



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

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CHILD CARE BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (4.47 p.m.): In the last 30 years we have witnessed significant changes in Australia's patterns of work and family life. No change has been more significant than the rise in the number of women returning to full-time or part-time work after having children. Like many of my contemporaries, I was raised in a family where dad was the main breadwinner while mum stayed at home with my brothers, sister and me. But this is no longer the norm. Working mothers are today's reality. Whether or not you are one of the old school still clinging to the view that a mother's place is in the home, the reality is that this is no longer an option for many families.

Many of today's mums have no choice but to return to work soon after having a family, and few families can afford the luxury of having one partner stay at home full time to care for the children. So while researchers continue to debate the benefits or otherwise of child care, the fact remains that such services are a necessity for thousands of Australian families. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999 census of child care services revealed that 51 per cent of Australian children aged less than 12 years used some type of child care. No doubt that figure has risen over the years since.

With that in mind, it is important that parents are able to feel confident about and comfortable with the quality of care being provided for their children. The Beattie government's Child Care Bill 2002 is about maintaining that parental confidence by providing the state's child care services with a strong framework in which they can deliver quality care while at the same time allowing them the flexibility to respond to the needs of parents.

There is little doubt that Queensland's current child care legislation is in need of an overhaul. The legislation was drafted in 1991 and was appropriate for its time. But times have changed and there is a need to put in place legislation that better reflects and supports today's child care industry. The government's Child Care Bill aims to address a number of key problems that have been identified in the legislation over the years, the most important of which has been the prescriptive nature of the current system. In the minister's speech, she covered in some detail the new approach to child care in Queensland that will be adopted with the passing of this legislation and I certainly do not propose to cover this ground again. Instead, I will touch on several key initiatives within the Child Care Bill that I believe have the support of most Queensland parents.

As I said earlier, the bill before us today is about flexibility—flexibility for child care providers and flexibility for parents. One of the major concerns identified by stakeholders has been the lack of provision for child-care centres to vary the standard requirements with respect to staffing ratios at different times of the day or even to allow for a regular variation or increase to the licensed capacity of a centre for different times of the day. This bill will deliver this flexibility, thereby ensuring that centres are better able to accommodate the needs of parents. For example, a child care service may now be able to apply for a variation in its maximum numbers to accommodate additional school-age children in its after school care programs. This legislation also provides flexibility that will allow for more innovative services to operate, such as those who wish to operate overnight to meet the needs of shiftworkers. Coming from an industry background where shiftworkers spend a lot of their time working long hours during the night, there have certainly been times in the past when I have been able to identify that it

would have been great if we had been able to put children into some sort of child care service. Previously, it has not been viable to provide such services because of the restrictive nature of the staff-to-children ratios. Clearly, flexibility is required as full staffing ratios would not be needed at times when most children are sleeping.

Similarly, problems have arisen in the current legislation with respect to staff-child ratios during staff lunchbreaks, which usually coincide with children's rest periods. The flexibility provisions within this legislation will enable child-care centres to apply for a regular variation to staff-child ratios during these times. That is commonsense stuff.

Another example of the government's recognition of the need for increased flexibility within child care services is the new emergency care provision. Many families would have experienced emergency situations during which they needed to place a child or children in child care. I think that the member for Logan in his contribution to the House reflected on that need. For example, a parent may be called into work unexpectedly on their day off or may be needed to lend support or assistance during a family crisis and emergency. How many times do we find that happening in our lives? We all know that it is not always possible for a parent to have their child cared for on these occasions if, for instance, numbers at the child-care centre are at full capacity. Interestingly, Queensland's current child care legislation makes no formal provision for child care services to provide emergency care in situations such as those that I have mentioned.

During the consultation process for the proposed legislation, it was clear that there was general support from both child care service providers and parents alike for the inclusion of formalised emergency care provisions. This legislation does just that, but it also imposes a limit of one extra child or a sibling group. This is an important condition in that it means that the child care services will now legally be able to respond to the emergency care needs of parents, but at the same time they will have to guarantee that safeguards remain in place to ensure that the demands of the other children in care are met. That is very important. Therefore, the provision will not be able to be abused, but will still be there for genuine emergency cases. That is good news for both parents and for the service provider.

