enabling people to meet each other. Over the past couple of days since this bill has been on the *Notice Paper*, I have spoken to a few of my colleagues—

A Government member: A straw poll.

Mr HAYWARD:—a straw poll—about how they met their partner. I will give a number of examples. Linda Lavarch, the member for Kurwongbah, is not in the chamber. However, in the book titled *Getting Even*—an interesting title—which is about women MPs on life, power and politics, she had this to say. She said, when referring to her husband, Michael—

I mean, all those years of nightclubs, trying to meet young men. And all you had to do was join the Labor Party.

I am not going to go into exactly how she met her husband in the Labor Party—and there are probably some people who know—but I will say that it was at the Petrie Lawnton branch of the Labor Party. The member for Pumicestone told me that she met her husband, Jon, because they were both involved, naturally on different teams, in the sport of basketball. They were involved in a club situation where they had the opportunity to meet each other. The member for Albert met her husband under very exciting conditions. She has given me permission to say this. They are both proficient in the sport of judo and they used—

Mr Nuttall interjected.

Mr HAYWARD: She belted him. They used to train at least one night a week. As I understand it, he was in a different club. One day, there was a competition on—

Ms Keech: At the University of Queensland.

Mr HAYWARD: It was at the University of Queensland. Just as she was about to go out and fight another woman, her now husband came up to her and said, 'Margaret, would you like to have a cup of coffee with me afterwards?' That was his way of introducing himself to the member for Albert. And it has all worked out from there. The point I am trying to make from the examples I have cited—and there are plenty of others that I could have used—is that through sporting clubs and societies and through political party membership—for instance, I met my wife, Janet, at a Labor Party meeting—people meet people. That is what happens. Similarly, people meet people through churches and mutual friends. The member for Bulimba met his wife under interesting circumstances. It was pouring rain outside the church and he was standing out in the rain—

Mr Purcell: At the Catholic church.

Mr HAYWARD: It was pouring rain outside the Catholic church. He was standing in the rain, as he probably would do, and he saw a woman with an umbrella so he just ran over to her and said, 'Would you mind if I borrowed half of your umbrella?' and down the track they got married. The member for Mackay met his wife through a mutual friend who introduced them both. So those were the circumstances in which some members around me met their partners. However, it is not that simple for other people. It is getting harder because of the changes occurring in work and in society.

Meeting people through church activities, mutual friends and other organisations is specifically excluded from the bill, as they come under meetings organised through community and non-profit organisations. And this includes the organisers of public dances. The minister met her husband at a country dance.

Mrs Rose: No, at a party.

Mr HAYWARD: I am sorry, it was at a party.

The key issue in relation to this bill is, firstly, whether or not a person or company operates a business of introducing people interested in a personal relationship; and, secondly, whether they charge a fee for doing so.

As I said before, the bill aims to eliminate exploitative and unfair practices from the introduction industry. It is important to note that this action by the department was not taken lightly. Over the past five years, the Office of Fair Trading has received over 500 complaints relating to introduction agents. The complaints and dissatisfaction concern things such as high-pressure sales, excessive fees, unsuitability of levels of service received, and lack of response to complaints. That figure of 500 is probably understated, because I think introduction services are generally an industry in respect of which most people would not complain. There is probably some element of embarrassment in complaining. People might be reluctant to complain in instances where they went to an introduction agency and it was not successful for some reason or another. This might be changing—and I hope it is—but I think in our society there is also a stigma attached to somebody who may be using an introduction agency in order to meet another person.

It is difficult to find information on the size and growth of the introduction industry in Australia, but information from the United Kingdom suggests that the industry is worth in the UK alone \$150 million per annum and is growing at the rate of about 35 per cent per year. The Internet has been cited as one of the biggest driving forces behind that growth.

The bill does not distinguish between classes or types of introduction service, but merely says it is a service, the purpose of which is to introduce a person to one or more other persons who might be interested in a personal relationship. The act makes the distinction that this is provided a person does not act as an introduction agent by providing prostitution services or services related to prostitution. So there is no distinction between classes or types.

My research was from the UK; it was difficult for me to find examples in Australia. In the United Kingdom, there are dining clubs aimed at professional people where it is possible to pick a partner, as they say, over pate. There are up-market agencies in England that take on just 30 clients at a time, with the agent acting as a kind of head hunter by placing discreet advertisements and using their own personal contacts but, importantly, charging up to \$20,000 per client.

I am trying to say that it is a growth industry and, as I said right from the start, it is an industry that is growing because of the nature and changes that are occurring in our society. I have had time to think about that and I think that that is related to work activity in our society and the nature of the change in business in our society.

There are specialist agencies in the UK for ethnic groups, for lesbians, for gay men. There is even an introduction service there for vegetarians. If a person is a vegetarian, there are opportunities to meet other vegetarians. In Austria there is an agency called Techtcl Mechtcl, which caters for extramarital affairs. It is advertised as a 'side spring', an extramarital fling for those who have become a little bored with their spouse but who do not want to break up the happy home. On the information I saw, the agency owner maintains that her business providing a little 'side spring', as it is called, can help a marriage.

A government member: How?

Mr HAYWARD: Somebody said how? I would have thought that the only thing it could help would be the lawyers. That is probably a personal view.

As the minister said, this bill is an example of strong consumer protection legislation in an industry in which consumers are most vulnerable. There have been some examples of unscrupulous behaviour in that industry given here this afternoon. For instance, I will give a couple of examples that I have seen as case studies. A man in his thirties paid \$5,000 for a 12-month contract with an agency after being told he would be in a relationship 'in no time'. He was given telephone numbers of only four women, none of whom turned up for the arranged meeting.

A young man in his early twenties, which is the incredible thing about this, paid a total of \$19,000 to an introduction agency which promised to find him a wife. He visited the office three times. At each visit when he balked at paying the sums involved he was met with responses from the agency staff such as, 'You can't take your money to the grave.' 'You can make money but you can't make up for lost time.' 'I'm here to make you see sense.' 'You don't know what it's like to be in love.' 'Your choice is to remain single or have a long-term relationship.' Very strong emotional comments to people—in this case a young man, but it could be anybody—that force them into a position in which they need to think about their actions. Then they think, 'If I do upgrade myself or if I do pay the extra or if I do whatever the person is saying I should do, there is an opportunity, there is hope out there for me to meet and find a suitable partner.'

This bill will go towards giving confidence to a growing industry and, I think, an industry that is going to grow and grow in the future. It will regulate a growing industry which provides services to consumers. Importantly, this bill also gives confidence to that growing industry so that people in it who meet the requirements of the industry can have confidence that people who do not meet the requirements of that industry will be put out of the industry. I think that is important. It gives people who, in lots of cases, are desperately trying to find a partner for life some confidence that that will at least be done in a straight up and down way, that they are not going to be conned. Nevertheless, from what I have read in my research in preparing for this debate, I think that consumers who are thinking of using an introduction service should make some inquiries about the service and what the introduction service commits to provide an individual client before signing up. If someone is thinking about using an introduction service, they need to make those basic inquiries.

I welcome this bill, the aim of which is to curb consumer exploitation by eliminating unfair practices from the introduction agency industry. I commend the bill to the House.
