




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 19 May 2020

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.52 pm): We all have a role to play in the protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders—these young people from the longest living culture in the world. We would all agree that the health, wellbeing and safety of all children is one of the most important challenges for our state. We know that we must empower Indigenous communities to make decisions including what best serves their children's protection and the employment of community members. We know employment offers a significant opportunity for a healthy lifestyle and positive opportunities for our families wherever they live.

I understand the origins of the bill attempt to overcome existing barriers in creating opportunity and I am a supporter of less interference from governments. The challenge of these proposed changes is the implementation and the uniqueness of Indigenous communities across Queensland. I see real issues in the balance between community expectations of the need to support employment aspirations in the community while continuing the tremendous task of protecting the interests of children. I fear that the proposed changes would introduce, amongst other issues, increased governance, and poor accountability processes would hinder outcomes, not improve them.

We know that the Queensland government's blue card system has been in place since 2001 to create safe environments for children. It aims to minimise the risk of harm to children receiving services that are essential for their development and wellbeing by the prevention and monitoring of people who work and care for children. We know that the blue card system operates a three-step risk management approach. It assesses a person's eligibility for a blue card based on known activities; monitors that blue card holders have taken appropriate actions if necessary and undertakes audit services; and a future step will also require organisations and self-employed persons to implement and annually review child and youth risk management strategies, which will be monitored by Blue Card Services. The present step we are debating requires Blue Card Services to monitor all police and disciplinary information.

We should be concerned about the plight of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There have been many and varied reviews into the blue card process, and we would agree the system contains significant limitations in the way it applies to the unique circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. Submitters to the committee, for example, listed some of these limitations: there is a difficulty in providing proof of identity in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; applications and the assessment process generate logistical and geographical barriers to assessing applicants; correspondence through Australia Post; disengagement with the applicant and assessment process due to a lack of literacy skills of certain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders; costs and challenges to engage, review and appeal the process; and a reduced number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders applying for a blue card as the assessment process does not take into account any relevant cultural aspects of the application.

There is a need for greater marketing material which contains culturally appropriate material to ensure a better understanding of what a disqualifying offence is, as this lack of knowledge can result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thinking they are excluded from being eligible for a blue card. The result is them not applying, which is causing us concern. Our concerns are reflected on many levels, especially when we reflect on the Closing the Gap report.

The government's report is an area where we need to take action, with just two of the seven targets on track to be met. The Prime Minister's 11th annual Closing the Gap report, which is the national standard by which all states and territories are measured, showed Queensland was the only state or territory that was not on track to meet a single target. These reports really expose the fact that the Palaszczuk Labor government is failing to deliver any practical improvements for Queensland's Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander communities. The issues in Indigenous communities are highlighted when we see government failures and shocking scandals involving children. We have seen the issues of children being locked up in watch houses under this government. It has been revealed that two-thirds of children held in Queensland watch houses were Indigenous.

A huge issue for Indigenous child safety is the government's attitude towards the Family Responsibilities Commission. The changes to the commission all but ceased a decade of work in addressing welfare dependency and school attendance in some of these Indigenous communities. It is important to reflect that what is now being proposed is a vague program called Thriving Communities. This program has been plagued by the government's continual problems: it cannot negotiate with the federal government on the three-year funding for the commission. The seriousness of the government's politicisation of this care has been shown well in these Indigenous communities and it has not gone unnoticed.

In November 2018 Prime Minister Scott Morrison had this to say in response to a question on notice—

The profound damage arising from the Queensland Labor government's decision not to reappoint commissioners or continue to fund and support the Family Responsibilities Commission will end more than 10 years of critical work that has been improving the lives of Indigenous Australians in these communities. Minister Scullion—

at that time—

has written to the Treasurer of Queensland, urging her to reconsider what I would describe as a foolhardy decision to abandon the Family Responsibilities Commission. He has repeatedly indicated the Commonwealth government's support for the FRC. It is the most critical component underpinning the Cape York Welfare Reform agenda.

It is important to reflect that the reality of working with children in Indigenous communities is one that challenges us all. In just one year there was an increase of 405 ATSI children living away from home. That is an increase of 10 per cent. The number of children subject to protective orders jumped to 10,769 by the end of last year, and this is more than in the preceding 12 months. This is more than 1,500 since June 2015. The number of children subject to child protection orders has increased by 6.4 per cent from nearly 10,000 at the end of 2018 to 10½ thousand by the end of last year. Since 2015 we have seen the number of children subject to child protection orders increase by 14.2 per cent. Over this period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to child protection orders increased by 17.8 per cent.

Creating a two-tier system is not the answer. The creation of a families justice group is not the answer. Putting this amount of risk into decision-making is not sustainable and comes with much risk. We all have a role to play in improving the lives and opportunities for Indigenous Queenslanders. However, what we have before us tonight, although well-intentioned, is not the answer.