



Speech by

Hon. Mike Reynolds

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Wednesday, 20 October 2004

CHILD SAFETY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (NO. 2)

Hon. M.F. REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (Minister for Child Safety) (7.30 p.m.), continuing in reply: As I was saying before the break, the work that we are all doing in regard to the amendments which are being put forward in relation to child safety is very important. They are very important amendments. Again, I would like to thank all the speakers today for the support that they have been able to give to the legislation.

One of the other issues that was raised, particularly by the member for Gladstone, was the issue of politicians having access to information. This is a topic that a number of people on my legislation committee have asked me about, as have members across the parliament generally. The legislation safeguards children's information because it is important that these children have the same rights of privacy as any other child. I think that privilege is sacrosanct. It is very much something which a child deserves. The legislation does protect confidential information very much in the best interests of the child, very much in terms of the paramountcy that we give to the interests of the child. That interest of the child will always be our first consideration.

If there are concerns about how the department is dealing with a case, there are specific agencies which have powers to obtain information about a child for the purpose of following up on concerns and ensuring that the best interests of a child are met. In other words, not just the department but a number of different watchdogs—if I can put it in that way—are able to work towards keeping the processes and systems of the Department of Child Safety open, transparent and accountable. That underpins this child safety reform legislation.

Anyone who has concerns about departmental decision making or the actions of departmental officers has a variety of options—I stress, a variety of options—available to them involving either internal or independent external review mechanisms. Major case decisions of the department are subject to internal review by experienced, professional staff. Externally, organisations including the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, the Children's Services Tribunal, the Children's Court, the Ombudsman and the Crime and Misconduct Commission as well as the general judicial review systems can be involved in reviewing public decisions.

As I have indicated, I cannot think of one other state government department in Queensland that would be externally monitored in the manner of the Department of Child Safety, but that should be the case. We need to be open, we need to be transparent and accountable, and we need to be externally monitored; we have witnessed tragedy in the past when that was not the case.

The shadow spokesperson, the member for Burdekin, also raised the issue of the complaints unit and the appropriateness of referring people to that unit. I advise the member for Burdekin and other members that the complaints unit was set up as a result of the CMC inquiry. It was a very, very important recommendation that came out of the CMC inquiry, and it is entirely appropriate to refer people to the 1800 number. The complaints unit has a target of providing an initial response within three days, and, by referring people directly to that unit in the first instance, if people are unhappy with their local child safety

service centre or zonal office, it ensures that their concerns are addressed in a timely and considered manner.

The member also raised a particular case in the House today. While I cannot specifically discuss the details and while not wanting to be overly critical, can I say that this case was not referred on by the member for Burdekin until 17 days after the shadow minister was contacted by a family member—17 days! Had the member for Burdekin referred the client directly to the complaints unit, this matter may have been able to be addressed in a much more timely manner. I would encourage all members of this House to support the mechanisms that have resulted from the CMC inquiry, including the complaints unit and the work it does.

The member for Gladstone asked about section 159N and raised fears that the Department of Child Safety will not be able to find out if a child has been harmed. The matter is provided for in the new section 159N that will be inserted into the Child Protection Act. The department will already be aware that there is some risk to a child and will be able to act in that regard.

Can I conclude by once again thanking all members for the excellent contributions that they have made in this debate. I look forward to working constructively with all members on this important reform work. Much has been done and there is much more to be done. As Minister for Child Safety, I commend the bill to the House.