




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

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PUBLIC GUARDIAN BILL; FAMILY AND CHILD COMMISSION BILL; CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MOLHOEK** (Southport—LNP) (2.50 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Newman government's reforms to the child protection system in Queensland and the three bills that are being debated in cognate today that form part of the government's initial response to the Carmody inquiry. And what a fantastic and thorough report we have received from that inquiry. As a former assistant minister for child safety working with Minister Davis, I looked forward to reading both the reports. I spent quite a bit of time trawling through them. I can assure the House that the commissioner has done a fantastic job in summarising and bringing to conclusion a raft of reforms and recommendations to this government.

Our government has been absolutely unwavering in its commitment to making Queensland the safest place to raise a child. That commitment was very clear when one of the first announcements that our Premier made after being sworn in by the Governor was his intention to announce an inquiry into child safety and child protection practices. Then on 1 July, only three months after our government was sworn in, the Premier established the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, led by the Hon. Tim Carmody QC. I want to read briefly from the executive summary of his report, because he makes a very important point in his opening comments when talking about the case for reform. He says this—

The Queensland Child Protection Act 1999 upholds the principle that all children have a right to be protected from harm. It also respects the right of families to privacy. The state should only interfere when a child's family is unable or unwilling to fulfil its duties by the child. The preferred way to protect a child, therefore, is by supporting the child's family, with coercive interference restricted to legally authorised interventions when a child's safety is at risk.

The Commission is convinced that wherever possible it is better for the child to stay safely at home—better for the child, better for the family and better for society as a whole.

Mr Carmody makes a really important point, because when we came into government the child safety system was obviously in great distress and under great duress, with costs spiralling out of control and an overemphasis on the tertiary treatment of the system rather than working on preventive practices to any great degree. If we look at the total numbers over the last decade, we see that the budget for child protection services has more than tripled—going from \$182 million in 2003-04 to \$773 million in 2012-13. Our government has continued to increase spending and has continued its commitment to child protection. I think our record speaks for itself in that we have continued to support the system as best we can.

There is no doubt that the system needed reform—not just the child protection system but many other aspects of the legislation. As a government we have introduced some of the toughest legislation in Australia to deal with child sexual predators, including the two-strike policy targeting repeat child sex offenders, new maximum penalties for convicted paedophiles and the new offence of grooming a child. The two-strike policy was developed in close consultation with Hetty Johnston from Bravehearts, who would like to see all governments in Australia adopt the same policy. There were new offences created to deal with new technology, particularly in regard to the grooming of children

over the internet. The previous government was a government that kept doing the same thing, expecting different results. But our government is getting tough on crime. We are cracking down on the paedophiles and sex offenders who harm our children.

We have also done our best to remove the Brisbane-centric approach of the previous government to the child protection system. We have done that by increasing our support for child safety workers at the front line. In my previous role with the Minister for Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, Minister Davis, as I travelled around the state I learned that many of our front-line workers were frustrated with the bottleneck that had been created in George Street in the city by the previous government. Often I would hear people say, 'We need more caseworkers, not more office workers. We need more front-line caseworkers to work with the children and their families. We need more support around those families. What we don't need is an ever-growing army of people in Brisbane interfering in the process and creating larger bureaucracies and larger offices and more palatial facilities at the expense of providing those front-line services.' That is why these reforms that we are discussing this afternoon in these three pieces of legislation—and I should point out again that this is just the beginning of our government's response to the Carmody inquiry—are just so important.

I do not propose to go into a lot of detail, but the Public Guardian Bill 2014 establishes the Public Guardian and the Office of the Public Guardian, reporting to the Attorney-General and advocating for children in the child protection system. This is our response to the commission's recommendations on improving advocacy services and the community visitation program. The Family and Child Commission Bill establishes the Queensland Family and Child Commission, reporting to the Premier, and provides a framework to deliver a new child protection system. It also responds to the Carmody inquiry's findings that the risk-averse and bureaucratic system that we had previously was affecting the level of services provided to children and their families.

I cannot say how frustrated I felt and how disappointed I felt by the comments of the member for Redcliffe earlier when I heard her say that the Labor opposition would not be supporting these bills.

Ms Davis: It is outrageous.

Mr MOLHOEK: I take that interjection from the Minister for Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. It is outrageous, because I understand that, in the past, previous reforms were supported by all sides of government. I would have to say that child protection is not a political issue; it is everybody's responsibility. I find it very disappointing that the opposition members cannot accept the fact that this is not an attack on them, this is not an attack on their policy or their initiatives; this is simply an opportunity to reform, improve and build on the legislation of the past and the attitudes of the past in trying to create a better child protection system.

I remember well the first weekend after we won government. The Premier had rung me and asked me if I was prepared to take on the role of assistant minister for child safety. I decided that for the weekend—we were going away for Easter—I would take away a copy of the Forde inquiry and the last CMC inquiry into child protection as a bit of light reading. For two days I sat in a coffee shop reading both reports. What is very clear is that modern governments of the last two or three decades have made very genuine and sincere attempts to improve the system. If you read the Forde inquiry, some of the evidence that was presented in that inquiry, some of the attitudes of the government of the day and even previous governments going right back to the 1950s, would break your heart. But over the last two decades we have seen a genuine attempt to reform and improve the outcomes for children across Queensland. So I would have to say that I am disappointed and I am somewhat surprised that the opposition has taken this position in respect of this legislation.

The Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill deals with a number of issues. It deals with a definition that is certainly one that has needed an overhaul and that is the need to identify clearly the difference between harm and significant harm. I think that this is a great step forward, because in the past all too often we have seen too many young children removed from their families where there has not been significant threat or significant harm. All the evidence points to the fact that most children desperately want to be with their family, as harmful or as challenging as that can be. Most children at about 15 or 16 years of age, once they have been through the child protection system, typically want to go back to their families. So I think it is an important distinction that we are making here. We are really dealing with those children most at risk.

It gives me great pleasure to stand in the House today and support these three pieces of legislation. My sincere hope is that as these reforms continue we will see greater intervention at the start, greater support wrapped around those families in distress, but most importantly that we will see better outcomes for those young children and we will see those numbers, such as the 129,000 intakes that we receive every year here in Queensland and the 11,000 children plus in need of intervention, reduce. I am very pleased to stand and speak in support of these bills.