



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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SEXUAL OFFENCES [PROTECTION OF CHILDREN] AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (12.23 p.m.): I rise to address the House on the Sexual Offences (Protection of Children) Amendment Bill 2002. Although it would be preferable that such a bill need never be brought into the House, societies world wide suffer because of the practices of perverse individuals.

I commend the Attorney-General for introducing this bill and have no illusions that there will be more amendments over the years. Perhaps paedophiles should think themselves extremely lucky that it is the minister bringing in this bill and not me because, quite frankly, I would neuter the lot of them without a moment's hesitation.

Legislation giving police the powers to investigate and have wider intelligence guidelines is imperative if we are to make any inroads into stopping heinous child sex crimes and paedophile behaviour. As with any other crime, whether it be drugs or prostitution, most involved with paedophilia are not working alone and have intricate networks aiding and abetting individual members to satisfying their base desires.

Although doing their best, police have been restricted through lack of finances in trying to keep up with the rapid advances in technology that criminals are using to commit crimes. Unfortunately, they will always be playing catch-up. As hackers have often stated, 'It's a game. Every time ways are found to prevent us hacking, the challenge is in finding new ways to do it.' And so it is, I believe, with paedophiles.

We must be forever vigilant and continue to keep introducing this type of legislation as technology advances. It is the only way our law enforcement officers will have any chance of continuing to combat paedophiles and Internet based child sex criminal activities. It is hard, if not impossible, to legislate to stop it all, but the new powers contained in this legislation certainly go a considerable way to hopefully minimise it in Queensland.

Looking at child pornography first, we should not forget that in general the Internet technology has positive attributes, and I still believe the positives outweigh the negatives. But anyone connected to the Internet can testify to the huge amounts of unsolicited sex junk mail and 'pop ups' that float around the world and infect computers. Without doubt, the most heinous of these crimes, I believe, is the sexual display, enticement and entrapment of young people by paedophiles through the Internet.

This is not just a Queensland or an Australian problem; it is a worldwide problem. Paedophile activity is now available to anyone connected to the Net in many forms and guises. Many child porn sites are linked to other sex sites, and with the latest surveys showing that more than 70 percent of Internet users at some stage access sex sites, it is no wonder that paedophilia is growing. If so, then there is the chance that these sites could link inadvertently to detestable sites used for child pornography.

These paedophiles prey on the innocence of youth and have many ways of reaching young children. There are a lot of convictions on record where paedophiles have entered chat rooms for young people and enticed them to meetings to satisfy themselves with under-age children. To all decent thinking people, these acts are not only abhorrent but also unforgivable.

It is good to note that in Queensland convictions against paedophiles are on the increase. But there is, and I presume always will be, some way these despicable people will get around the law and evade punishment. There is always someone or groups out there who are clever enough or technically advanced enough to stay one jump ahead and who have the computer skills to manoeuvre around the Net.

I believe this legislation should be backed up by a child-awareness program at schools. Children are, by nature, inquisitive and with parental permission they should be informed as to how their curiosity is being played upon and is making them vulnerable. Many are easily vulnerable to a professional paedophile's well-rehearsed approach. They use a child's inherent attitude to rebel and keep secrets from their parents as their greatest ally against not being discovered. I trust the legislative power for police to enter child chat rooms to weed out these undesirable elements will have the hoped for success. It is important for paedophiles to know it may well be them who are being trapped into a meeting and not the other way round.

As the legislation brief states, legislation and law enforcement efforts will not provide the total solution. The approach to this problem must be a holistic one, as stated. Cyberpredators come in two forms: enticement or detailed sex acts and nude photographs of under-age children. I am led to believe through research that many of the young, innocent children being used on these sites are mostly from Third World countries.

The bill seeks to amend the Criminal Code and the Penalties and Sentences Act 1992 to reflect proper sentences imposed on child sex offenders from both categories. New-age paedophiles deserve the justice the bill introduces, and police are entitled to wider powers of investigation and intelligence resources when combating this problem. The ongoing reporting to courts about movements by convicted paedophiles is positive, but does the legislation have sufficient regard—and I really object to this at times—to the rights and liberties of individuals once released?

Prejudice against a convicted paedophile on release from prison can turn even the most peaceful community into one described as having a mob mentality. Under our laws, once a person has served a sentence they supposedly have done their time and should be able to get on with their lives.

