



Speech by


Hon. Glen Elmes

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

Hansard Thursday, 1 November 2012

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

 **Hon. GW ELMES** (Noosa—LNP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs and Minister Assisting the Premier) (12.36 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

I begin by thanking the members of the Health and Community Services Committee for their prompt and valuable work in relation to the Family Responsibilities Commission Amendment Bill 2012, better known as the FRC bill. The committee has recommended that the bill be passed without amendment. The amendments will allow the Family Responsibilities Commission, an essential part of the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, to operate until the end of December 2013. The bill also seeks to introduce a quorum for meetings of the commission board to overcome a practical issue arising from the requirement for all three board members to be present at a meeting.

The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, which is a partnership between the Queensland and Australian governments and the Cape York institute, operates in four Cape York communities: Aurukun, Hope Vale, Coen and Mossman Gorge. The trial aims to restore social norms and local authority in those communities, and change behaviours in response to chronic levels of welfare dependency, social dysfunction and economic exclusion. The three trial partners recognise that when dysfunction is engrained in a community, encouraging community members away from welfare dependency and towards responsible behaviours will improve outcomes.

When the trial commenced in 2008, the establishment of the Family Responsibilities Commission was supported by both sides of the Queensland parliament. The trial was originally intended to end in 2011 with the expiry of the Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008 but was extended for 12 months pending the finalisation of an independent evaluation of the trial. The results of this evaluation, which is jointly funded by the Australian and Queensland governments, were originally anticipated in late 2011 but now are not expected to be released by the Australian government until later this year. The Family Responsibilities Commission is a central feature of the trial and operates to restore local Indigenous authority and build stronger and more resilient communities by attaching behavioural obligations to the receipt of welfare payments.

The FRC is chaired by the commissioner, Mr David Glasgow, and also includes a deputy commissioner and local commissioners from each of the four trial communities. Under the FRC Act, the commissioners hold conferences with local people who are notified to the FRC for not enrolling or sending their children to school, not meeting tenancy obligations, child safety concerns or being convicted of an offence in the Magistrates Court. If people do not work with the FRC to satisfactorily address problems, the FRC is able to refer clients for income management through Centrelink or to services provided by wellbeing centres, parenting services or ending family violence programs. Tenancy support services and school attendance officers are also available.

Local commissioners sit in each of the trial communities. They play an important role in the FRC— hearing conferences, developing case plans and sitting with the commissioner in deciding on income management. I have had a number of conversations with Commissioner David Glasgow and would like to publicly commend the good work he and his team are doing.

The Queensland government has committed \$5.65 million, which includes \$1.6 million towards the costs of the FRC, to extend the trial to the end of December 2013. In June 2012 my department, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs, undertook stakeholder and community consultations in Cairns, Brisbane and the four trial communities. We spoke to community members, school principals, wellbeing centre staff and local police. We also consulted the Cape York institute and other government agencies and service providers.

These consultations demonstrated there is widespread support for the continuation of the FRC for 12 months and for the continuation of key programs associated with the trial. There is a commonly held view that the trial is having a positive effect on the behaviour of community members, with more children going to school and communities being quieter than before the trial commenced. This was especially the case in Mossman Gorge.

The trial has been regarded by many as a key driver for improved school attendance and school readiness in the communities. The value of those trial elements, which are aimed at schooling and education, including student education trusts and student case managers, have become widely known and generally accepted and supported by the communities.

Most stakeholders who were consulted commented that people knew how the FRC could assist in addressing their problems and some were actively seeking support outside the formal FRC process. It was perceived by stakeholders that the trial had created new avenues for people to seek assistance, including from the FRC, local program offices, wellbeing centres and village opportunity hubs.

Extensive consultations were conducted during the establishment of the trial, and also in 2011 when the trial was initially extended to December 2012. This level of comprehensive consultation is necessary in order to satisfy the special-measure provisions under the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975. This special-measure status ensures the trial is able to operate without infringing the Racial Discrimination Act. A special-measure status is temporary and cannot continue once the objectives of the trial have been met.

The FRC, through the authoritative roles of the local commissioners, is assisting people to make positive changes to care for their children, families and homes using a case management approach. The outcomes of programs supported by this government must focus on developing community capacity so community members have greater control in determining their own future, thereby reducing their reliance on government. This requires that the community accept this challenge and assume responsibility for outcomes. Sometimes communities need assistance to successfully rise to this challenge.

Extending the trial for a further 12 months will provide the opportunity to consolidate the gains already made in terms of the safety, wellbeing and welfare of the people in the trial communities, particularly women and children. An important part of the extension will be an expansion of the membership of the project board to include a representative from each of the trial communities. The function of the board will also change so that it provides advice to me on how to expend \$4 million in state funding for trial specific projects.

I discussed these proposed changes with Noel Pearson and we agreed it would be the best way to take the trial forward for the additional 12 months. I asked him to provide me with the names of two members from each of the trial communities and I will choose one from each to be members of the project board. I would like to acknowledge the work done by Noel as one of the principal driving forces behind the trial. He has been a tireless community leader over the past two decades in seeking better life outcomes for Indigenous Queenslanders.

Noel has already raised with me the prospect of introducing additional trial programs during 2013 focused on nutrition and family reunification. No-one understands better than he the need to identify programs and services which achieve results so that the significant financial investment from state and federal governments can be directed where it works to greatest effect. If we are serious about improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities, it is important that we allow time for these changes to become embedded.

The proposed release of the trial evaluation later this year will help inform future policy decisions in relation to the provision of more appropriate and effective services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Queensland. The evaluation, when we finally get it from the federal government, will hopefully provide the necessary analysis and detailed assessment of the various measures implemented as part of the trial. Only when we have that evaluation can we comprehensively assess the

success of the trial and see what elements might be replicated for the benefit of all Indigenous communities.

Even without the evaluation, I feel safe in saying this trial has been important in the way it has expanded the normal range of services to see what better results can be achieved. The trial has been expensive, but I hope that significant investment can result in better targeted and more effective services for Indigenous communities. I will be looking very closely at the various evaluations and assessments of what has been achieved since 2008 to identify the benefits.

We will also need to discuss the evaluation with the federal government to agree on how we can move forward from the trial in just these four communities to develop better services which benefit all Indigenous communities. The last thing I want to see is that the trial ends in a year and we lose the legacy of what has been achieved. I commend the bill to the House.