



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION [STUDENT PROTECTION] AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (3.19 p.m.): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak in support of the Education and Other Legislation (Student Protection) Amendment Bill. The main objective of the bill is to amend the Education (Teacher Registration) Act 1988 and Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 to enhance the capacity of the Board of Teacher Registration to screen, monitor and make decisions about the suitability of teachers to work with children, thus providing greater protection for children in the schools from sexual abuse and other inappropriate conduct with school based employees. I do not think there is a single person in this House or in the community who would object to any part of that. The bill also amends the Commission for Children and Young People's Act 2000.

It is a sad day when bills such as this have to be brought into the House. One would think that the average person would value our children as much as we do. However, the truth is that there are prime reasons why this legislation has been brought in. The explanatory notes state that in May 2003 the Premier announced the establishment of a ministerial task force comprising the Minister for Education, the Minister for Police and Corrective Services and the Minister for Families to act on recommendations of a report of a board of inquiry into the past handling of complaints of sexual abuse in the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane. The report highlighted that the existing systems for checking and monitoring the children of teaching and non-teaching staff had many weaknesses which needed responding to.

I also note that the explanatory notes outline how the implementation of the objectives will be achieved by, firstly, clarifying that, in performing its registration functions, the welfare and best interests of children are to be a primary consideration of the board; and enhancing the capacity of the Board of Teacher Registration to screen, monitor and make decisions regarding the suitability of teachers. It allows also for the information sharing between key agencies such as the Board of Teacher Registration, the Queensland Police Service and the Commission for Children and Young People.

It is great to note that the bill enables the board to inform relevant agencies about the outcome of its disciplinary inquiries and that, at the end of those inquiries, it is necessary that they must notify their decision to all Australian and New Zealand teacher registration authorities with which the board knows that person has been registered. It may also notify its decision to other prescribed entities such as the person's employer and foreign regulatory authorities or any other entity that it feels is warranted. It also says that it may notify its decision to the Commissioner for Children and Young People where it considers that the information is relevant to the commissioner's consideration of whether the person is suitable for child related employment.

Most people in this House would know that I have no time for people who abuse children in any way, shape or form. I have often stated in this House that I do not think the laws are actually strong enough. Every little step forward—and this is rather a big step—is gratefully received not only by me but by the wider community as a whole.

The bill also mandates the reporting by school staff of actual or suspected sexual abuse of schoolchildren by other school based employees to specified persons who are required to report the matter to the police. I think that is appropriate. That is where it should go straightaway. This is designed to ensure that there is appropriate response by school based employees to complaints of sexual abuse of the schoolchildren.

The other thing I noted during my reading of the material supplied was that the union and all other relevant parties supported this legislation, as did all the churches. If every single entity, every group, works together perhaps in time there will be a greater curbing of these kinds of atrocities on our young people. In saying that, I think everyone also recognises that children see teachers as heroes. I remember that as a young child when I was at kindergarten and when I first started school, I thought the teachers knew absolutely everything and my parents knew nothing. The teachers could have asked me to jump off a cliff and I would probably have been quite happy to do it. I thought they were the greatest things on earth. At times I think my father and mother despaired that I never believed that they knew more than the teacher. It happens to every child.

When children are that way, when children are so enamoured of their teachers, when they are prepared to walk with them, hold their hands, go anywhere with them, they are really quite vulnerable. The utmost care must be taken when these people apply to become part of a world where children are everything, where children are the majority. They are often willing victims because they do not know a lot of the world's ways. It was not too long ago that a convicted paedophile, once released from jail, was actually permitted into school grounds and was promoting educational material. There was a huge furore over that at the time—and rightly so. It shows that people do slip through the net that is put in place to curb any such behaviour and we have to be forever vigilant.

I know full well that the teachers with whom I talk throughout my electorate have primarily the utmost care for the young children in their charge. They would do anything to ensure that those children receive the best education and the best protection they can offer. That is pretty obvious when teachers are even prepared to go on strike to ensure that the student-teacher ratio remains at a reasonable, workable level. My own sister was a teacher. The number of out-of-school hours that she spent in her attempts to give as much as she possibly could to the students in her classes was amazing. Everyone says that teachers have a great job, they get almost half a year off and can do whatever they like. However, in my sister's case, she spent a lot of her off time, as it is often described, working for the next week, the next semester or whatever.

I have about 30 schools in my electorate, whether they be state preschools, primary and high schools, special schools or private schools. At this time of year all members would be endeavouring, as I am, to attend as many of the speech nights and award nights as they possibly can. I recently had an interesting experience. This year was the first time I had the chance to go to one of the private schools, which was the South Burnett Catholic College. Most schools that I go to—and they are primarily the state schools—tend to focus on academic achievement all the time. This is the essential part of schooling.

