



Speech by

Hon. Anastacia Palaszczuk

MEMBER FOR INALA

Hansard Wednesday, 27 October 2010

CARERS (RECOGNITION) AMENDMENT BILL; SENIORS RECOGNITION (GRANDPARENTS PROVIDING CARE) BILL

Hon. A PALASZCZUK (Inala—ALP) (Minister for Disability Services and Multicultural Affairs) (8.35 pm), in reply: I rise to speak in support of the Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill. The Bligh government has a strong record of supporting seniors and carers. I think all of us would agree that grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren make an invaluable contribution not only to the lives of their grandchildren but also to the whole of the Queensland community.

Although we recognise the opposition's intention in seeking to introduce a grandparents recognition bill, the issue with the opposition's bill is that it is simply unworkable. The bill is unworkable because the opposition sought to define full-time care to be more than 30 hours per week of care. Thirty hours is barely the standard full-time working week. That definition has the potential to include within the scope of the bill grandparents who care for their grandchildren only while their parents are working or grandparents whose grandchildren, together with the children's parents, live with them.

In this day and age, it is widely accepted that many parents work and grandparents continue to care for their grandchildren while the parents are working. Under the opposition's bill, if a grandparent was caring for their grandchild five days a week, eight hours a day they would be deemed to be the full-time carers and we as a government simply cannot accept that.

Ms Jones: So my mother would be the full-time carer.

Ms PALASZCZUK: That is right. The Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability has raised a very interesting point. Under the opposition's bill, her mother would be deemed the full-time carer of her son. The opposition's bill is simply unworkable. Further, the consultation requirements of formal notification and time limits are cumbersome and may discourage effective communication between groups representing grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren and the government.

The government is not opposed to the legislative recognition of grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren. In fact, the government fully supports the legislative recognition of grandparents raising grandchildren. I believe that the Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill 2010 would achieve that aim in a much more practical way than the bill introduced by the member for Burdekin. It is those grandparents who step into the shoes of parents, even though their days of raising their own children are behind them, that the government believes should be recognised legislatively.

Raising grandchildren can have a significant financial impact on grandparents. This often occurs at a time when their income is limited to the pension or earnings from investments. Not only do they have to meet the day-to-day living expenses such as food and clothing for both themselves and their grandchildren; they also have to meet education expenses such as school uniforms, books and excursion fees. They may also have to meet medical expenses sometimes arising unexpectedly and suddenly.

The Carers (Recognition) Act was passed in 2008 with a set of very clear objects, which were to recognise the valuable contribution by carers to the people they care for; to recognise the benefit, including

the social and economic benefit, provided by carers to the community; to provide for the interests of carers to be considered in decisions about the provision of services that impact on the role of carers; and to establish the Carers Advisory Council. As a government we did not want to infringe upon the fundamental objectives of this act. What we have aimed to do is to keep the integrity of this act intact. That is exactly what Carers Queensland said to us, and we listened to them very carefully.

The Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill 2010 complements existing Bligh government strategies such as Positively Ageless—Queensland Seniors Strategy. If this bill is passed today, it will mean that Queensland will become the first state in Australia to legislatively recognise these grandparents. The government's bill is both symbolic and practical. It is symbolic in that it would give long overdue recognition to Queensland grandparents who provide full-time care for their grandchildren and it is practical in that it would require public authorities to reflect the principles of the Queensland Carers Charter in providing information that affects grandparents raising grandchildren. The charter would also contain principles specifically applicable to grandparents raising grandchildren. The bill would also require public authorities to consult with representatives of grandparents raising grandchildren in relation to policy and planning decisions that affect them. The bill would contribute to the continuation of the meaningful dialogue established between the government and representatives of grandparents raising grandchildren that has taken place during the development of this bill.

The amendment recognises grandparents who have the full-time care of their grandchildren because parents do not have the capacity to be full-time carers. This could be for a range of reasons. For instance, it could include parents going through a period of crisis such as a serious medical illness. While protecting the integrity of the Carers Act, which is fundamental to Carers Queensland, through this bill we will extend the definition of carer to recognise grandparents as full-time carers for their grandchildren where the child lives with the grandparent and the grandparent is the primary caregiver and the day-to-day decision maker for that child.

We will expand the membership of the Carers Advisory Council by two positions to provide for a grandparent carer providing full-time care for their grandchild as well as a member of a representative body of grandparent carers. We will amend the existing Queensland Carers Charter, again established under the Queensland Carers Act, to include recognition of the invaluable role that grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren play in the lives of their grandchildren and to include a further two new principles in the charter which would recognise grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren and assure them of access to information that supports them in their role. This access to information that supports them in their caring role is very important.

