




Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Thursday, 1 November 2012

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (12.46 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Family Responsibilities Commission Amendment Bill 2012. The bill was introduced into this House by the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs and Minister Assisting the Premier on 12 September 2012 and was referred to the Health and Community Services Committee for scrutiny. The committee has returned its findings and has recommended that the bill be passed in this Assembly. This is a recommendation that the opposition agrees with. We will be supporting this important bill.

As many know, the Family Responsibilities Commission commenced operating on 1 July 2008 in four remote Aboriginal communities—namely, the Cape York communities of Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge. I would like at this stage to mention briefly the new centre at Mossman Gorge. If people have not had the opportunity to visit that centre I can tell them that it is one of the most amazing pieces of local cooperation, with some government support. It shows that given the right opportunities and the funding and tools at the right time a community can do amazing things. It is certainly an amazing thing for that local area. I hope to see that continue to grow over the coming years.

The commission was born out of the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, which stemmed from a tripartite agreement between the Australian government, the Queensland government and the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership. The main purpose of the trial, as I outlined in a speech to this House for a similar piece of legislation that I was responsible for when I was minister last year, is—

... to build stronger and more resilient communities, re-establish local Indigenous authority, enable children to achieve their full potential, support engagement in the real economy, and encourage individuals and families from social housing to homeownership.

I believe the commission has done just that in achieving positive results in the four remote communities. We only have to look at the independent studies which have been undertaken to see the positive trends being set. For example, the report entitled *Annual highlights report for Queensland's discrete Indigenous communities for the period July 2010—June 2011* revealed that there was a positive trend showing in the four remote communities where the commission operated within, with factors such as school attendance improving or being maintained at a higher level. But the reports cannot capture a holistic understanding of what is occurring in these areas. Data that cannot be measured—*anecdotal stuff*—is where we hear the real success stories.

As the previous minister responsible for this area, I had the privilege of travelling the state, traversing the countryside, visiting many remote communities including some where the FRC is operating. What I saw were communities that were changing and changing for the better. Sure, there was not 100 per cent conformity to the law and social norms, but show me one community anywhere in Queensland where that happens completely. These communities have been given a real chance through properly structured programs, guidance, monitoring and support, and we are seeing that real change is occurring.

The bill, as outlined by the minister, will allow for the operations of the commission to be extended by one year, changing the cessation date of the commission from 1 January 2013 to 1 January 2014. This will allow the commission to continue its strong, positive work assisting the community for at least another 12 months. The bill also makes two consequential administrative amendments which extend the tenure of the

commission by one year and the ability for orders to be made for another year also, to bring it into line with the new cessation date of 1 January 2014.

The second non-administrative change is the amendments to the quorum of the board. Currently a quorum of three commissioners is required to allow a valid meeting to occur. However, as the parliamentary committee heard when undertaking hearings for this bill, it is sometimes practically impossible for a commissioner to attend a meeting and in that case a meeting will not be able to proceed. This bill seeks to amend the situation by allowing two members only to form a quorum and thus constitute a valid meeting. Whilst the opposition is agreeable to this proposal, we would ask the minister how he proposes that accountability and transparency remain at the fore when the board meets with only two members. Whilst we on this side of the chamber are not suggesting that any dishonesty would occur, it is of course, as we would all agree, important that appropriate safeguards are put in place in this regard. It is always important to ensure that a high level of transparency and open government is achieved.

Just briefly, the fact that local commissioners are playing a greater role in the FRC is so commendable because it is about the calibre of the individuals who are participating, and the more people I meet who have shown an interest in becoming local commissioners the more buoyed I am by the fact that this trial, even without the funding, has put in place structures that are really changing the communities in terms of leadership and approach. That gives me great hope for what we are going to see in the communities in the future.

I certainly welcome the minister's comments that he will be expanding the membership of the project board to include a representative from each of the four participating communities. This is a little bit of *deja vu* for me because this is something that I had talked about when I was minister, and I am very, very happy that this is the way forward. I will tell you why. There have been tensions with the board in the past in terms of the way things operated, and that is not unusual to see from the fact that you have four communities very much having their own local leadership and having their own ideas as to how they would like to see the welfare reform trial and the commission operating. But I can certainly say that the whole approach of expanding that board is commendable because it will see a greater input from each of those communities. It is going to allow not only elected persons but other people the opportunity to have a say in terms of how this goes forward. That is pleasing because sometimes, as we know, elected persons are not the font of all knowledge and are certainly not always necessarily the representatives of the community. So, in terms of the selection process of those nominees going forward, I know the minister will be very careful in that regard, but it is a great opportunity to provide some very good grassroots knowledge and input into what is a very important role.

I wanted to say just briefly that the idea of the extension of the board also came about from looking at the community consultation that was undertaken the last time there was an extension of the Cape York Welfare Reform through the FRC. That was important because, particularly in Hope Vale, there was a lot of concern about the way the FRC operated and whether there was going to be support. I was pleased to have sat down with the mayor, Greg McLean, and the council and talked to them about what was lacking and what was important going forward. Really what they said was that it was about communication. It is very important to have that communication right and to ensure that we have those things on the table.

