



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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EVIDENCE [PROTECTION OF CHILDREN] AMENDMENT BILL

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (3.24 p.m.): I am pleased to join other honourable members in this House in supporting the Evidence (Protection of Children) Amendment Bill 2003. It is timely that we should be speaking about this bill this week when this week is Child Protection Week. I am pleased and even proud to inform honourable members of the House of the very active time we are having in Cairns this week with Child Protection Week. Catherine Gray, who is the coordinator of the Family Support Program run through Lifeline in Cairns, has been a convenor of the Child Protection Week working party in Cairns. They have put together an amazing program of events.

We all know that the theme is that child protection is everyone's business. To that extent they have been very keen to make sure that all of the activities in Child Protection Week are as visible as possible and that they are brought to the attention of the wider community as much as possible. They have included events such as a sausage sizzle in town, Family Fun in the Tropics, a postcard competition entitled 'What does childhood mean to me?', a creative parenting workshop, a meeting about balancing work, family and play, a session entitled 'Feeling good about yourself', training and other events.

It is a busy week in Cairns. I would like to give recognition to all of those who have done the hard work of organising these events, not just because they have organised this week but because they are people who are devoted to preventing child abuse week in week out, year in year out. Organisations in the Cairns region such as Lifeline, Cairns Shared Family Care, Wu Chopperen Social and Emotional Health, the Women's Centre, the Regional Domestic Violence Service and Youth Empowered Towards Independence and even organisations like the Girl Guides and the Scout Association are part of the events this week.

The names of private sector organisations that give time and time again to good community causes are on the sponsors list, too. These organisations include: Birch Carrol and Coyle in Cairns, Piccones IGA, George Pickers, Irelands, Woolworths Cairns and, of course, our famous Taipans basketball team who, in between playing magnificent basketball and training hard, do all that they can for the youth of our community. There is no doubt that this bill is needed and is timely.

Unfortunately, I have some figures that will be very sobering for members of the House to hear. The Cairns Juvenile Aid Bureau is a busy bureau. In fact, we have had to increase the allocation of officers to the bureau recently. We have brought their total strength to 16. The figures that I place before the House come from their work over this last year. They say that child abuse is quite a significant problem. In the 2002-03 financial year, Cairns JAB dealt with 298 reports of ill treatment of children, 82 reports of serious assaults on children, 31 reports of rape and attempted rape, and 328 other offences against children. Through the good work of the JAB, 90 per cent of all offences committed against children were solved, with 802 charges being presented to the courts for determination. The result is that child victims of crime are receiving better support than they have in times past.

This is a slight diversion, I admit, but I would particularly like to pay my compliments to the officer in charge of the Cairns Juvenile Aid Bureau, Detective Senior Sergeant Maurice Carless, who won the *Courier-Mail* Police Scholarship. He has been examining the latest techniques in child abuse investigation in the United Kingdom. I have no doubt that not only Cairns and the far north but the whole state of Queensland will be better informed for his studies when he returns.

For many years the JAB in Cairns has worked closely with the SCAN team that has been ably led for most of its years by paediatrician Dr Ross Messer. We are as well organised as you can probably be in the Cairns area in terms of managing child abuse when it is reported. The truth is that in generations past we have not paid enough attention to what could be regarded as the retraumatisation that can occur for children who report abuse.

I remind honourable members of another unpleasant fact, and that is that far and away the majority of child abuse occurs within the home. Can members imagine the pain, the fear, the anxiety and the confusion for a child in reporting child abuse within his or her own family? We cannot even imagine that, but added to that is what psychologists regard as a retraumatisation process—that is, making that child in very difficult circumstances, sometimes in front of the alleged perpetrator, repeat and discuss the details of what happened and then be cross-examined by adult lawyers who believe that they are doing their best to defend their client while at the same time increasing the trauma.

This bill ensures that we do our best to make sure that courts get proper evidence from children in a way that is as least traumatising as possible yet has proper regard to the presumed innocence of the person who is charged. That person, of course, has the right for that evidence to be taken in a fair and proper fashion. There is at our disposal, as the bill makes clear, many choices as to how that evidence can be taken other than what might be termed the old-fashioned and high anxiety-producing way of a courtroom full of threatening adult figures engaging in a combative style of questioning. I therefore support the bill.

Before I conclude, I pay compliments also to the Australian Institute of Criminology for its excellent paper in the trends and issues series titled *The experiences of child complainants of sexual abuse in the criminal justice system*. There are some very unpleasant examples given in that paper as to why we need this bill before the House. I pay my full regards to all of those who have been part of drafting the bill and, of course, to the Attorney-General, who has put it before us.