




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

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CHILD PROTECTION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms RICHARDS** (Redlands—ALP) (3.13 pm): I rise in support of the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020. We live in ever-changing times, particularly within family units. Last week in my contribution I mentioned that family units are very different and the influences in society are very different than they were back in the fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties. Families are impacted by a range of different influences, including the prevalence of alcohol and drugs. The same is true for our children today as it was back then: it is important to have a safe, stable and loving home and to be surrounded by people who care about you.

Sadly, we know that this is not true for all Queensland children. Over the past three years I have had the privilege of meeting a number of foster carers and kinship carers in my electorate. I take this opportunity to put on the record my deepest and heartfelt thanks for the important work they do in our communities. They are very special people. They open their hearts and their homes to help and care for children to grow up in safe and stable, caring environments where that did not exist previously. Some do this for as little as two days, some do it for two weeks and some do it for years. From the conversations that I have had with those carers I know that these reforms are important to ensure that, where there is opportunity for permanency, we provide that as a lever.

I also acknowledge the many child safety workers across Queensland. They are faced with some of the most complex and distressing circumstances. They work tirelessly to provide these children with the best opportunity for a better life. I would like to thank my team at the Bayside Child Safety Service Centre. I know that they do an outstanding job in my community.

This legislation responds to the Deputy State Coroner's findings from the inquest into the tragic death of Mason Jett Lee. The coroner's report is distressing and it is disturbing. No child should ever experience what Mason Jett Lee experienced. The Palaszczuk government is committed to doing everything it can to strengthen and improve the child protection system to support vulnerable children and families now and into the future. Recommendation 6(b) was that the government consider whether the Adoption Act 2009 should similarly reflect the 2018 amendments to the Adoption Act in New South Wales, expecting children to be permanently placed through out-of-home adoptions within 24 months of entering the department's care.

The Child Protection Act 1999 promotes positive, long-term outcomes for children in the child protection system. Amendments were passed to the act in 2017 to reinforce the importance of achieving permanency and stability for children. These amendments are focused on achieving permanency for children in care, ensuring early planning for permanency and having that front of mind when those case plans are put together, and establishing permanent care arrangements for children who are unable to be reunited with their family. We know the ultimate goal is to do that where we can.

The proposed amendments and the findings of the inquest reinforce the importance of achieving permanency. We know there are circumstances where this is not simple. Consultation with stakeholders in the committee's work reinforced the complexity of this recommendation, in particular for Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people. The bill aims to implement the intent of recommendation 6(b) to enhance the approach to permanency under the act whilst being responsive to stakeholder feedback that was received.

The bill will amend the act to clarify that adoption may be considered as an opportunity for achieving permanency for children in care by including adoption as a third preference in the permanency hierarchy for children other than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and that that be the last preference for those children, the first preference being for the child to be cared for by the child's family, the second preference being for the child to be cared for under the guardianship of a family member other than the parent or another suitable person. The second part is to require the chief executive officer to review the case plan for a child subject to a child protection order, granting long-term guardianship of the child to the chief executive officer within six months of the order reaching two years, and to consider whether an alternative arrangement would be best to achieve permanency and to be focused on the child and their needs.

We must be vigilant in the ongoing monitoring of these case plans to ensure the best possible future trajectory for these children. The act is underpinned by the principle that the safety, wellbeing and best interests of a child, both through childhood and for the rest of the child's life, are paramount. This bill does not change that fundamental premise for the child. The bill strengthens existing safeguards and makes it clear that although adoption is currently an option and is the third preference for achieving permanency for other children, it is the least preferred option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The bill also inserts a note into the act explicitly referencing the safeguards that currently exist. The practice reforms include responding to recommendation 6(a) and 6(c). That work is underway. That is the development of an internal permanency strategy with quarterly progress reporting to the director-general; reviewing implementation of the 2018 permanency reforms to date, including the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle; the establishment of a new chief practitioner, an important role within the department with responsibility for overseeing permanency outcomes; and conducting an audit of case plans.

As I said, we need to remain vigilant on those case plans for all children in care to make sure that we better meet their permanent needs. Implementation of the bill includes updates to procedures, policies and practices. It is important that we communicate these with the family: with the children, with young people, parents, carers and partners.

In addition to this important legislation, the Palaszczuk government will continue to invest in strengthening the child protection system. We are investing more in frontline support officers, increased family support and the coordination of services. Having travelled last week on the youth justice bill, I know it is important that we are focused on how we coordinate and best deliver services.

Our Supporting Families Changing Futures 2019-2023 plan builds on the strategic direction published in the Supporting Families Changing Futures: 2018 Update and it outlines priorities for the final stage of the reform program. The strategy is centred on wellbeing outcomes: safe, secure and stable; healthy; learning, earning, developing and participating; belonging and identity. We know how important those outcomes are and we have just heard contributions from members that talked about all of those aspects of a young person's life. Taking a centrist wellbeing approach better articulates our work and the outcomes we want to see for Queensland children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability. It is more meaningful for them and it aligns with our state's strategy.

The saying goes that it takes a village to raise a child. The safety of our children is everybody's responsibility. This is important legislation. It is important work of the government. We must continue to work with our families and we have to work together if we ever want to solve some of these extraordinarily complex and challenging problems. As with all complex issues, by working together I know that we can make a difference for vulnerable young Queenslanders who need our help. I commend the bill to the House.