However, it is important to note that these amendments to the Carers Act will not create individual rights, nor will they determine if a grandparent carer is the legal guardian of a child. A number of members have spoken about a grandparent carer who, although not the legal guardian of their grandchildren, is nevertheless doing the day-to-day, week in, week out care for their grandchildren and, for all intents and purposes, is the day-to-day decision maker. However, of course, many of these grandparents will not have legal guardianship. This is appropriately an issue for parenting orders by the Family Court or, where a child is in need of protection, child protection orders by the Children's Court under the Child Protection Act.

The amendments to the Carers Act will not change issues in relation to the guardianship of a child. However, what these amendments will do is ensure that grandparents have access to, for example, the services currently offered by carers organisations such as Carers Queensland. I am very pleased to say that the Queensland government funds Carers Queensland to the tune of \$3.3 million recurrently to deliver a range of services. These services include information and resources for carers, counselling, referral services, a library of resources for carers, support for young carers, accredited training to assist carers in their caring role and support for the No Interest Loan Scheme, which assists carers with financial support.

Last week, as many members would be aware, was Carers Week. I was very pleased to announce last Monday that the government is injecting \$2.5 million of brand-new money over three years to help Carers Queensland to support carers right across Queensland. This is a fantastic initiative. This \$2.5 million over three years is a very clear sign of the commitment that we have in valuing the role that carers play right across our state.

Grandparents who, for example, are struggling to manage the maze of issues that may arise in their role caring for their grandchildren or who simply need support and someone to talk to will now be able to access the services provided by Carers Queensland. Carers Queensland has advised me they will open their services to grandparent carers as a result of this government bill. I am sure members will join with me in thanking their board and chief executive for this very important move. I have asked them to monitor and advise me of the uptake of services by this newest group of recognised carers. We will monitor this, and if they need some additional funding we will ensure they have the necessary supports to fulfil this very important role.

Outside of these amendments, the government is also acting in other ways to support Queensland grandparents. As I mentioned earlier, we have a dedicated seniors strategy and the Premier has also recently announced that for the first time Queensland will have its own Grandparents Day on 7 November. Grandparents Day will be an annual event celebrated on the first Sunday of November each year, and I believe that this recognition is very important for all grandparents right across our state.

Mr Lawlor: Do I get a holiday?

Ms PALASZCZUK: We will see about that. Through the government's close engagement with the seniors roundtable and the Council of Grandparents, we have been able to ensure that Positively Ageless includes a focus on responding to the needs of grandparents raising their grandchildren. Many of these initiatives that fall under Positively Ageless have been highlighted by members during the debate—for example, the Time for Grandparents program that provides grandparents caring for children outside the child protection system with respite and recreational support free of charge. This support includes grandparent access to overnight camps which provide them with support from professionals who can assist with parenting, financial and other information and advice. The grandparents information line, which is operated by Lifeline, provides grandparents with information, support and referral on topics such as legal issues, finance, social activities and concessions. The line is staffed Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm and provides a personal response to all callers.

I know that members on the other side of the House are concerned about the financial impacts that grandparents may face when they take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, and I share this concern. I can advise that the Commonwealth government is primarily responsible for providing financial support for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Grandparents who care for their grandchildren may be entitled to support from various Commonwealth government support services including the Family Assistance Office, the Child Support Agency, Centrelink and Medicare Australia. Where children are in out-of-home care in the child protection system, there are payments of allowances to approved carers, including foster and kinship carers which may include grandparents, for the child's care and maintenance.

As the Minister for Community Services mentioned previously, the Minister for Child Safety has also been raising this issue at the national ministerial council. We do not see any action on the other side of this House raising issues, but on this side of the House we are continuing to raise issues with the federal government. Queensland has put it on the agenda—not any other state—and we will continue to fight for grandparents' rights.

Ms Struthers: Hear, hear! For income support.

Ms PALASZCZUK: That is right. In summary, these amendments are another important milestone in this government's recognition of grandparent carers. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all the members who supported the bill. In particular, I would like to acknowledge that it was the Premier who announced Grandparents Day coming up next month. I would like to acknowledge the honourable member for Algeester, the Minister for Community Services, who has been here through the entire debate. That just shows how much we actually support this initiative and the amendments in this bill. I would also like to thank the members who participated in this debate and make some brief comments.

The member for Hinchinbrook considered that legislation about grandparent carers does not come within my portfolio responsibilities. Let me assure members of the House that, under the administrative arrangements, I have responsibility for the Office of Carers, the Carers Action Plan and the Carers (Recognition) Act. Also during his speech the member for Hinchinbrook quoted from an earlier letter from Carers Queensland. Let me update the House with a more up-to-date letter from Carers Queensland dated 15 September 2010. It states—

Dear Minister,

The discussions with your department have been very productive. We now have a much better understanding of what the government intends to achieve. We look forward to working closely with the government and the Department of Disability Services and Multicultural Affairs to help ensure the government achieves the best outcome for the carers of Queensland.