I fully understand community hostility in neighbourhoods where young children may be at risk from ex-prisoners, even though they have served their time for paedophilia. I do not know how one would ever overcome the natural instinct of a mother or father to protect their child, and I do not think that instinct should ever be overcome. We continually instil in our children the stranger danger message, but it is not always the stranger one has to be wary of. The paedophile is often a neighbour, an uncle, a friend of the family, sometimes a father and on rare occasions women.

There is a perception out there that people who abuse do so because they were abused. I find it very difficult to accept that idea in all cases. Although it may be true in some instances, the majority do not go on to abuse, and I question the statistics gathered and believe they are based on false information offered. Society has, to a certain extent, permitted the growth of an attitude that is being played on by perpetrators of these crimes. That attitude is that allowances must be made because the perpetrator of the abuse has claimed that he or she was the victim of abuse themselves. I find such thinking almost unacceptable.

Any victim of child sexual abuse knows what it is like to be the victim. All I have spoken to state categorically that they would not inflict the lifetime of torment they have experienced on any other child. People should not kid themselves that sexual abuse is something people get over, because it is something they never forget and it will go with them to their graves. Victims of child sexual abuse have reported that they have become almost paranoid when it comes to protecting their own children.

Can the Attorney-General give accurate figures on just how many convicted paedophiles re-offend? Can we base sentencing and release on prior history? Past offences cannot be brought up before a jury in most trials, but I see no harm in including such amendments when we are talking about child sex predators.

There have been instances of people's lives being destroyed after false allegations—against biological fathers or stepfathers—of sexual abuse from suppressed memories revealed under hypnosis. Enough doubt has emerged to make such allegations suspect, and I hope that police intelligence is sufficient to ensure that the accusations are valid and the right person is charged.

I have been to several meetings of a group whose numbers are made up of the victims of sexual abuse. They describe themselves as survivors. None of these men and women have gone on to abuse any other person. There are many paedophiles who remain on the streets, living the family life—pillars in their communities—while their victims continue to live with the knowledge of their sexual abuse. If that abuser is a family relative or friend, the victim suffers the mental anguish of facing their abuser every day without betraying what happened. They live an isolated existence in their family as each child who has suffered sexual abuse keeps that abuse to themselves.

Recently a family with several daughters discovered that each had been molested by the same man. None had ever mentioned it to their mother. None had discussed it with any of the others. Only one had ever mentioned it to her husband, and he did not believe her. It is often asked: why do these people not report the abuse to the authorities? There are myriad reasons. I will read an extract from a letter from one of these victims to answer the question, 'Why didn't you ever tell?' It states—

Why didn't we ever tell? Many, many reasons. The possibility of not being believed, that no conviction would occur, not hurting mum—

or other members of the family—

feeling somehow guilty yourselves, the associated trauma of revealing a secret kept for many years. Having to relive the experience. And when it gets to the charges and court having your distress, the psychological and physical affect of the sexual abuse and the trauma experienced revealed in black and white to the perpetrator. They get to read of how vulnerable they made you, the fear and the power they had over you. The years of insecurity and fear each time they came near you and having to pretend you didn't mind their cuddle when they came around to visit your parents who thought he was the best bloke in the world. The effects on your marriage and sexual relationships. It's almost voyeuristic for the perpetrator and you the victim feels physically ill.

Why the heck would anyone put themselves through that? That is a pretty graphic account. There has to be a way to address this further victimisation of the victim. This particular lady is from a generation which did not speak of such things, and her mother passed that thought process on. There are still a lot of barriers that older victims have to overcome. Although paedophilia is now more openly discussed and younger victims are now coming forward, I do not believe it is an easy process to go through at any age.

I think any convicted paedophile should have access to rehabilitation if for no other reason than the future safety of potential child victims. Can the Attorney-General assure this House that any person convicted of paedophilia will be assessed by professional medical experts before being released back into society as being cured, and can he assure any future victim that the assessment is actually correct and that the medical professionals have not been duped?

Any measures to pursue these paedophiles are costly. I ask the minister: have sufficient resources been given for the constant upgrading of software that is capable of staying up with, if not ahead of, these despicable people? We must never forget the trauma such incidences can cause to children for the rest of their lives. I commend the Attorney-General and fully support the legislation.