




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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WORKING WITH CHILDREN (RISK MANAGEMENT AND SCREENING) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (6.50 pm): Blue cards are a privilege, not a right. This legislation spotlights the importance of the working with children screening system, or the blue card system as it is popularly known. The government is trumpeting these amendments as a no-card no-start regime. I feel that is misleading. It was always intended as a no-card no-start system. It ceased to be that because of the systemic blockage in processing applications. When it ceased to be that, it ceased to be the screening and licensing system the people of Queensland expected and believed they had.

A question on notice in November 2018 revealed that some 2,917 applications were pending for paid employees who were entitled to start while awaiting the outcome of a blue card application. This may hide the backlog but does so with potentially tragic outcomes. Any of those applicants already working with children could have had serious criminal histories and could be refused. The government should have trumpeted that the suite of initiatives was aimed at making the process easier and faster. I know that people in my electorate are hoping these changes will have the desired result.

For many years, the start of every school year in Central Queensland saw backlogs of people waiting for processing of their blue cards before they could take up child related employment. Part of the problem was the way the system required students working with children to replace the blue card that they had held for student practicums with a new blue card when they graduated to employment. This always coincided with the agency closing down for the annual Christmas holidays. Every year commenced with a backlog.

The system also required jobseekers who required blue cards in their work to have the job lined up before they applied. In those days it made many employers operate short-staffed while they waited for childcare workers' clearance of a blue card. In one case in my electorate, a childcare worker was employed in January and could not start work until May. That is a devastating blow on people trying to get employment in regional Queensland. This disadvantaged everyone—the employer, the worker and the children.

Allowing paid work to commence before the blue card issued is potentially disastrous too. It is hoped that the new automated system will allow people making the transition from student to worker to be job ready by having the valid blue card when applying for a job. They will not require a link to an employer before they apply. This will be a big improvement for regional and rural Queenslanders.

I strongly support the introduction of a photograph on the blue card. This will provide some protection against fraudulent misuse of blue cards by persons other than the official holder and will close another one of those loopholes. These loopholes all allowed real-world experiences that risked bringing the blue card system into disrepute.

I sincerely welcome the changes that will allow a better application process. This will really help workers and employers in regional Queensland. I also welcome the automated process which promises faster time frames, especially for those applicants with no criminal history or simply non-relevant criminal history.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission recognised that a more efficient processing system is, by definition, a stronger protection for children. That is what it is all about. A supplementary review was conducted by the Queensland Family and Child Commission following the tragedy of Tiahleigh Palmer's case. The legislation addresses one recommendation from that review by creating a central register which will function like an information exchange for multiple agencies dealing with children. These agencies include the Queensland Police Service, the Department of Education, the Office of the Public Guardian and the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women.

It is hoped that, by being able to see all of the information held by these agencies about a given child's living arrangements and information about others also residing in a home, agencies will be able to make a better informed decision about child safety. I sincerely hope so. This will be a protection for all children in regulated out-of-home care. That includes foster and kinship care, family day care and stand-alone care, for example regular, scheduled babysitting from a sitter's home.

Many families in the Bowen Basin rely on this last type of care because of the shortage of childcare centres and the fact that young families in these towns live without the physical support of a network of relatives. They have moved away from their families of origin in order to earn a good wage. They do not have the ability to rely on grandparents, aunts and uncles, so they may need to employ a regular babysitter or family day care arrangement. This amendment strengthens the protection for the child. However, Labor's blue card reform still fails to meet the community expectations of the reform needed. That is why the LNP will be moving amendments to further strengthen blue card protections for workers.

I was shocked when a recent answer to a question on notice revealed that over the last three years 46 persons convicted of disqualifying offences were given an okay to apply for a blue card. The blue card is needed only so they can work with children and then, of course, they are able to start work pending the processing. What are the convictions for? Some 31 of the 46 were for unlawful carnal knowledge. That means that people convicted of sexual offences are working with children quite legally, and they hope to have a government issued blue card to show off if they need to keep at bay employer or parental concerns.

A recent question on notice revealed that under Labor 35 people with disqualifying offences were granted a blue card by relying on eligibility provisions. Some 23 of those 35 were unlawful. This is definitely not what the community expects from the blue card system. The LNP amendments will remove the eligibility declaration to ensure that such people remain disqualified. Importantly, they will ensure that they will never work with children. Further, we will ensure that, if a person is charged with a serious offence, their blue card will be suspended. Their blue card application will not be considered or processed while the charge of a serious offence is pending or if the person has been convicted of a serious offence.

In the community the blue card is seen as a licence to work with children, as it should be. The LNP will require Blue Card Services to conduct international criminal history checks to ensure that people are properly assessed for a Queensland blue card. This will include people with work histories in New Zealand and other countries.

In an overdue reform, the bill will expand the range of disqualified offences to include seven more offences including rape, murder, kidnapping of a child, abduction and child stealing. While that is for the good, the LNP will also include manslaughter of a child that was not a result of a motor vehicle accident, torture, cruelty to children under the age of 16, sexual assault of an adult, rape or an attempt to commit rape of an adult, and incest. The need to include such offences is obvious. Most parents would not want their child near such a person and it is probably assumed by most Queenslanders that these offences are covered, because they do not want to see children at risk of those offences.

The LNP wants the Queensland blue card scheme to operate in the best practice model in screening for working with children. The bill is a step in the right direction, but without the LNP amendments it will still fall short of the gold standard. We must protect our children. The blue card plays an important role in ensuring that we have a system that works right across Queensland. The blue card system has been around for 20 years and has played a significant role in ensuring that we have the right people in employment, playing a role with children in sport—Rugby League, netball and so on—or educating children. We need a blue card system that parents understand and that plays an important role in protecting our children.

Our children are our most valuable resource. We need to make sure we have legislation to protect children right across Queensland. I commend this bill to the House. I thank those in government and those in opposition for making sure we get the right system in place. It is important that we have the right legislation when it comes to blue cards, because they play an important role in ensuring parents have confidence that the people involved with their children, whether it is at sport or in education, are trustworthy.

(Time expired)