The member for Burdekin stated that the government's bill promises nothing more than to give some grandparents access to information. She knows that is simply not true. Essentially, the bill that she put forward was simply unworkable as it sought to define 'full-time care'. We are recognising grandparents who are full-time carers and have the day-to-day responsibility for the decision making for their grandchildren.

The member for Burleigh mentioned the two new principles in the Queensland Carers Charter as outlined in the government amendments. The member for Kallangur stated that the amendments to the Queensland Carers Act proposed by the government would make Queensland the first jurisdiction in Australia to explicitly recognise grandparent carers in legislation and the equally important recognition of carers for people with a disability, chronic illness or frailty. I reiterate that Queensland will be the first jurisdiction to recognise those full-time grandparent carers who look after their grandchildren and are the primary decision makers. That is an Australian first.

The member for Redcliffe mentioned the government's introduction of Grandparents Day, which I think has been welcomed by all sides of the House. The member for Capalaba acknowledged the

contribution made by carers on a daily basis right across Queensland. The member for Waterford raised an issue about the term 'primary decision maker'. I have written to the honourable member stating that it has its ordinary meaning and covers both informal and formal decision making. I have also elaborated on this in the explanatory notes, for the clarification of the entire House.

The member for Kawana was slightly confused. He stated that not all children who are being cared for by their grandparents have a disability. Of course we acknowledge that, but I think he was slightly confused as he thought that, as I was the Minister for Disability Services, my only focus was on grandparents who are carers for children with a disability. That is simply not correct.

The member for Woodridge made a very thoughtful contribution, as she does in every debate in this House. She mentioned another important issue about ageing parents of children with a disability, which is one of my key priorities. I will continue to fight for more funding in relation to that. The member for Brisbane Central spoke about the significant role of grandparents and the importance of access to information for grandparent carers who are the full-time carers of their grandchildren and the primary decision makers.

The member for Gladstone placed on the record her utmost respect, regard and admiration for grandparents who look after their grandchildren. I totally agree with her sentiments. The member for Nicklin was concerned about public servants being made aware of the changes to legislation. The member for Nicklin has my personal assurance that when this bill is passed I will write to all ministers and outline their departmental requirements under the legislation. Also, I note that government departments and statutory bodies must consider the principles in the Queensland Carers Charter, established by the act, when making decisions that may affect the interests of carers. The member for Mulgrave spoke about the seniors strategy, which was launched by the Premier and the Minister for Community Services. He also mentioned the important role of Carers Queensland.

I make specific mention of the member for Mount Ommaney, my parliamentary secretary. The member for Mount Ommaney works extremely hard and does an absolutely amazing job. She is always out in the community. She has worked very closely with Carers Queensland. She has been involved in a lot of negotiations, discussions and consultations, and has been with me at many consultations as well. I place on the public record that I think I have one of the hardest working parliamentary secretaries in government. I acknowledge her efforts and offer my personal thanks to her this evening.

In conclusion, I thank all honourable members who contributed to the debate tonight and in the previous parliamentary sitting week. They have made a valuable contribution. They have placed on record and shared their stories. I think that members from both sides of the House will agree that we all value the important role that grandparent carers play in our society. That is one thing that we are not going to dispute. The only key difference that we have is the way in which we acknowledge that. We could not accept the opposition bill as it is unworkable, because it seeks to define a full-time carer. We have put in place broad-ranging amendments that are supported by Carers Queensland, the Council of Grandparents and the grandparents we meet on a daily basis who come into our electorate offices and share their stories with us. On their behalf we make representations to various ministers about the issues that they raise with us. They are doing a lot of good work in raising their grandchildren and my hat goes off to them. I thank them on behalf of the Queensland government for the work that they do.

I thank my ministerial staff and my departmental staff, led by Helen Ferguson and her team. Kim and the others have done an amazing job. Last week, during Carers Week, we announced the extra injection of \$2.3 million, which I believe reaffirms our commitment to grandparent carers across this state.

One group I would like to particularly thank is the carers for people with a disability, frailty, chronic illness or pain who have worked tirelessly to achieve recognition for such carers through the Carers (Recognition) Act. The work of the Carers Advisory Council and groups such as Carers Queensland has resulted in us having the legislative framework for carer recognition that the Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill will build on. I also thank the Council of Grandparents for its contribution. The Council of Grandparents provides information and support to all grandparents and raises issues of concern to grandparents with government. In conclusion, Queensland grandparents play an important role in this community and this legislation will give grandparents who are full-time carers of their grandchildren the recognition that they deserve. I commend the government's bill to the House.