I think if you asked individual people within a community like Hope Vale they would say that each of the outcomes happening in the community is a good outcome. If you asked them sometimes about the FRC, straightaway the barriers would go up. But the more people talked about the fact that the FRC was achieving good outcomes, the more we saw that this was actually the case. I think there has been a shift in that regard and I am very pleased to see that.

Earlier today in this House we paid tribute to the late Eric Deeral, who, as we know, was the first Aboriginal person to serve in the Queensland parliament—a strong leader and a pioneer. And I just attended an unveiling of a plaque in his honour here at Parliament House. The minister also referred to Noel Pearson as someone who has made a significant contribution and has a leadership role in this particular area of the FRC as well as the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial.

I think it is fitting that I pay tribute at this time to Neville Pootchemunka. Neville was the former mayor of Aurukun who passed away while standing for re-election earlier this year. Mr Pootchemunka was a passionate advocate for the Family Responsibilities Commission and for the broader Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, as well as for the alcohol management plans in place in Aurukun. He was very clearly of the view that things were changing in Aurukun as a result of all of these initiatives and he wanted to keep going. He wanted to press ahead, and it was a very important thing to him. I wanted to make sure that I paid my respects to Neville. I do not think I have had an opportunity to do that until now. I think it is fitting given that this is something that he was a key driver of and he played a very important leadership role in the community.

Last year the ABC *Four Corners* program ran an episode called 'Return to Aurukun' which focused on AMPs and the Family Responsibilities Commission. With regard to income management, Aurukun resident Kayleen Chevathun said—

They put me on a basic card and income management and it helped me a lot. That's why the kids they're going to school every day now.

This groundbreaking program has helped turn the community around. School attendance is up and levels of violence are down. Aurukun was held up as a beacon of hope in this program, an example of what can be achieved when people embrace reform with courage and conviction. I want to encourage the minister, as I said earlier, to appoint strong community leaders who, as we know, do not always need to be elected persons to the position. I certainly wish him very well in his deliberations.

As members would know and as the minister has stated, the commission is headed by Commissioner David Glasgow. Commissioner Glasgow was a strong advocate for social justice, with most of his years on the bench served travelling to remote and regional Queensland, on circuit court in Queensland's Indigenous communities, where he was able to better learn and understand the culture and language of traditional owners and our first Australians. One of his finest moments before becoming a commissioner was his influence in lobbying the government to create a Murri Court, a court where justice could be dispensed to individuals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent in a fair and impartial manner. It is a shame that Commissioner Glasgow's hard work and vision for justice in this state has been lost on the Attorney-General with the defunding and axing of the Murri Court services in Queensland.

Commissioner Glasgow does not undertake this work on his own. We know that in the FRC he is supported by Deputy Commissioner Rod Curtin and myriad different local community commissioners. As I said earlier, those local commissioners are the key to the success or failure of this particular program. Commissioner Glasgow plays a terrific leadership role but I think in his absence he has some great people who are very able to perform that work. The real day-to-day personal work occurs through local commissioners, and I really do want to put my thanks to those people on the record.

I acknowledge the minister's comments that additional funding has been provided through the budget process, with an extra \$5.65 million allocated and with \$1.6 million allocated towards the extension of the commission. This commitment, though, is in contrast with the comments made by the member for Moggill when he was the shadow minister during estimates last year. He said—

The commission has been a reasonably expensive trial.

...

I think that people should be aware that this program applies only in four communities. I think that people sometimes get the idea falsely that this is a more extensive program than it actually is. I think it is a very valid function of the opposition to question both value for money and the effectiveness of actually making the lives of people in the subject communities better. That is our role. I will never resile from that. I think it is right and proper for us to ask questions.

I congratulate the minister for continuing down this line and in some respects distancing himself from these comments because I know that, now he is in government, he has seen the full value of this program. Of course, you can always look at how money can be better spent. I acknowledge that. This trial is expensive, but every cent of it is worth it—every cent of it is worth it. Going forward, I commend the minister for having that new board approach to the way that money will be spent. I think that will be a terrific way forward. You have to compare the budget papers from last year to this year to note that an increase in the overall budget for the Family Responsibilities Commission, from \$4.2 million to \$4.4 million, has occurred. In this regard I think the comments of the member for Moggill have been relegated to the past.

I want to take this opportunity to put on the record the opposition's thanks to Commissioner Glasgow and all of the commissioners and staff who, day in and day out, are providing an important service to the four remote communities involved in this trial and involved with the Family Responsibilities Commission. I am also very pleased to say that I have formed a strong working relationship with Minister Elmes, and I hope that continues into the future. It is important because, as we all know, one of the keys to making a difference and moving towards that end goal that we all have of closing the gap is about consistency and continuity and not having short, sharp programs that go nowhere and continually trying to reinvent the wheel. These programs are working because we have stayed the course. The communities are embracing them. Communities are seeing the benefit and I think all Queenslanders are seeing the benefit. I commend the bill to the House.