



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

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CHILD CARE BILL

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (5.31 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Child Care Bill 2002. During my time in politics I have been involved with the child care issue in many ways. In fact, as an endorsed candidate for the seat of South Brisbane in 1977 I noted a survey of the East Brisbane State School by the University of Queensland's social work unit which discovered that 37 per cent of children attending that school were latchkey children—that is, they left school each day with a key around their neck and went home to nobody. I remember discussing that issue at the newly formed East Brisbane Community Centre, which I was secretary of. In many ways, that centre was by far one of the best learning curves I had as a potential member of parliament.

Those involved in that centre thought that we ought to do something about providing care for these children before and after school. In fact, with support from the social work unit of the university that community centre set up the first out-of-school-hours care centre in Queensland. Nowadays that kind of care is an integral part of just about every P&C and every school community, because there is a need to meet the gap between mum or dad either going to or coming home from work and children starting and finishing school. No school principal would allow the dumping of a child at 7 o'clock in the morning in the school grounds without some sort of organised child care, and rightly so.

The centre then decided to run a vacation care program. Local police confirmed that the creation of that program reduced the number of juvenile offences in East Brisbane. It stopped young people from going around the streets aimlessly looking for something to do. I was also involved in setting up a family day care program in the area run by two unbelievably wonderful coordinators who expended much energy to get a toy library to travel on a day-to-day basis to the homes of family day care centres. In those days there were community based child care services. The East Brisbane Community Centre decided to set up a service at the centre. At that time the fee was an 80 per cent salary subsidy. It was not means tested, but the fees were very small. The care provided at those community based care centres was wonderful, even though in today's world there is an argument in terms of equity. Today it costs something like \$155 in fees for long day care. If a family is earning less than \$30,000 a year, there is a \$133 subsidy. Those levels for lower income people are comparable, but that figure is less if the child is of school age—that is, it is only 85 per cent of that.

Those involved in politics are always confronted by the issue of child care. When doorknocking as a candidate after my re-found wisdom to run for politics again I spoke to many Army wives around the Enoggera area. I discovered that they had two issues that were most important to them, and I must have gone to 100 houses in the area where the woman's husband worked at the Enoggera Army base. Two issues confronted those people: the first was the quality of their housing—it was not up to scratch—and the second was the lack of child care facilities. When the Labor government came to power in 1989 a child care service was established in the area. When the Labor Party won government in 1989 it put substantial amounts of money into child care, but unfortunately it was one of the few things we did well at the time in family services; we did not dedicate enough resources to that area. That was an important issue. This bill continues on from the 1991 legislation. It does a very good job in meeting its goals of regulating child care services, of establishing a licensing system and of looking at the qualifications and the quality of people who work in the child care industry.

I would assume that, like all other members, I was lobbied by a number of providers of long day care in my electorate and from outside my electorate about their concerns. However, I was upset when they put out a press release saying that they had no confidence in the minister because the arguments that they put during the long and positive consultation process were not accepted. I have often discovered that people tend to think that consultation really means that they should get exactly what they want, and I will give the House an example. The Minister for Health and I had to address safety issues with regard to Route 20 after the Goss government was elected. We wanted a crossing over Pickering Street because cars were running into trains and we needed to do something about that. One group said that they were concerned about the same issue and became part of the consultation process. However, when the crossing was opened they were there with placards saying that people should vote against Jim Fouras because they did not like the final outcome. But they were part of a very full consultation process.

There is no doubt that the people lobbying me about this bill argued that there needs to be a balance and a nexus between the quality of child care and the affordability of child care. Nobody could disagree with that. Child care agencies are arguing that this legislation will badly impact on child care itself. They believe that the fact that the bill contains a provision to have a minimum staff of two during lunch hours would increase the costs of child care by \$30 per child per week. I do not think that that can stand up to any rational analysis. Certainly there would be a bit of an increase, but it would be less than \$10 a week.

