




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BUDERIM

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CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MICKELBERG** (Buderim—LNP) (3.25 pm): I rise to speak to the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. At the outset I too would like to acknowledge the contribution of foster carers and child safety staff for what on many occasions is an incredibly thankless and difficult task. In 2018 my wife and I went through foster care training. I was very confronted by the content that was presented in relation to the effects of trauma on the psychological development of the brain. Every child in this situation represents a tragedy, but what struck me was that those foster carers who make the decision to care for children in such a circumstance are making a considerable sacrifice as well. It was a sacrifice I was not prepared to make at that time. The reason for that was because I felt that the position taken in relation to the rights of the child and, in particular, the rights of their parents was incompatible with my ability to be able to support that child in the same way that I support my own children. I was not prepared to enter into a situation where my children would be treated with one standard and a foster child who we were caring for would be treated with a different standard because their parent may have a different view. I understand the desire to reunite young people with their parents regardless of the circumstance, but there has to be a point in time where the rights of the child come first. I appreciate and acknowledge that this bill seeks to do that.

There needs to be a greater priority to protect all children in our society. I acknowledge that it is a bipartisan position that that is a priority for governments—for the Labor government and also for the LNP. Unfortunately we have seen too many cases of children becoming a forgotten number in a broken system. I will not talk about the individual cases because we have spoken about them time and time again in this House. Those kids need a voice. They need a chance to grow and to develop in a safe and loving environment as most kids get the chance to do. Every single time that a child enters the foster care system it is a tragedy, be it for tragic circumstances like a car accident where both their parents may be deceased or in instances where there is abuse in the family unit. I acknowledge there is a multitude of reasons why children may enter the foster care and child safety system in Queensland and right across Australia.

For reasons I spoke about earlier, I support the amendments to the principles of the Child Protection Act giving children a stronger voice in decisions that affect them. It is also vitally important that children are given appropriate support while they are using that voice. Too frequently these children are discussing matters that are traumatic and stressful. Discussing them could be a cause of further harm so it is important that they get the appropriate support.

Information sharing between departments and authorities is critical in ensuring that we fix the child protection system. Unfortunately we hear too frequently stories of antiquated processes, such as the keeping of paper files, for example, and the inability for information to be transferred rapidly across departments but also within the department of child safety. We need to ensure that the right people are looking after children in care in our schools and in other entities across society. In my view, at the very least people need blue cards. At the moment there are clearly deep concerns around the blue card process generally.

As others have spoken about, we have seen where victims of domestic violence have been misidentified as perpetrators and domestic violence orders have been put in place, which at times can result in the refusal of blue cards. Of course, that will impact their employment opportunities. I note the member for Gregory spoke about the potential unintended consequences of people not reporting domestic violence in the home because they are concerned about the impact on the family breadwinner. Clearly that is an outcome that no-one in this House seeks to achieve. We need to remove all of the barriers for victims of domestic violence in seeking help. There needs to be a process where women or men who are seeking help from authorities in gaining a DVO are able to do so and we need to consider the second-order effects of some of these decisions.

Information sharing between departments will break down barriers that have existed in the past and will open more doors for victims of domestic and family violence. I am pleased that this is a simple change to how things are currently done. To be frank, and this is not a reflection on the current government or the minister, it is disappointing that it has taken until 2022 for these sorts of measures to be put in place. We have been in a situation where the information technology capabilities have existed for many years. In my view, we need to do better in this space.

Our aim in this space must always be to protect children and women from violent and abusive relationships and situations. I acknowledge that that is the minister's first objective. I know that often it is a thankless task. I acknowledge the minister's commitment to that and I also acknowledge the shadow minister. As I am sure all in this House do, I find many of the stories that come across my desk as a member of parliament—stories about children who are in abusive environments or in cases of neglect—deeply confronting. I live in a relatively affluent area and I acknowledge the preponderance of that in my area is probably less than in some other parts of the state and particularly in some of the more remote communities.

One of the reasons my wife was so passionate about becoming a foster carer is that she was a police officer in the Far North and had seen, time and time again, children in situations of neglect. I recall her telling me about a job she did in Cairns. One night at about 10.30 she entered a house and found a one-year-old child alone. No-one else was home. There was drug paraphernalia and so on in the house. No-one should grow up in such a situation. I am sure all members of the House would want to see that sort of instance remediated. We need to work towards that without political interference getting in the road.

In relation to the Working with Children Check National Reference System, interstate information sharing is a no-brainer for me. The recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse should be implemented without delay and states and territories should be working together on this. As I said, politics should be pushed aside. This issue is bigger than politics.

On the Sunshine Coast we have some trail-blazing organisations that are making a difference in the lives of women and children. Just last week, along with the member for Cooper and the member for Maroochydore, I attended a workshop tackling domestic and family violence. We heard from advocates such as Lloyd Clarke, the father and grandfather of Hannah Clarke and her three children who, as we have heard today, were killed in horrific circumstances at the hands of a monster. The work that organisations such as those I met with last week on the Sunshine Coast is invaluable.

At the event we heard from a cause that is close to my heart, DV Safe Phone. Ashton Wood founded that charity organisation. He is a Buderim resident. So far they have collected 6,000 phones, which are cleaned, repaired and then given to women in domestic violence situations so that they can call for help and get themselves and their children to a place of safety. It is a tremendous organisation. I am proud that my office was one of the first to start collecting phones for Ashton.

The organisation was born out of COVID. Ashton cleaned up his house and had a carload of stuff to take to the op-shop. However, we had a lockdown so he was left with a car full of stuff that he did not know what to do with. He rang a police officer who works in the child safety space who said, 'Mate, to be honest, we don't need all of your old stuff from the house. It's nice of you, but what we really need is mobile phones.' Ashton then made it his mission to set up this organisation. They have partnered with Lloyd and Sue Clarke to ensure that their service is rolled out more broadly across Queensland and Australia.

If members of parliament are so minded, I would encourage them all to set up a DV Safe Phone collection point in their offices. It is very simple: people come in and drop a mobile phone into the box, which can be dropped at any Jeep dealership from where they will be given to DV Safe Phone.

On the Sunshine Coast, foster-care services such as IFYS are under extreme pressure yet our staff and carers continue to operate to protect displaced children right across the coast. Across Queensland we hear of children pleading to stay with their long-term foster carers but too frequently, in

my view, they are taken away from their foster carers and reunited with their families, placing them in what may be unsafe situations. That is why I think it is important that we recognise that children deserve to have their voices heard. Their opinions and emotions need to be taken into account. Too frequently we discount the views of young people in relation to some of these issues.

My wife and I are the proud parents of four young kids. We know that they are very privileged to have every opportunity in life and that they are the lucky ones. As representatives of the state we need to do more to ensure that fewer children fall through the cracks in that regard. I will support anything we can do to reinforce children's rights in the legislative framework, to ensure that information sharing is streamlined and to improve care for children because every child deserves a childhood and a bright future.