



Speech by

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Hansard Thursday, 12 February 2009

GUIDE, HEARING AND ASSISTANCE DOGS BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (4.26 pm): It is also my pleasure to rise to speak to the Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Bill 2008. I want to state for the record my support of this bill. I note the contributions of the honourable member for Bundaberg. I do not have the number of the local Guide Dogs Association on the Gold Coast, but I know they do a great job.

We know this bill is about equality. I want to acknowledge the contribution of the shadow minister and thank the minister for accepting the amendment to clause 49 in relation to the return of a handler's identity card to change the time frame from seven days or within seven days to within a month. That is a very practical amendment. If someone passes away, there is a month in which that card has to be returned. I again thank the minister for agreeing to that amendment.

As the shadow minister, the member for Burdekin, stated, the Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Bill is commendable for its objectives. Clause 3 of the bill illustrates these objectives and includes the further objectives of assisting people with a disability gain independent access to the community and ensuring the quality and accountability of guide, hearing and assistance dog training services. To that end, the bill sets up a legislative framework for the accreditation and training of assistance dog trainers as well as putting into place a range of measures to maintain the integrity of this valuable service. In fact, as I was walking over here I saw someone in the level 3 foyer of the Annexe. They may well have been looking to come over here to attend the passage of this bill.

Although most people would be aware of the work of guide-dogs, many would be surprised to learn that dogs can be used to assist people with other disabilities or impairments. Assistance dogs do not just help the vision impaired to see; they assist people with severe spinal injuries, such as paraplegics and quadriplegics, and people with debilitating diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, to get about their daily lives by performing tasks that they have difficulty doing themselves. According to Assistance Dogs Australia, these tasks can include opening and closing doors, operating light switches, pressing pedestrian crossing buttons, retrieving and picking items up off the floor as well as alerting others when their human friend is in need. These dogs are known as assistance dogs and, as members would realise, they play an integral role in helping people with a disability gain independence and confidence.

I was interested to read the personal account of Tanya Clarke, who was provided with an assistance dog after a terrible accident put her in a wheelchair. She summed up the role of her assistance dog, Harry, by saying—

Harry has improved my independence, my quality of life and the way I feel about myself. He is also my companion and the very best friend anyone could ever wish for.

One of the interesting things Tanya said about having an assistance dog is the difference in the way people react to her in public. Before she got her assistance dog, Tanya said she felt invisible, as though no-one took notice of her. Having an assistance dog changed the way people treated her because she said, for what felt like the first time, people noticed her when she was out in public with Harry and often they will

offer help when she needs it. I think many of us would acknowledge that it is much easier to speak to someone if they have a little dog with them—or a big dog—unless the dog looks like it is a bit threatening.

I think it is wonderful that having an assistance dog has made such a difference to a person's life and the way in which society interacts with her. Unfortunately, for some people there is still a lot of confusion about the role of assistance dogs in public places such as on public transport and in restaurants. Sadly, there have been a number of stories about people with assistance dogs being ejected from public transport or other public places because people are unaware of their rights under the law. This act goes part of the way in remedying this problem and, as the honourable member for Clayfield has pointed out to me, division 2 of the bill states that assistance dogs and those in training are entitled to accompany their human friend in most public places such as trains, taxis, restaurants and cinemas. The only places exempt are outlined in the bill at clause 7 and include places like hospitals and ambulances for health reasons.

Recognising the rights of people with a disability to be accompanied in public by an assistance dog is one step towards equality for people with disabilities. However, in order to achieve this the public needs to be educated about the rights of people with a disability so that discrimination does not occur in our communities. This is where the bill fails. Until Disability Services Queensland can actually promote the rights of disabled persons and promote independent living through the use of companion animals we cannot expect the public to do the same. A piece of legislation cannot change people's attitudes towards people with a disability; education can. To this end I urge the minister to consider better publicising these initiatives and the rights of people with disabilities who we are recognising in the House today so that we can start to change attitudes and foster acceptance and tolerance in society. Of course, this bill is an example of how far we have come in the area of disability services.