



Speech by

Michael Choi

MEMBER FOR CAPALABA

Hansard Tuesday, 23 November 2004

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILD GUARDIAN AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CHOI (Capalaba—ALP) (3.03 p.m.): I rise this afternoon to speak in support of the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Amendment Bill 2004. In doing so, I say at the outset that it gives me absolutely no pleasure to speak on this bill at all. In fact, it is a very sad indictment of our society that the working with children check or so-called blue card had to be introduced in 2001. This government, with the introduction of the blue card, was trying desperately to reduce opportunities for child sexual offenders to prey on children by restricting or avoiding the possibility of interaction between the groups. This is being achieved by screening people working in certain categories of child related employment. It represents a criminal history clearance by the Commission for Children and Young People and their guardian.

The blue card is never going to be the be-all and end-all of child protection. It is not a guarantee card. In fact, it does not guarantee anything at all. It should be treated simply as a way of protecting our children against sexual predators in our society. It should never replace vigilance by parents, families and community involvement, risk management and education of our young people. It is a clear indication, however, of this government's commitment to prevent child sexual offences in our community. However, after the introduction of the blue card in 2001 it has become necessary to enhance the operation of the blue card by expanding it to cover, for example, home-stay providers, staff of hostels, road crossing supervisors as well as religious representatives.

Just now I heard the honourable member for Gregory talk about child abuse done by clergymen, by religious institutions and by the churches. I share his sentiment—as I am sure all the members of this House do—of the horror that we have felt in the last few years as we learned about the sexual crimes committed by clergymen in our religious institutions. It is true that they are people in a position of trust and responsibility. It angers us when they abuse the very people they are called on to protect. We hear stories about churches covering up sexual mistakes or crimes committed by their members—by the clergymen. We also find that sometimes churches put first the institution that it represents rather than the wellbeing of the people it cares for.

It is also necessary to have some balance here. For every single clergyman who has done something wrong there are thousands of clergymen and hundreds of churches that are doing the right thing by the community. We need to be very careful as politicians not to jump on the bandwagon of criticising any religious institutions or body simply because some of them have done the wrong thing. As politicians we should know this because at any one point in time that one of us does wrong thing every one of us gets criticised. If one abuses the travel allowance we are all branded as travel rorters, and we do not like it. It is only fair that when we criticise some of the members of the religious institutions for doing the wrong thing by their members we need to perhaps maintain some balance in our view.

I also state very clearly that this legislation is not about adults working in the industry I mentioned before because they have caused any concern for the government; it is simply because of the fact that

they deal with minors on a routine day-to-day basis and are in a position of trust and sometimes even authority.

This bill also implements the four recommendations made by the ministerial task force on sexual abuse of children in schools. It amends the serious offences list used in the assessment of the blue card applications. It allows the Children's Commission to use and take into account other disciplinary information from other agencies as well as allowing the police commissioners to provide certain investigative information to the Children's Commissioner. This bill provides further power for the commissioner to immediately suspend a person's blue card if the commissioner becomes aware that the person has been charged with an excluding offence. It also allows provision for a lifetime ban when the offence resulted in a custodial sentence.

Some people may be offended by the requirement to have a blue card to begin or continue their employment. They believe it is a reflection of their perceived risk to society. I understand that sentiment. However, children are very trusting by nature and we collectively as adults have failed them terribly in the past. This bill is about the safety of our children. I believe most members of the community are prepared to be inconvenienced for the sake of the most vulnerable members of our society, our children. I commend this bill to the House.