



Speech by

ANDREW McNAMARA

MEMBER FOR HERVEY BAY

Hansard 10 May 2002

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES [ACCREDITATION] BILL

Mr McNAMARA (Hervey Bay—ALP) (11.08 a.m.): I am very pleased to support the Residential Services (Accreditation) Bill 2002. I am very strongly of the view that this is among the most important legislation to be introduced into this House, certainly in my short time here so far, because it sets out to protect the health, safety and basic freedoms of some of our most vulnerable people.

It is a matter of fact that many of the residents of residential service facilities, including boarding houses and hostels and, more obviously, supported accommodation and aged care accommodation, are disadvantaged. These residents are aged and often infirm and frequently are on low incomes. For better or for worse, over the past decade the process of deinstitutionalisation has resulted in many people with physical and mental disabilities living in boarding house and hostel accommodation where they are vulnerable and, regretfully, sometimes exploited. I congratulate the minister on bringing in this legislation. I suggest that for deinstitutionalisation to work as a policy, it is essential that there be this type of concurrent increase in the degree of regulation of the environment in which these deinstitutionalised people must live. It is clearly understood that when public enterprises are privatised, it is essential that the environment in which the newly privatised entity operates will need to be more highly regulated. But this piece of economic theory has not always been recognised as being necessarily applicable to a social policy such as deinstitutionalisation. I would argue that it is the same and that this bill is a very sound and necessary reform.

As a community, we have effectively privatised the care and housing of a great number of people who would once have lived in institutions. I make no observation on the success or otherwise of this policy shift. That can wait for a more appropriate debate. Also, I do not want to obscure my very strong support for this legislation, which will directly address some of the issues of greatest concern to disadvantaged residents. This legislation will ensure that minimum standards and living conditions are in place, and residential service providers will be encouraged to improve continually the residential service they provide.

The system of registration for residential service providers is particularly welcome. It provides that not only the residential service provider but also their associates must be suitable persons. The abuse which some physically and intellectually disabled persons suffer at institutions can be just as easily inflicted on those vulnerable people in boarding houses or hostels—perhaps even more so—so this reform is vital. Further, the safety and suitability of these boarding house premises will be improved by this bill. It is so obviously necessary that residential accommodation that is substantially let to people with mobility problems and intellectual disabilities has to have the highest possible safety standards.

I am also very pleased to see that this legislation includes strong compliance and enforcement measures. It is a sensible, stepped system which starts with compliance officers initially seeking undertakings from the service provider and then moving up through to the issuing of a compliance notice and, finally, if necessary, amendment or cancellation of accreditation or registration. Of course, closure of any premises would be a last resort, as it would be hugely dislocating and traumatic for residents and financially disastrous for the service providers. Protection from reprisals is also built into the bill for people who make a complaint about the conduct of a residential service. It is a vital protection for residents, who will be able to feel safe from eviction as a reprisal for making a legitimate complaint to the appropriate person.

Finally, I wish to touch on the very sensible support which the Minister for Housing is offering the accommodation industry to make this legislation work. I congratulate the minister and the government for committing to put in place a loan product through the Department of Housing for use by accommodation providers who want to do repairs and improvements to their premises in line with the objects of this bill.

The phasing in of the legislation gives industry time to adjust and meet standards and I am aware that seminars and training courses for owners, managers and employees have been run throughout the state. Queensland leads Australia in being the first state to require mandatory accreditation of residential accommodation service providers and minimum standards for this type of accommodation. Around Queensland, this legislation will make a real difference to the lives of about 10,000 of our most vulnerable people. I am immensely proud to be able to vote in favour of this bill. It is the sort of legislation that reminds all of us why we are in this place. In this cynical and insular world in which many people often ask what do politicians ever do for battlers, we should point to this particular piece of legislation with a real sense of pride and achievement.

I congratulate the minister and her ministerial staff and her department for bringing forward this bill. It is great Labor legislation which will make the lives of some of the most disadvantaged and disempowered people in our society safer, more comfortable and more secure and provide a legitimate expectation that their living standards, like those of everyone else, will improve over time, not get worse. On behalf of the aged, the infirm, the disabled and the poor and vulnerable in my community of Hervey Bay, I thank the minister. I commend the bill to the House.