




Speech By  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

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Record of Proceedings, 15 October 2013

**FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (12.45 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Family Responsibilities Commission Amendment Bill 2013. The bill which we debate today was introduced by the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs on Tuesday, 6 August 2013 and was promptly referred to the Queensland Parliament's Health and Community Services Committee for scrutiny and public consultation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank members of the Health and Community Services Committee for their deliberations on the bill and recommending that the bill be passed without amendment. I also would like to thank the committee's hardworking secretariat, led by research director Ms Sue Cawcutt, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that the legislation that comes before this House has been properly scrutinised in an appropriate manner.

This bill is similar to a previous bill that we have already debated in this session of parliament, namely, the Family Responsibilities Commission Amendment Bill 2012, which was introduced into this House on 12 September 2012 and passed on 1 November 2012. That bill, like this bill, extends the conclusion date of the Family Responsibilities Commission by one year. As the minister has already stated, this bill will officially extend the expiry date of the Family Responsibilities Commission to 1 January 2015 and makes consequential amendments to the Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008 by aligning the cessation of the office of commissioner and/or board members to be deemed vacant on the new expiration date of 1 January 2015 and aligns the ceasing of Family Responsibilities Commission orders to 1 January 2015.

This is an important piece of legislation, just like the piece of legislation introduced over 12 months ago, as it allows the commission to continue its important and vital work in our remote Queensland communities. I will not traverse the grounds of the purpose and structure of the commission as I previously have in this place. Having overseen this area when I was a minister in the former government, I know that this is a very important area which needs to continue to have the support of both sides of politics to ensure that we can get the best learnings out of this and continue to build stronger, more resilient communities, particularly the trial communities.

I would, however, like to spend some time talking about the successes of the commission, which is the reason for the extension. At the recent Queensland Parliament Estimates Committee on 24 July 2013, the Family Responsibilities Commissioner, Mr David Glasgow, spoke of the successes of his commission and in particular the recent survey that was undertaken. Mr Glasgow stated—

Of those people surveyed, 77 per cent felt that things were better because people were willing to put effort into making their community better; 54 per cent of the people felt that their lives were on the way up; 51 per cent felt the FRC had made leadership in the community stronger; 65 per cent of the community members surveyed felt people should go to the FRC if they were not sending their children to school; and 69 per cent of those surveyed felt that if people did not spend their money on reasonable household expenses, they should be given a BasicsCard.

The commissioner went on to state that 'school attendance has increased considerably during the period' of the commission's operation. I would just like to touch on that for a moment, because

school attendance continues to be one of the key challenges, not only in the welfare reform trial communities, but certainly across a range of discrete Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

It is one of the key areas of focus of this government, I know, and certainly was for the previous government. It is one of the most important areas to make a difference and to see that generational change we are all trying to achieve in these communities. These comments by the commissioner just go to show that the commission, since its establishment in 2008, has worked and is making positive inroads in the community. That is the reason it should be continued.

As I said in this House in November last year, I believe that the commission has achieved a positive result in the four remote communities and I concur with the commissioner's statements at the recent estimates hearing, at which he stated—

There are other challenges ahead, but overall I would think, having looked at the evaluation, the charge that we were given back in 2008 has been complied with.

Whilst I support this legislation and I continue to have a strong working relationship with the minister, I cannot let this occasion pass without reminding the House of the contradiction we saw certainly during the estimates process and certainly in the media releases when we last looked at extending this particular trial. I certainly concur with the commissioner's statement and believe in the commissioner's successes as a whole, but it is questionable whether the minister does. It was only a few months ago, on 27 March, that the minister issued a media release entitled 'Cape York Welfare Reform Trial' in which he announced that funding would no longer continue. It stated—

... the Cape York Welfare Reform trial will end on 31 December 2013.

I table that media release for the benefit of the House.

*Tabled paper:* Media release, dated 27 March 2013, from the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs and Minister Assisting the Premier, Hon. Glen Elmes, titled 'Cape York Welfare Reform Trial' [3735].

But less than 24 hours later there was what could only be described as a monumental, first-class backflip by this policy-on-the-run Newman LNP government, with a further media release issued not by the minister but by the Premier. This media release, issued by the Premier on 28 March, was titled 'Cape York Welfare Reform Trial Extended'. I table that media release for the benefit of the House.

*Tabled paper:* Media release, dated 28 March 2013, from the Premier, Hon. Campbell Newman, titled 'Cape York Welfare Reform Trial extended' [3736].

As I read the media release I see no mention of the minister. Indeed, the Deputy Premier, the Treasurer and the Attorney-General are all listed as members of the Cabinet Budget Review Committee who made the decision to continue the trial's funding, but there is no mention at all of the minister responsible. It begs the question: was the minister involved in the decision to backflip and re-fund the trial or was he overturned by the Premier without consultation? What I would like to believe is that the minister was doing as he was told originally by the Premier and was then told to be the scapegoat for the Premier's own backflip. I will give the minister some credit and say that that may have been the way things went down. Either way, it just goes to show that this Newman LNP government is just enacting policy on the run, one day axing funding to a vital cause and the next changing its opinion and funding it, without input or public comment by the responsible minister. But I stress that it is a positive that the government came to its senses eventually and continued funding to the Cape York Welfare Reform trial.

Finally, I turn to the erratum to the explanatory notes that was issued on Thursday, 10 October 2013. It inserts two words into the original explanatory notes tabled on 6 August 2013, when the former federal government—a Labor government—was in power. This erratum inserted the words 'up to' in relation to the Australian government's contribution to the continuation of the Family Responsibilities Commission. The notes originally stated—

Of these allocations, the State Government will contribute \$1.6 million and the Australian Government \$2 million towards the FRC's operations from 1 January 2014 to 1 January 2015.

It has been changed to—

Of these allocations, the State Government will contribute \$1.6 million and the Australian Government up to \$2 million towards the FRC's operations from 1 January 2014 to 1 January 2015.

There may be a logical explanation for this—it may have simply been a typographical error—but one would think this error would have been picked up sooner. Or it could be the start of a wave of cuts by the federal Abbott coalition government. It is certainly a change in direction that had not been flagged. No doubt the federal government will be embarking on a range of cuts that it has already identified—vital funds from vital projects which aid and support the most marginalised members of our community. I ask the minister to provide a response to my question in his reply to the debate. I hope

that he will be able to provide a response in relation to the technical wording, if indeed it was only technical wording.

It goes without saying that the Labor opposition will be supporting this important legislation because it extends the great work of the Family Responsibilities Commission, which was established by a Labor government. I take this opportunity to thank Commissioner Glasgow, who was appointed on 25 April 2008 and has discharged his duties with distinction. Of course, the commissioner cannot achieve the great results of the commission without the assistance of his deputy, Rod Curtin, and all of the local commissioners in each region and the staff of the Family Responsibilities Commission. I wish the commissioner, the deputy commissioner, local commissioners and staff all the best for the coming year as they continue to build on the successes achieved to date. I commend the bill to the House.