As I mentioned previously, the current legislation was drafted some 11 years ago. Since that time, the child care industry has not only grown significantly but also it has developed a much more professional outlook. According to the last census of child care services, 54 per cent of long day care staff held formal qualifications. Therefore, it is appropriate that the new legislation seeks to reflect the growth towards a more professional industry by looking at increasing the minimum qualification requirements for child care staff. Times have certainly changed and today's parents expect to be able to leave their children in the capable care of suitably qualified professionals. This bill seeks to introduce a minimum qualification for assistants—a move supported by the government's pledge to the industry through its \$4.2 million child care training strategy.

I understand that there is general support from the child care sector for the introduction of minimum standards for all staff. However, some concerns have been expressed by the private sector with regard to the availability of qualified staff to fill those positions. I believe that this may be just a short-term problem and I genuinely believe that the move to have all staff hold minimum qualifications will encourage the growth in the professionalism of the industry and, in turn, lead to increased interest in those people who are seeking to pursue a full-time career in child care. Currently, there is a perception—misguided though it is—that being a child care assistant is an easy job that anyone can do. I know that is not the case. It is an exhausting, challenging and no doubt a thankless job.

Ms Keech: Very rewarding.

Mr PEARCE: It would no doubt be very rewarding. As all members know, anything to do with children—making them happy and enjoying their life and better preparing for their life—is very rewarding for any of us.

I think that the introduction of minimum qualifications will work towards removing this misconception and will give assistants a degree of professionalism. It will also encourage them to pursue a career path within the child care industry. I think that is a great move, because every worker likes to have some goals to be able to go out and work for and achieve in their lives. So if we give these people a career path, it will make them more dedicated, more professional and more determined to do a good job. I think that everybody in this House would agree that most parents support changes that are about promoting professionalism within this significant industry.

One of the problems identified in the current legislation is the ambiguity with respect to an area that has long been a concern, and that is first-aid qualifications. Although child care service providers make every effort to ensure that their centres meet strict health and safety requirements, accidents are inevitable when toddlers and young children are involved. We see that happen all the time. So there is a need to ensure that suitably qualified staff are on hand at all times to respond to accidents,

emergencies, or when a child falls ill. The new legislation seeks to clarify the existing provisions with respect to first-aid qualifications. Previously, there was a belief that all staff at a centre must be qualified in first aid. That was never the intention of the existing legislation, but this misconception has arisen because of the ambiguous nature of the act. The bill before us today clears up any ambiguity by ensuring that at least one staff member with a first-aid qualification is present at all times when child care is being provided. Once again, this provision is about promoting flexibility for child care service providers, who will now be able to organise staff rosters accordingly. At the same time, this provision provides reassurance to parents that someone will always be on hand should the worst happen.

One of the more interesting facets of the new legislation is the introduction of a requirement to license school-age care services for the first time. The current legislation makes no provision for such a service. A lot of people have been asking about this for a long time. Instead, most school-age care providers have operated in accordance with the national standards for outside school hours care. However, these standards are not enforced by either the Commonwealth or state governments. Like the remainder of the child care industry, the school-age care sector has become more professional in recent years and it is important that the new legislation reflects this trend.

I understand that there is strong support from the child care sector for this licensing change. It is also pleasing to note that the government has responded to feedback during the consultation process by ensuring that P&C associations will be able to apply for a licence to provide school-age care services. Through this and the other provisions I have touched on today, the Beattie government has demonstrated its commitment to supporting the development of a highly professional child care industry within this state. In continuing to foster the development of Queensland as the Smart State, it is inevitable that we take a closer look at those industries which have such a major influence on our children who, after all, will be the leaders and managers of tomorrow. The Child Care Bill 2002 is an important step in the right direction in cementing Queensland's position as the Smart State. I commend the bill to the House.
