



Speech by

ANDREW McNAMARA

MEMBER FOR HERVEY BAY

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CHILD CARE BILL

Mr McNAMARA (Hervey Bay—ALP) (4.26 p.m.): I rise to support the Child Care Bill 2002. The degree of interest in this bill both inside the parliament with so many members contributing today, and outside the parliament, is a clear commentary on how our society has changed over the last 10 or 20 years. Child care is now a vital social, economic and political issue which sits squarely in the middle of many of the big issues which dominate debate in the media, in parliaments around the country, in shopping centres and at backyard barbecues.

Child care is one of the most important issues for young Queensland families as they try to juggle the priorities of work, home, sport and community. Child care is a vitally necessary service across all socioeconomic sectors of our society. My wife, Judith, and I have been extensive users of the services of the child care industry as we, like so many other Queensland families, have tried to balance work, study and other commitments while raising our children.

The Limited Hours Child Care Service run from the Neighbourhood Centre at Hervey Bay provided vital quality child care for us when our children were quite young. Judith was working part-time at the local university and my flexibility was limited by the demands of legal practice. A few hours of child care here and there were vital, just to keep the house running with groceries.

The Condy Park Kindergarten and Preschool, which has been operating in Hervey Bay for more than 40 years, helped us juggle family arrangements for three years before our children were at school. It is an outstanding institution in my community which has now started helping a third generation of children on their way to a new life. We are still occasional users of after school care in order to fit around our work, social and family commitments. That juggling is certainly made very complicated by my being here for about 17 weeks a year, and this might be an appropriate time to thank Judith once again for somehow managing to keep it all together on the home front with only part-time help from me.

We have been very lucky in that overwhelmingly our experiences with child care have been very positive and our children have benefited greatly from caring, dedicated and thoughtful child care which has helped our children to grow and develop. Judith served as president of the Condy Park Kindergarten and Preschool Committee for a year during its move from its old buildings at Pialba to its new residence on Old Maryborough Road, and perhaps more than many families the legal and financial issues involved in running a child-care centre were frequent topics of conversation around the McNamara kitchen table a few years ago.

Accordingly, I am aware of the financial and legislative issues which underpin the operation of child care facilities and I am firmly of the belief that this new legislation is designed to ensure that Queensland has an economically sustainable child care system which provides high quality, sensitive and responsive care for our children. There is no doubt that the Child Care Act 1991 and its subordinate legislation were due for an update as they lack the ability to meet the changing needs of our community. I am aware that there has been very substantial consultation with, and feedback from, the industry and the draft legislation has been amended to reflect that industry input.

The new legislation unashamedly seeks to increase standards across the industry by requiring qualification benchmarks for childcare workers. This includes the licensing of school-age care services for the first time as well as expanding the number of offences for which operators may be liable. These are important issues as the care of our children is a critical requirement which we as law-makers must address on behalf of our communities. But the bill does strike a balance fairly between the financial needs of the child care industry and the rights of parents to expect quality child care when they pay for it.

There has been a very significant change in the types of child care which we are demanding now, and in particular school-age care services have grown substantially. The requirement that these services be licensed recognises this expansion and sets certain requirements which I welcome. Similarly, the requirement that staff be either studying towards appropriate qualifications or actually hold appropriate qualifications reflects the broad societal move towards appropriate training and skilling across every sector of the work force. The child care industry has been heading in this direction for many years and is to be broadly congratulated in this regard.

This bill is detailed in its approach and reflects the need to tie licensing criteria to appropriate measurements. Issues such as where the service is being delivered—that is, either at home or in a child-care centre—and the numbers and ages of children and the length and time of care are all explicitly taken into consideration in setting carer to children ratios. I am certainly aware of the lobbying of organisations such as the Queensland Care Providers Association Inc. and the Queensland Professional Child Care Centres Association Inc. I thank them for their advice to me, which has helped me in preparing for this speech today.

In particular, the requirements for playgroups and excursions involving other carers in licensed home based care has been explicitly raised with me by carers in my electorate of Hervey Bay. I note that the initial proposed legislation did not accommodate the practice of more than two carers gathering in playgroups and for excursions. The provisions of clause 96 of the bill are, I think, balanced and sensible. The new bill is drafted to recognise that home based care services receive an advantage by carers coming together to share ideas and provide peer support, as well as allowing children opportunities to socialise more broadly and participate in a larger range of activities.

Importantly, however, the bill sets out safeguards around the frequency of such gatherings and the number of carers and children participating. I think we would all feel more comfortable with that in that it is appropriate. The imposition of reasonable limits to these activities is necessary to ensure that children do not attend playgroups all day every day. One of the fundamental benefits of home based child care is regular sleep times, structured events and a home environment, and this legislation will protect that.

Some suggestions have been made that the new bill will mean that carers will only be able to meet together for playgroups for three hours a week and that carers will not be able to leave the house with children for more than three hours once a week. This is untrue and the new legislation is quite clear in this regard. There is no time limit on carers leaving the house to shop, pick up older children from school or attend to other chores. There are, however, appropriate limits on the amount of time child carers can come together at one another's house or in other child care places. These vary depending on the number of carers and the age of the children. In relation to excursions, there is no limit on the number of hours in a day that can be devoted to an excursion but there is a limit of not more than once per week for any one child. This is balanced and sensible.

The new bill also provides for a more flexible range of services to operate with specific conditions on their licences. The transitional provisions for staff already working in the child care industry are also appropriate to allow staff to meet new requirements within a reasonable period of time. I congratulate the minister in particular on backing up these reforms with the \$4.2 million Child Care Statewide Training Strategy so that the bill's objective in terms of upskilling are achievable. I commend the minister and her staff for the lengthy consultation and for the numerous amendments to the draft bill which were in response to those community and industry concerns. The Child Care Bill meets the needs of parents and children first and foremost, which is how it should be, and clearly aims for quality, safety and affordability across the sector. Childhood should be a time of joy and discovery and play and happy learning. For many kids it is, but it should not be a matter of good luck. This bill aims to raise and enforce standards which are in the interests of all children.

I am delighted to be able to be here today to debate this bill because travelling with me this week is Kitkat, the class travel buddy of the 2K Legends from Kawungan State School. Kitkat travels with 2K class members' parents to their workplaces and files email reports back to the class about what he has seen. I am very pleased to inform the House that Kitkat will be reporting to 2K about the debate in this place on this bill. He will be letting the class know that legislation about the care of children is of vital concern to the parliament of Queensland.

Ms Rose interjected.

Mr McNAMARA: They have excellent teachers and an excellent school. Finally and on a personal note, yesterday was my son Brandon's seventh birthday. This is regretfully, in some ways, the second year in a row where I have been away for parliament for his birthday. I did promise him that I would be wishing him a happy birthday as the first thing I did when I spoke this time around. I want to say happy birthday Brandon on the record. Like many seven-year-olds who read *Hansard*, he will be avidly looking at the *Hansard* to see that that is there. So happy birthday, Brandon. Kitkat and I will be back on Friday and we will see you then. I commend the bill to the House.