It is interesting to note that provisions relating to staff levels to be maintained during the day were contained in the 1991 legislation. It should be noted that some child-care centres are actually meeting that requirement. We have a situation whereby people are arguing that this requirement is very onerous and there is something wrong with this legislation—so wrong that they have to issue press releases saying that they have no confidence in the minister—when that requirement was being met and was part of the 1991 legislation. All we are doing now is ensuring it is met.

Some in the consultation process said to me that minimum qualification standards—I think it is level III—would lead to a demand for increased wages. If people are better trained to give a better quality of service, I think that should be addressed. It would certainly go before the industrial commission as a need to give people increased wages.

I note that in the last month or so child-care centres have been listed on the stock exchange. Each of the listed centres has gone gangbusters. The listed price has been exceeded day after day. That indicates that this is a viable and very profitable industry. The child care industry is a large employer, employing more than 20,000 people. Some \$1.4 billion has been invested in that industry.

One of the major arguments against this legislation was that in some way it was unfair. For example, people representing long day child care centres were saying that family day care, creche and kindergartens and out-of-school-hours care were being treated much better in this legislation because there are not the same requirements on them as there are on long day care. In fact, the aim of this legislation is to set consistent standards across comparable child care settings. The long day care centres are competing against other long day care centres. There are different circumstances in out-of-school-hours care. I do not know how the legislation can be seen to be discriminatory, because those environments are totally different.

There is no doubt in my mind that qualified staff contribute to a child's overall development. There is also no doubt that group sizes, staff numbers and staff-child ratios can impact on the quality of care provided. There is also no doubt that poor quality care can impact on a child's social and language development. Those issues go hand in glove with the need for affordable and quality child care. That is the issue that makes me say to the critics, 'You made your argument, but not too well.' There is a large amount of research indicating the value of qualified staff in a child's early development.

It should be noted that the minimum standards of European and other OECD countries are still well ahead what is being nominated here. It should also be noted that there are specific transitional provisions in this legislation. There is no callous attempt to put people into extreme difficulty. This bill accommodates staff currently in the industry to meet the new qualifications. There is a training fund of \$4.2 million to assist in this process. A person currently working in a child-care centre will be regarded as qualified while they are undertaking appropriate courses. What could be fairer than that?

Ms Keech: It is a generous package.

Mr FOURAS: It is certainly well thought out. The many issues in this bill, such as emergency care, have been well canvassed by many members. I do not want the Deputy Speaker to bring me into line for being tedious or repetitious. I have been known to be tedious, but I will try not to be repetitious.

This piece of legislation does meet its goals. Concerns raised with me by those lobbying against this legislation relating to accountability, the licensing system and minimum educational qualifications have been addressed and put together in a piece of legislation that will stand the test of time.

Particularly the long day care operators should welcome the fact that they will get quite a bit of assistance in training.

There is no doubt that there have been longstanding issues with staff turnover and difficulties with training and recruitment. The minister said that some \$10 million would be invested in new technologies, training strategies and research. We are not just imposing conditions; we are trying to provide the resources to make them happen. I was delighted when I saw a press release from the minister indicating that she had found \$2 million to introduce family support hubs, which would amalgamate child care and early childhood services with family, health and education services. They are the sorts of initiatives that go hand in glove with this legislation.

I am pleased to support this legislation. I think the need for child care will continue to increase. I know that having to put a couple of children in day care creates tremendous problems for some families. Family incomes of up to \$60,000 a year do not provide much subsidy, so it is difficult. In the end, I think the right for a woman to work and be part of society is fundamental. I do not think any of us should be judgmental as to whether the place of a particular woman is in the home or in the workplace. It is a matter of choice.

Mr Terry Sullivan: Or whether a father stays at home.

Mr FOURAS: A very good friend of mine in the electorate is a lecturer at QUT and his wife is a very senior social worker. They have actually taken it in turns to be house parents. That is the makings of a very good relationship. Their decision was to stay at home with their children. I have been diverted enough by the member for Stafford. I conclude by commending the bill to the House and congratulating the minister on a job well done.