



Speech by


**Andrew Powell**

**MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE**

Hansard Wednesday, 23 March 2011

---

## **CHILD PROTECTION (OFFENDER REPORTING) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; CHILD PROTECTION (MORE STRINGENT OFFENDER REPORTING) AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (8.27 pm): I, too, rise to speak on these important but competing child protection offender reporting bills: the LNP's Child Protection (More Stringent Offender Reporting) Amendment Bill introduced into this House in April last year and the government's half-hearted response, the Child Protection (Offender Reporting) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, introduced some four months later in August 2010. Child protection is a fundamental concern to our society, and rightly so. The destructive impact that abuse has on a child's mental and physical health and wellbeing has the ability to, and literally has, ruined lives. Child abuse is insidious and evil and exacts a terrifying toll on the victim and the community as a whole.

A number of members have already very emotively presented the compelling case to take action—perhaps none more so than what we have just heard from the member for Caloundra. I would like to take a slightly different approach. A research paper conducted by the Australian Childhood Foundation, Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University and Access Economics titled *The Cost of Child Abuse in Australia* outlines the cost of child abuse, and this is something the government might want to take into account. The prevalence of child abuse in Australia in 2007 was conservatively estimated as impacting the lives of 177,000 children under the age of 18 and suggested that these numbers may reach as high as 666,000 children. Of these, between 130,000 and 490,000 children were abused for the first time in that year across Australia.

If we apply an accepted proportionality for the frequency of sexual abuse as opposed to physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect of 6½ per cent then, conservatively, 11,500 children were sexually abused in 2007 across Australia, 8,500 of them for the first time. The human cost of child abuse in Australia is simply unacceptable. The report outlines that in 2007 there were an estimated 240 deaths attributable to child abuse—114 males and 126 females—including 27 deaths of children aged zero to 14 years. Most deaths were from suicide and self-inflicted injuries, others from alcohol abuse and anxiety and depression. This is a nationwide tragedy greater than any natural disaster and it occurs not once in a lifetime but each and every year.

If we set aside this personal loss, which I know seems callous and cold, the economic cost incurred by the Australian community in 2007 was approximately \$10.7 billion. The cost of prosecuting offenders was in the order of \$589.3 million. But the costs do not stop there. Ongoing care and treatment throughout the lifetime of the abused is estimated to be \$13.7 billion and could reach as high as \$38.7 billion.

If not for the personal tragedy, which is more than compelling in its own right, then for the economic rationale, government must be on the offensive when it comes to dealing with child sex offenders. At a minimum, government must establish more rigorous and immediate reporting methods and standards.

This must involve working with the police to have them carry out their duties more effectively, particularly in relation to the monitoring, management and control of child sex offenders.

The first step in achieving this goal is to reverse the onus of reporting onto the offender—place the burden of responsibility to report on them and not on the police. These offenders have been given a great privilege by being let out into the community, given their status and the offences they have committed. Surely it is a lenient community that asks them to meet them halfway. The 'honour system' offender reporting regime currently instituted by the government by definition cannot work. We must acknowledge the fact that there is a high risk for recidivism with these offenders and the consequences of such are too great to keep this relaxed approach. An honour system will not work on those who have no sense of the meaning of the word. This is why I support the LNP's bill that would see child sex offenders reporting to police every three months, not the current 12 months.

In relation to the destruction of DNA, as outlined in clause 31, I propose to the government that DNA sequestration should apply—that is, DNA is kept and not destroyed—to those mentioned in section 5(2)(a) and (b) of the Child Protection (Offender Reporting) Act 2004. We cannot allow opportunities for offenders of this class to escape the grasp of the police. Any offence against a child is a serious one and therefore any evidence supporting such should be kept.

The LNP has also identified that it is still illegal for the police to disseminate information regarding missing offenders. This needs to change. If we are serious about protecting children first and foremost and not the offender then this point cannot be stressed enough. The sharing of information with the community in this regard will increase awareness and will allow communities to better protect themselves and their children.

This is one instance where knowledge is indeed power. Once the police and community acquire knowledge of the offender, his whereabouts and his details, the more power they have over the significant risk the offender poses to the community. What the LNP proposes is to increase the amount and quality of knowledge to be made available and to be collected by the police, thus enhancing the locus of control to be exercised by the police over these offenders. This in turn will lead to a reduction in the number of registered offenders wantonly disobeying reporting requirements, which we have heard is up to one-third, and prevent offenders disappearing into the community, disregarding the privilege given to them and increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

In conclusion, I, too, would like to draw the minister's attention to the lack of community involvement in the resolution of this problem. The government, in its version of the bill, has not consulted the wider community—a serious misstep if the government in its role and function intends to represent voters. The importance of community consultation cannot be underestimated, especially given the impact and costs of child abuse that I have previously mentioned. The fact of the matter is that this problem concerns everyone—the victim, the victim's family, the offender, the criminal justice system, the government and the broader Queensland population. After all, as the government has said itself, child protection is everyone's responsibility.