



Speech by

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CHILDREN LEAVING HOME

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (12.20 pm): We often hear debate about protecting the safety of children at risk and about whether or not the foster care system is working properly. We hear about the level of resources devoted to protecting children, about case loads and restructuring and so on. There is, however, another issue impacting directly on a number of families in my electorate—and I am sure there are similar cases across Queensland—that I will talk about today, and that is the devastating impact on families when their children decide to run away from home for what appears to be no good reason. This has happened in my electorate to three separate families over the last few months. In all cases the families have been confronted by bureaucracy—bureaucrats who all say that their hands are tied and that there is nothing within the law that they can do to help these distraught parents. These particular children are aged 14, 15 and 13. They have each left home to live at the homes of their friends.

When their parents sought help from the police, the education department, child protection and community services, they were advised there was no way to force any of the children to go home. The police could do nothing for fear of being accused of assaulting the child if the child were forced into a police car. The education department could not help them either, even though it is the parent's responsibility to see that the child attends school until the age of 16, and on one count I am advised that a guidance officer even told the child of her rights on leaving home.

Community Services said that it would not have an interest unless the child had turned 16. Child protection was not interested in two of these cases as it did not believe that the children were in any danger. To give the local child protection department credit, it did step in in the case of the 13-year-old but even then it did not return her home. Instead, the child has been temporarily placed in foster care pending further developments.

However, nothing has been done in the case of the 14-year-old, who, I am advised, has moved into her boyfriend's parents' home. Her family has been extremely worried about her welfare and has contacted all government departments from police to child protection, education and communities for help but to no avail. Each service has said there is no law that can force this vulnerable child to go back home to the family that loves her and where she has been supported in a normal family situation. These are all children who have been housed, fed, clothed and supported as normal family participants. They are under the age of consent, yet they are falling through the cracks because the Beattie government has no laws in place to support parents who are doing the right thing in bringing up their children.

All of us have gone through teenage years and know what it is like to go through those growing pains. Those of us who have been parents of teenagers know full well the intricacies of guiding our children through those difficult years. Sometimes as parents we have to make rules and show our children where the boundaries lie for their own good. I have been advised by all of the parents involved that their children have left home not because of any abuse or any kind of mistreatment but they have simply decided that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence and other families have decided to keep them.

These children belong to their own families, not the state and not these other families. They are and should be the responsibility of their parents and only in exceptional circumstances should child protection

have to use its powers and step in. Children should not simply be allowed to leave the safe environment of their homes and they should not have the right to apply for financial assistance from society's financial coffers without good reason.

These parents want their children back. They want to rear their children as they see fit and they want to discipline their children as they see fit within reason. More and more of our caring families are seeing this government white-anting parents who do act responsibly, who do try to keep track of their children and who do care, by telling these children that their parents have no authority nor power over them. Governments should not interfere in the normal course of family life. There are already too many children in real need with too few resources to go around. To waste time and money protecting the so-called rights of these children for no good reason is robbing resources from children in real need and along the way it is destroying families, and that is totally unacceptable.