



Speech by
Lesley Clark

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard Thursday, 25 November 2004

PARLIAMENTARY AMNESTY GROUP: WHITE RIBBON DAY

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (4.18 p.m.): I rise today, White Ribbon Day, to support the motion moved by the member for Murrumba drawing to the attention of the House the violence experienced by women in the Solomon Islands and the current Amnesty International campaign to support women in that country. To mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Premier, Peter Beattie, today reiterated our government's position of absolute zero tolerance. Violence against women is never justified under any circumstances.

Sadly this stands in stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes towards women in the Solomon Islands as evidenced in the Amnesty International report released this month which graphically documents the appalling violence experienced by women during the five years of internal conflict and lawlessness in that country, often at the hands of the police, many of whom were closely associated with the radical militia groups which have terrorised and killed villagers there. Amnesty International identified widespread and entrenched discrimination against women deeply rooted in traditional customs and its British colonial legacy as the most significant underlying cause of violence against women in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands is but one of six Pacific Island countries without a single woman member of parliament—not that women in that country have not tried, and I commend the courage of women such as activist Aft Billy who lost by two votes in the 2001 election. She was one of 14 women who stood at that election and who were threatened and intimidated by men, as were many of the voters, rendering the results of that election invalid.

In 2003 the Solomon Islands government actually recognised White Ribbon Day and announced its intention to formulate a national policy on violence against women during this year, to draft new legislation to implement the policy and to submit its report to the UN committee overseeing this issue. Despite persistent lobbying by women's organisations, work has not even begun on these urgently needed reforms. The largely Australian funded and controlled Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands has helped to restore peace, but the work is not over yet because women still live in fear and 200 rapes were reported to police in the first six months of this year. In June 2004 the Australian government provided \$3.4 million to Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and PNG to develop programs to address violence against women in those countries. Inexplicably, the Solomon Islands missed out on a share of these funds, and this must be rectified as a matter of urgency by the Australian government.

But the men who hold positions of power in the Solomon Islands government must also act decisively and implement the recommendations in the Amnesty International report beginning with the development of its national policy on violence against women, including strong laws to protect women and programs to change the attitudes of men about violence towards women. Lack of awareness about women's rights, relevant domestic laws and human rights standards were common concerns amongst women interviewed by Amnesty International. Many women considered this lack of information amongst both women and men a major obstacle to seeking justice and improving protection for women against violence. The action which Solomon Islander women and many male community leaders most frequently wished Amnesty International to support was the conduct of awareness workshops on human rights and law and legal procedures to be held in rural centres. The government must also take action to ensure that

women are elected to parliament and hold senior positions in the public sector and police force so that they can contribute their perspectives, knowledge and skills to improve the quality of life for women and end the cycle of violence. I commend the motion to the House.