



Speech by

Mr D. BRISKEY

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

Hansard 12 November 2003

EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION [STUDENT PROTECTION] AMENDMENT BILL

Mr BRISKEY (Cleveland—ALP) (3.36 p.m.): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak in support of this bill. As members know, one of the main jobs of parents is to protect our children from harm. When we send them to school, we expect that the teachers will act in loco parentis; in other words, to protect our children from harm and to act in our place as parents. That is why this bill is so very important to me. As a former teacher, and as someone who lives with a teacher, and as someone who comes from a family of many teachers, it is important to me that, as legislators, we make sure that children are protected in our schools.

Any abuse of children is abhorrent, and most especially the sexual abuse of children. In the past some teachers have abused children in our schools—both state and private schools. This bill will go a long way to ensuring that that sort of activity does not happen again—or we hope that it does not happen again. I know that the minister—and I congratulate her on this—has undertaken extensive consultation with teacher unions, parent bodies, heads of religious organisations and other stakeholders as well as the Board of Teacher Registration and the general public on this bill. I know that there is general agreement with respect to what we, as a government, are endeavouring to do through this bill.

The bill states that it is being put before the parliament to protect the welfare and interests of children. That is our job. That is our obligation not only as parents but also as members of this House. This bill arises from the deliberations of the ministerial task force to address reforms to enhance the level of protection for children in schools. I share the minister's sentiments and I would like to make it clear in this House that the vast majority of teachers in our schools are concerned about the safety and protection of children. In fact, I would say that the overwhelming majority of teachers—I would go as far as to say 99.9 per cent of teachers—have a genuine interest in the care of their students. I keep in touch with teachers who I once taught with. I talk to teachers who teach with my wife at her school. Every one of them has a genuine interest in the care and protection of the students they teach.

However, over time there have been, unfortunately, a very small minority of teachers and other staff in schools from whom this amendment is designed to protect children. The bill seeks to amend the Education (Teacher Registration) Act 1998, the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 and the Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000. As I said at the outset, this legislation and the minister should be applauded. I am sure the bill will be supported by every honourable member.

New mechanisms to extend the powers of the Board of Teacher Registration to ensure that all potential and existing teachers are and remain of good character and are suitable for child related employment will have a huge impact on weeding out people who are unsuitable and who may pose a risk to children. I am advised that the board is now undertaking the task of conducting checks not only on all new registrations but also on all 62,000 teacher registrations before 1998. I understand this is the largest retrospective criminal history check of teachers ever undertaken in Australia and is to be applauded.

Amendments to these bills are important. Over the years, children have been affected by exposure to teachers and other teaching related staff in schools with less than honourable intentions. These children have been unknowingly left open to abuse by opportunists who have

used the system to satisfy their sick desires. I do not plan to detail the finer points of the amendments except to say that this is a significant and positive step forward for the children of Queensland and their parents. I am very pleased to commend the bill to the House.