




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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CHILD PROTECTION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (3.04 pm): I welcome the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, as will many of my constituents also. It has been a long time coming, and they rightly feel that way. It is shameful that it took the horrible death of Mason Jett Lee to address this issue. The issue was a source of rising concern under the LNP government nearly 10 years ago. The Carmody commission of inquiry dug deeply into the issues and the Labor government has had over half a decade to act on the 121 recommendations in that report but has failed to do so. The Carmody report stands out in my mind because its central concern was the child. It recognised what child development experts know well and what many of us as parents know instinctively: a child needs love. This is not just sentimentality from a father; children's need for love has long been scientifically recognised. Tragic case studies from Eastern Bloc orphanages post World War II show us that children who lack a bond to at least one primary caregiver die young. They just fade away in what is called a failure to thrive.

In order to develop normally, children need to attach to at least one primary caregiver. Most children will have a firm network of attachments with parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Their babysitters and class teachers are also a part of this network, but right from birth they must have attachment. This bond is so important for the child's wellbeing that if the biological parents cannot provide it we should be seeking to provide an alternative through adoption.

The Carmody commission recommended this eight years ago. It stated that the Queensland government should routinely consider and pursue the use of adoption in cases where reunification with parents is no longer an option. Not only has nothing been done in relation to that recommendation; it almost seems as if the department was intent on the opposite course. Who can forget the evidence of one of the caseworkers who were meant to protect 22-month-old Mason Jett Lee? They said in evidence that they did not think that the protection of Mason was the primary concern. We can all be a bit gobsmacked by that. After all, we call these public servants child protection officers, but the evidence highlighted that other goals routinely took priority, from attempts to rehabilitate a drug addicted mother and her boyfriend and obviously the philosophy of keeping the family together.

The household that Mason Jett Lee died in did not warrant the description of family, but this is how we have lost our way, and in doing so we forget that childhood cannot be put on hold. We just cannot hit the pause button while other secondary daydreams are pursued. For children, growth and development are imperative. Human biology provides development windows for the development of muscle and coordination, for the development of speech and even the child's development of its own theory of what is right and what is wrong. A child who does not get to open one of these windows may be forever disadvantaged in that regard. This is why we put such emphasis on early childhood education. This is why when we see development problems we know the best intervention is early intervention, yet in the case of children like Mason Jett Lee we seem to have been doing the opposite of early intervention.

Tragically, since this government was elected in 2015, little Mason was only one of 16 children who have died while under the care and supervision of the Queensland government. In fact, 13 of those children have died since Mason died. This should lend us a sense of urgency with this bill. I welcome the bill as an attempt to find a more child centred approach where the safety and welfare of the child are the very core of every action undertaken for that child, but it has been terribly slow. A question on notice from the member for Currumbin during the committee investigation into this bill asked how many adoption requests have been rejected by the department in the last five years. The answer was—

It is not possible to apply to adopt a child in care.

How can this be our policy when we know that children need attachment to survive and stability and permanency to thrive? We know this scientifically. We know this from horrific historical example. We know this as human beings ourselves. Yet the department is happy to state that children are routinely being denied a loving and permanent home.

With such an ideology driving the decision-making, it is not surprising to read that only 34 children were adopted in Queensland over the past year. The *Brisbane Times* reports that is an 80 per cent plunge from two decades ago. Only an ideology can achieve such a dramatic change. This is clearly ideology before everything. Of those 34 adoptions, 11 children were adopted from overseas, 11 were local adoptions to known caregivers and 12 were local adoptions to adoptive parents with no prior contact or relationship. About one in 10 adoptees in Australia are younger than one year old, while about 28 per cent were aged between one and four years old.

Mason Jett Lee would have fallen into this category. He was not even two years old when his mother's boyfriend struck him so hard it killed him. If Mason Jett Lee had been placed permanently with loving and competent caregivers it is likely he would still be alive today. The outcomes were never going to be good leaving him where he was. The best outcome would have been delayed and impoverished development. Tragically, we know what the worst outcome was. I make this point because the committee submissions show significant opposition to this bill.

The committee heard evidence from groups like Adoptee Rights Australia. They argue that there are significant long-term negative outcomes in adoption. I do not accept that this is an inevitable outcome of adoption. Nor do I accept it is the universal outcome of adoption. For people born in Australia in 1960 or earlier, adoption was far more common. Many members of those generations will have friends or family members they knew were adopted. It would seem the outcomes for those adoptees were better than the outcomes for their peers in orphanages and boys' and girls' homes.

We can look at the historic record and learn from it. Having said that, I would point out that this bill only adds adoption as one option for achieving permanency for a child. It adds what is not currently there. By establishing adoption as an option, the bill does not remove other options. In fact, it specifically places adoption as the third option and then only for non-Indigenous children. If the child is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, adoption is established as the fifth and last option for permanency.

This brings me to my final point: in addition to giving adoption legitimacy within our child protection system, this bill is important because it places an emphasis on the child's need for attachment, stability and permanency. These changes are important. However, adoption should not be seen as the closing of a case. The department should continue to work with the adoptee and the adoptive parents to support the success of the placement and should have a monitoring role for some years. We should continue to research and learn so that we can give children in Queensland's child protection system the very best options for their situation. I commend this bill to the House.