




Speech by

John Hathaway

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Thursday, 1 November 2012

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr HATHAWAY** (Townsville—LNP) (4.32 pm): I rise today as a member of the Health and Community Services Committee to speak in support of the Family Responsibilities Commission Amendment Bill 2012. In speaking to this bill I also point out to members of the House that of the last four reports tabled by the Health and Community Services Committee three had statements of reservation or dissension appended by opposition committee members. I am pleased, however, to note that this report from the committee was unanimous in supporting the bill.

As has been noted by the House today during discussion on this bill, there is generous support for the FRC and things like the wellbeing centres and indeed the work of the commission. I also want to thank and note for the record the submissions by the Family Responsibilities Commission and the Cape York institute, the briefing provided by the department and, as always, the work of the secretariat in providing the very necessary research to enable the committee to so easily conduct its review.

In his introduction of the bill to the House, the minister outlined the amendments required to the Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008 to ensure the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial could continue and extend the operations of the Family Responsibilities Commission by a further 12 months. Minister Elmes stated—

The trial commenced in 2008 in the four communities of Aurukun, Hope Vale, Coen and Mossman Gorge. The objectives of the trial are to: restore social norms and local authority; and change behaviours in response to chronic levels of welfare dependency, social dysfunction and economic exclusion in the four trial communities.

These social norms are something that most of us take for granted in our own communities.

The purpose of this amendment bill is to extend by 12 months the term of the FRC which will enable continued support to the welfare reform trial. It will also allow further opportunity to consolidate the gains that the trial has made in terms of the safety, wellbeing and welfare of the people in the trial communities, particularly the most vulnerable—the women and the children. It will also enable the evaluation of the trial to be considered in determining the future of welfare reform initiatives across these communities or indeed elsewhere in our country.

The amendment also seeks to overcome some minor difficulties being experienced in meeting the legislative requirement that all three Family Responsibilities Board members attend board meetings by simply amending the provision of a quorum down to two members.

As part of the review and also in the explanatory notes, the committee noted that there was a commonly held view that the trial has had a positive effect on the behaviour of the target community members, with community members seeing more children going to school. This is indeed the outcome desired and the start of the change in order to rise out of welfare dependency. The trial has been regarded by many as the key driver for improved school attendance and school readiness in communities that focus on consistent school attendance—the important issue here is consistency—and that value that education needs to continue.

There was, however, some concern expressed that some of the people in the communities felt that the FRC model was problematic in that it did not involve community leaders as much as it should in the design and the delivery of the solutions and may in itself create some dependency amongst those who have come to rely on its services. Recent and subsequent interactions with the FRC by the committee would also clearly indicate the need to develop an exit strategy, if that is what is required, for the FRC post the trial. Any exit would obviously need to be well supported and guided by the independent evaluation of the trial that would determine the future initiatives that need to be cost-effective and sustainable, with strong ground-level community support and involvement. In closing, I thank the minister and the House for the opportunity to review the legislation and have no hesitation in recommending its continued passage through the House.