



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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CHILD CARE BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (9.41 a.m.): I rise to speak to the Child Care Bill 2002 and acknowledge that the government's objective is to protect and promote the best interests of children receiving child care. I applaud the motives of the bill, but I have had several concerns brought to my attention by organisations who question the effectiveness of the legislation in its aim of providing full protection to the child. There is also concern that the cost of complying with the legislation will for many make child care unaffordable, particularly with the requirement for the increase in staff over lunch periods, which will see a massive increase in staff numbers. I think that it was the member for Cunningham—and correct me if I am wrong—who offered a figure of an extra 4,000 staff who could be required. It was questioned whether or not it was possible to obtain that additional number of qualified staff and whether or not on the day that the legislation became law many child-care centres will, in fact, be in breach of the act.

An honourable member interjected.

Mrs PRATT: That is right. Many believe that complying with the legislation's requirements will increase costs and that these costs will be passed on to the parents.

I believe that more than 50 per cent of the child population frequent child-care centres. For most, it is a necessity. Although many mothers and fathers would prefer to stay at home, parents' circumstances make that impossible. Being a one-parent family, pursuing further studies, volunteering in the community, or perhaps having the need for a child to gain social skills or even a parent just needing time out for oneself can all be reasons why a child is placed in child care. Parents deserve to be confident in the child-care centre that they select. I believe that this is the intention of the bill. But I also ask: does the bill, in fact, achieve its aim? Does it convince parents, child care organisations and staff that it will, in fact, deliver its intent?

Like most members, I have been approached by concerned representatives of the Creche and Kindergarten Association, the Queensland Professional Child Care Centre Association and other individuals and groups. In communication with these groups, they criticised the Department of Families and claimed that the department has—

Failed to design the legislation so that it will protect children and promote their wellbeing while attending child care services.

It is because of concerns expressed by associations with such long-term experience that I choose to put forward their arguments to be addressed by the minister.

The Queensland Professional Child Care Centre Association Inc. has operated for 28 years and served approximately 25,000 families. They care for approximately 35,000 kids in 290 child-care centres throughout the state. These organisations are experienced in a field that most of us would baulk at. I for one do not dismiss their concerns lightly. In relation to the legislation, that organisation states—

That if passed in its current form, as overlooking the flaws in the current regulations and fear, if it becomes law it will allow licensees to increase profits at the expense of the children in care.

The Creche and Kindergarten Association's general comment was the following—

The proposed legislation is based on flexibility for licensees and the convenience of families rather than the object and principles in relation to the children it purports to be promoting. We cannot see any evidence of current research or best practice in early childhood reflected in the Bill or regulations.

It also claims that the current minimum standards will be further eroded if the bill is passed in its current form.

There are concerns that the needs of a child whose family is experiencing a genuine emergency cannot be best met within a centre based service. The Creche and Kindergarten Association argued—

In a genuine emergency it is more likely to leave a child feeling unsettled, vulnerable and in need of additional support as a result of a disruption to the family.

It stated further—

There must be alternative ways of responding to genuine emergency care requirements because meeting the needs of that child who has suffered a form of trauma in addition to an already full group of children will erode the level of care for every child in that group.

These groups maintain that this bill increases the pressure on human and physical resources in child care services. I cannot say if these concerns are justified, but concerns from bodies with such experience in the industry must be given consideration.

There are many concerns being raised by the child care agencies and I cannot see anyone arguing against the primary reasons behind the legislation, which are to protect the child from harm, respect the child's dignity and privacy and wellbeing, and provide positive experiences for the child. However, if that is to be achieved, then it appears that a lot more needs to be done before many in the industry are convinced. It may well be that some self-assessment could be successful, but that is also questionable. It could be that the licensing and relicensing process must be backed up by the department on a one-on-one personal visit basis, which would escalate costs—and possibly the cost factor has influenced this proposal for self-assessment.

It is essential that the department is satisfied that the licensees are complying with all aspects of the regulations. I do not believe that self-assessment alone, based on previous compliance history, is good enough. In particular, I see the standards of each centre being only as good as the staff employed, and staff change positions on a regular basis. In saying that, I have only admiration for the majority of child-care centres and others involved, but I am concerned that self-assessment opens the opportunity for certain aspects of standards to slip.

The carers' approach and attitude to their job will have a major impact on the children in their care. Through necessity, the child is left under that carer's supervision during their formative years while the parent works, and their influence on the child's behavioural patterns is well documented. In many cases, the child forms an extremely close relationship and dependency with individual staff. Like any business—and in this day and age these centres are becoming big business—staff continually change jobs for many and varied reasons. Many join other child care organisations or start their own centre. Many take a lot of the goodwill of the business with them, like any good employee in any business that is competitive. Replacement staff may fail to continue the same level of care. Self-assessment could be false in cases such as that. Therefore, I believe that there needs to be a system in place for effectively tracking the progression of staff members to ensure that they are upgraded to any required qualification for their position. To be effective and in the spirit of the reasons for the bill, I consider that inspections by departmental officers are a must.

To back this up, there must be a strong enforcement by these officers to ensure that compliance by licensees is kept and that there are stiff penalties and sanctions imposed for offenders. It is the lives of our biggest asset that we are playing with here and genuine deterrents are essential. Let us not lose sight of fact that it is the children who are our responsibility, not so much the parents.

The minister stated the following as the basis for legislative changes to be made to the current legislation—

... the legislation being overly prescriptive and lacking the necessary flexibility to assist services to meet the specific needs of parents within their communities.

To an extent, I agree with that statement. But there are several concerns being expressed by a large sector of the child care industry that need to be adequately addressed. I look forward to the minister's response to the numerous questions put forward by many of the members in this House.