



Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

Record of Proceedings, 18 February 2020

**WORKING WITH CHILDREN LEGISLATION (INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES)
AMENDMENT BILL**

Second Reading

Resumed from 17 October 2018 (see p. 2904).



Mr KATTER (Traeger—KAP) (5.50 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

I am very proud to be standing behind the Working with Children Legislation (Indigenous Communities) Amendment Bill 2018. I remind members that this is the second time I have brought this bill into the House. It will keep coming back into this House until something is done about this issue. I cannot emphasise enough the seriousness of this issue.

Time and time again I come into this House and I hear platitudes mouthed about how we want to help Indigenous people, talk about closing the gap and a treaty. Here is some action. Here is how we can help people in these communities. When I visit Indigenous communities and talk to people I say, 'You are telling me you need a job and that you want to get into work. What are some of the problems?' Not having a blue card is one of the problems. I cannot find anyone in the communities who will argue that point with me. I visit these communities and I say, 'What is the big problem up here?' and I am told, 'Mate, none of us can get a blue card.'

The genesis of the bill before the House today came from having numerous conversations, inside and outside the Indigenous communities, with people saying, 'Can you please do something about this, because we're dying; we're drowning in this stuff and people are missing out on jobs.' It is not about better educating people about the process. There are some fundamental flaws in the application of this. I acknowledge that it is all done with the best intentions. I would say that these are inadvertent consequences of the good intent in the parliament, but I am telling the House that there are inadvertent consequences. They are dire and we are counting the costs of those consequences through youth crime in communities such as Townsville and Mount Isa—everywhere.

People come to see me in Mount Isa and they say, 'Rob, what are you doing about youth crime?' I say, 'I'll tell you what I am trying to do; fix the blue card.' Let us follow this problem through. Kids are running around on the street because it is not fun at home. There are dangers and threats for them at home, so they are out on the street at night. Why is the family dysfunctional? Most of the time it is because they cannot access work. You go up to the communities to find out why they cannot access work and find it is because they cannot get a blue card. Here is a solution to helping the problem.

In the eight years I have been in this job, going up to Mornington Island or Doomadgee, I cannot recall anyone walking up to me and saying, 'Robbie, I'd really like some more money', 'I'd really like some action on treaty' or 'I really like what you're telling me about closing the gap.' What a lot of people—perhaps 80 per cent or 90 per cent—say to me is, 'How come I can't get a job?', 'How come the white fella gets the job here and not me?' or 'How come I lost my job and can't get a blue card to try to get in there?' Very often the case comes back to the blue card.

I have said this before in the House and I will say it again: I was witness for an applicant who, I think about five years later, is still trying to get a blue card. In the course of discussions, I was asked, 'What are you suggesting with these blue cards? Are you suggesting there should be two sets of rules in this state, one for Indigenous and one for non-Indigenous?' I say that that has already been done, because there are alcohol bans on Mornington Island that we are still trying to resolve. Already there are two sets of rules, so you cannot use that excuse anymore.

I will go through some of the reasons for arguing against the bill. One comment I have heard is that it will put too much pressure on the locals who have to make the decisions. Let us stand back from that comment. Is that not what we would all refer to as condescending and paternalistic? The whole thing is about getting the communities to make decisions and to be autonomous; they make the decisions about who is safe to work in their communities. That is one of the arguments that has come up against the bill.

Of course, kids' safety is paramount. That is a proposition that we can never avoid. Yes, kids' safety is paramount, but I am afraid that the situation is a lot more complex than that and cannot be limited to it. Yes, we all should be worried about the kids' safety, but I would argue that the bill will make things safer than what we have at the moment. I would argue very strongly that kids' safety is compromised when you have dysfunctional families. When people are out of work they can turn to substance abuse involving alcohol and drugs. That is when you get child abuse and kids coming out of their homes because it is not safe to be there. I would say that that is accentuated and made a lot worse because they cannot access jobs without a blue card. My blue card legislation would let the community make the decisions on that, so long as there are no disqualifying offences, and then I would say that the kids' safety would be enhanced considerably. I challenge anyone to refute that or to speak against it. Those are the main issues that I have heard argued against the bill.

In the course of the debate and when it is time to vote on the bill, I hope that members will consider what can be achieved if we improve this. There might be some risks. Along with the government, I acknowledge that there are always risks about being perceived as soft on crime in the community. We all play politics around that issue. However, this issue is far too dire for that. I am sure that we have all been exposed to some of the really troubling issues that revolve around this.

Very recently, I have heard of more teenage suicides in my electorate. There is utter despair among children who are looking to get out. They are looking for structure in their families. There is despair among parents who are trying to access jobs. Maybe they have climbed out of a hole of substance abuse and are trying to turn their lives around. A female or a male may have an assault charge from 10 years ago when they were bad alcoholics, but that assault charge now disqualifies them. It is not just the disqualification. Say someone turns around their life and goes up to the school in Doomadgee, having finally decided that they are going to clean up their act and apply for a job. I know of real-life stories, if members want to hear them, but I will speak generally for now.

People will come out of that cycle, often having cleaned themselves up. They will say, 'All right, I'm going to engage in the white man's world. I'm going to get a job.' They will start to try to turn things around, but one of the first pieces of communication that comes to most of those people is, 'Sorry, mate. You can't get a blue card, but hang around, because we'll appeal. There are ways to work through this.' There are ways to work through this; I will admit that. However, the fact is that, when that person decides to turn up, within days the first message that they get is, 'You're not valid' or 'We don't consider you appropriate to be working in this role.'

I can tell the House that, in Doomadgee and on Mornington Island, there is hardly a single job that does not require the blue card anymore. Workers with QBAS go into hospitals and schools for most of the jobs that they do and they need a blue card. To go for any job you need a blue card. I think I mentioned—I lose track from the last bill, in the parliament before this one—that Clarrie Walden said, 'I've cleaned up my act. I acknowledge that I have a rap sheet this thick, but I've cleaned up my act. I dried myself out.' In his appeal they said that he did not even consult professional help. He said that he took himself out bush to dry out and that was held against him in the appeal, presumably. He was denied work and, to this day, still does not have a blue card, to the best of my knowledge. At what point do you say that these people will be denied access to jobs forever, because of this system?

I will say again that I am sure that no-one in this House has a mortgage on who thinks children should be safe and kept safe. Of course we all acknowledge that, but these are extraordinary circumstances that are faced in the communities. They are very serious and it is pervasive. It is not just in the gulf communities. You can talk to Alf Lacey on Palm Island. You can go up through the cape. You can talk to people in Yarrabah or anywhere back down to Murgon. People do not realise that a lot of this has arisen as an issue because, while individually they are all affected, collectively no-one is saying, 'Hey, do you realise that this is a real problem?' You do not hear about it collectively, but individually people are affected. It must change. I urge members to vote for the bill.

(Time expired)