




Speech By
James Lister

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Record of Proceedings, 5 February 2020

CHILD DEATH REVIEW LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (3.15 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Child Death Review Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. I particularly want to thank the Education, Employment and Small Business Committee for its work. I seem to recall that this bill was one which was destined for the committee of which I am a member, the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee, but as that committee had a number of bills before it at the time it was moved across to the other committee and I thank it for its work in this previously unfamiliar field.

This is a good bill and the LNP does support it. We support in particular the objectives of this bill which are to establish a new, independent Child Death Review Board located within the QFCC responsible for carrying out systems reviews following child deaths connected to the child protection system and expanding the requirement to conduct an internal systems review following the death or serious physical injury of a child known to Child Safety to other relevant government agencies involved in providing services to that child. I have listened with great interest to the contributions of members of the House and I have been particularly fortunate to hear my colleagues who have been police officers. It is interesting to hear their perspectives because they speak with the authentic voice of people who have been there and who have seen it from the systems angle. I found their contributions to be most instructive and I thank them for that.

Although the LNP does support this bill, the House must not mistake that for condoning the process by which we have arrived at this bill. We have heard many speakers say that this has taken a great deal of time. We know that we are here because of the tragic death of Mason Jett Lee and the awful circumstances of his death were the straw that broke the camel's back and led to the instructions to the Queensland Family and Child Commissioner to undertake an oversight review of all of the reviews going on at the time. That report was handed down in March 2017 and it has been noted by a number of speakers before me—and I will reiterate the fact—that it has been three years since that report was handed down and we are only having the second reading debate at the moment. I do take on board what the Attorney-General said in her second reading speech in that it is important to get this right, but I am not accepting the view that three years is an appropriate amount of time to take to get this right. I was just perusing the submission by the Queensland Law Society and, in a not unfamiliar phrase, it said—

As there has been only a brief opportunity to review the proposed amendments and due to the commitments of our volunteer legal policy committee members, an in-depth analysis of the Bill has not been completed.

That submission was by Mr Bill Potts. His successor has said very similar things, and I can see a mirthful look—a knowing look—on the face of the shadow Attorney-General, my honourable friend the member for Toowoomba South. It is a common refrain from the Law Society and other groups that are making contributions—valuable contributions—which we wish to encourage in the scrutiny of these bills that they are not getting enough time. When I see on the one hand years in the making of this bill and then a short period of time for important interest groups to make a contribution, it really does not reflect credit on the government at all.

The member for Nicklin made the observation that when it is necessary to get bills through quickly the government seems to be able to get into action, particularly when there is some political advantage for them, yet when we are looking at the vital role that government has in safeguarding the welfare and safety of the children in our state it can still take three years to get us to this stage. That observation does require remarking on in the House.

I also noted that the Attorney-General made a number of references to the Queensland Family and Child Commission. I am sure that she and I see eye to eye on the matter of the great work that they do and the goodness of that institution. It was the LNP that introduced the Queensland Family and Child Commission against the wishes of the Labor Party. The Labor Party opposed the introduction of the QFCC. I refer to the wonderful second reading speech that my friend, the shadow Attorney-General, made on this matter.

This bill is a response to systemic failings in child protection in this state. I do take on board the message of my friends to my left who have said that it is everyone's responsibility to ensure the safety of children. We all own this problem. I do not shrink from that. It is important to note that we have had systemic failures which have resulted in tragedies over many years and it cannot be escaped that the Labor Party has been in government for about 25 years of the last 30 years. We need to look at how the government has performed in this very important area. I think their efforts have been weighed in the balance and found to be wanting and slow.

Looking at some of the statistics some of my colleagues have referred to earlier on paints a chilling picture of the situation in the state today. The number of children living away skyrocketed to over 10,000 by the end of September 2019. That is 742 more than a year ago. That is quite an alarming increase. In just one year there was an increase of 405 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living away from home. That is an almost 10 per cent increase. Meanwhile, there was an increase of six per cent of non-ATSI children over the same year. Children subjected to protective orders jumped to 10,769 by the end of 2019. That is 719 more than previously. The number of notifications or concerns received that suggest a child is in need of protection jumped to 25,572 by the end of September 2019, which is over 1,000 more than the corresponding 12 months before. This is 3,216 more than as at 30 June 2015. The underlying matters which feed into those statistics are complex matters, I accept that, but the government is in charge and I think the growing statistics do not reflect credit on them.

There are examples of how the government's response to matters of child safety in the state have been wanting and have been confused. In the case of blue cards we have seen 70 amending acts associated with blue cards in the time that they have been around. The government gleefully took the amendments that the opposition had proposed and withdrew their own bill so they could mull over them to see what they could pick out of them, which is awfully gratifying of course, but we are looking at the safety of children and we need to get on with it.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission explicitly recommended that there be international criminal history checks on those who are going to be granted a blue card. It pains me to refer to the tragedy of Tiahleigh Palmer, which was a case where a blue card holder had an international criminal history which was not known to those issuing the card. I put on record that I am disappointed in the Labor Party's handling of child safety over long years. This is a good bill but it has been very slow coming. We do support it, but I condemn the government for its stewardship of child safety over many years.