What interested me was that at the South Burnett Catholic College the academic achievements were noted and applauded, but the college's primary recognition was of the community, what the children do for the community, how they assist the aged, how they liaise with all members of the community, whether it be the handicapped, the aged care facilities around the areas or just going down to help the younger students. It was all there. Their emphasis was on that. I thought that was a really appropriate thing to do. Without people prepared to work in our communities, all the education in the world is not going to make for a happy, healthy community. I congratulate the South Burnett Catholic College on that. It impressed me a lot. It impressed every other person I met there—all the charitable organisations such as Lions, Apex, Quota and Zonta. All those who want loving, caring communities would find interesting that this particular school concentrated on the recognition of those particular activities as the most important contributing factor of the school.

I have already attended Kingaroy State High School's speech night. As always, they had a fantastic night. The students' achievements were well recorded and the school was rightly proud. I can see that the commitment of the principal, Mr David Ballin, to the school is reflected in the teachers, the students themselves, those who work on the grounds and all the volunteers who go there. I commend them for the achievements of Kingaroy State High—on its standards and in the way it presents itself to the wider community. The students' pride in that school is really evident.

I also went very recently to Kilcoy State High School. It is a marvellous school. It is one of the smaller schools, but it really prides itself on the way in which the students conduct themselves at the school. Its speech night is one where the students run the whole night and they do a marvellous job. I would have really appreciated having the opportunity to do the things that the students at that school do—to develop public speaking, to develop confidence—instead of being told as a child to 'Sit down, shut up, don't speak unless you're spoken to and make sure that it is only the things that we want to hear, not what you think we want to hear.' It was just wonderful to see how the students at that school hold these nights and run them in such a professional manner.

There is a particular student at Kilcoy State High School this year that I would like to mention. His name is Mark Nunn. In January 2003, Mark attended the national youth science forum in Canberra. To gain selection for that forum, he was required to compete against 2,000 students nominated from all schools, both state and private, across Australia. He had to have a written application, there was an

initial selection interview—which was held in Caboolture—and then there was the final south-east Queensland district selection interview in Brisbane. Mark then became one of 282 students Australia-wide to be selected for that Canberra forum. During his time in Canberra, Mark was involved in a number of projects, tours and public speaking engagements. As he said, one of the most important things for him was actually interacting with others. At the end of his time there, he was judged on the abilities that he exhibited during those activities. Being the remarkable young man that he is, Mark became one of only four Queenslanders and 26 students Australia-wide to be selected to travel overseas to various destinations. I believe that this is an outstanding achievement for Mark and for his school. Kilcoy State High School has a truly amazing record. Mark is the fifth student from that particular school in 10 years to be selected to go to Canberra. But even more spectacular I believe is the fact that Mark becomes the third student in 10 years to achieve selection from the Canberra forum to represent Australia overseas.

Kilcoy State High School is not a big school. It is located at the foot of the Blackbutt Range. Given the school's size and location in a rural community, I do not think that anyone could say that this is less than an impressive record. As far as I am aware, it is a record that is unsurpassed by any other school and that includes the larger metropolitan high schools. So when people say that the larger metropolitan schools are the best way to go, I hope that they would think about Mark's achievements and say—

Mr Reeves: Horses for courses.

Mrs PRATT: Exactly. It is what the student makes of any school. What a student gives to a school will be given back to them tenfold. Students will go a long way if they are prepared to grab opportunities. My congratulations go to Mark. I believe that he has brought a very high distinction to Kilcoy State School and its community. I look forward to watching him as he goes through life, because I think that he is a young man who is going to really make a name for himself in the future.

I was not going to go on for too long, but I have. Most members in this House would know that I am a mother of three. The protection of my children is of paramount importance. There is nothing that I would not do to protect them. Most parents are like that, and that is the honest truth, but as a grandmother—

Mr Nuttall: I'm a grandad.

Mrs PRATT: We are getting older, but wiser, too. I have six and a half grandchildren. One is due to be born in January. As a grandmother, my feelings for my children never change. I have never stopped being a parent and I do not believe that I will ever stop being a grandparent. Children have to be protected. Each and every one of us must be actively involved in keeping children protected and preserving their future. Unfortunately, there are instances where it is very difficult to ensure that children are protected. But no matter how difficult it is, we must persevere. As I always say to people in my electorate, no matter how hard the fight is, it is not the size of the dog in the fight; it is the size of the fight in the dog. We must always remember that. If we just keep fighting, if we keep plugging away, eventually we will win. We will protect our children. We will ensure that their future is tainted as little as possible by adverse behaviour.

I commend this bill to the House. I congratulate the minister on it. I think that perhaps this is one of the bills that has been introduced into this House that I could support wholeheartedly.