




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR NINDERRY

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CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr PURDIE** (Ninderry—LNP) (12.53 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021, which seeks to improve welfare outcomes for children in care. There are some 12,000 children in the care of the Queensland government and 1,300 live in residential care. This is an enormous responsibility and should be the government's highest priority. Each of those children has a voice that deserves to be heard. Each of those children has a right to be protected from harm. Each one has the right not only to survive but also to thrive. It is equally important that those children be aware of their rights as determined by the Human Rights Act and be supported and equipped to fight for them.

This bill responds to a number of high-level reforms required to fix this government's broken system. It seeks to do this by reinforcing children's rights in the legislative framework to include rights relating to culture, religion and language, fairness, respect, development of identity, personal belongings, play and recreational activities. It strengthens children's voices in decisions that affect them, ensuring there is customary and age-appropriate participation of children in care, and streamlining, clarifying and improving the regulation of care, including certifications and access to orders in other jurisdictions before approving blue card applications.

Firstly, I thank the members of the Community Support and Services Committee for their detailed consideration of the bill and the 18 submitters and attendees at the public hearings in North and Far North Queensland for their contributions. The proposed amendments in this bill form part of Labor's 10-year Supporting Families Changing Futures reform program and is a response to the *Rethinking rights and regulations: towards a stronger framework for protecting children and supporting families* discussion paper that was released for public comment three years ago. Ten years is an unacceptably long time just to get the basics right and taking three years to respond to a discussion paper is indicative of the lack of priority this government gives to protecting our children.

Nearly two years ago I stood in this place and spoke on the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020, during which I paid tribute to toddler Mason Jett Lee and the 15 other Queensland children known to the department of child safety at that time who had lost their lives at the hands of their abusers. An agonising four long years after the damning review into the role that the department played in Mason's death was made public, the Queensland Child Death Review Board was established in 2020 to be an external viewpoint. Again, four years is an unacceptably long time to improve oversight of the failing systems in place when children are dying from preventable deaths.


Released in February, the board's first annual report into the deaths of dozens of children known to Queensland's child safety department warns that entrenched systemic issues are impacting the speed and quality of help available. The report revealed that more than one in 10 of the 398 youths who died in Queensland last financial year had been known to the department in the 12 months before their deaths. Nine died as a result of assault or neglect and eight from suicide. Even more alarming, between 2015 and 2020, 71 per cent of deaths by fatal assault or neglect were of children known to the child safety department compared to only 29 per cent not known to them.

According to the Child Death Review Board, children known to the department of child safety unit have a mortality rate almost twice as high as other children. The board's chair spoke of workload pressures, resource constraints and the overrepresentation of First Nations children, making up 23 of the 55 deaths and almost half of the suicides. With regard to this alarming statistic, section 5B of the bill embeds all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in legislation, which include prevention, partnership, placement, participation and connection. Pleasingly, these provisions to strengthen the consideration of those placement principles from simply 'having regard' to the principles to making 'active efforts' to implement the principle, which is an important step towards addressing the overrepresentation of First Nations people in the child safety statistics that I mentioned earlier. On the matter of suicide rates, as an insight into the department's failures the report commanded the department to explain why suicide risk management plans had not been developed for 60 per cent of eligible young people. Above all else, child protection is about preventing child harm and deaths.

The amendments to the Child Protection Act contained in the bill that give children a stronger voice in the management of their care is welcomed. However, for this to be more than just hot air and spin by the government, it is essential that children and young people are meaningfully supported through the often traumatic decision-making process. Extra effort and support must be put in place for those children who have experienced negative long-term interactions with officials and are extremely sceptical of genuine change. You can change the narrative but, if the people are all the same and their histories cannot be erased, the job is a lot more than aspirational words on paper.

The bill makes priority amendments to the Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000. The policy objectives of these amendments are in line with the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and, as such, should be enacted as swiftly as possible to ensure the safety of all children.

The majority of stakeholders that submitted to the committee were broadly in favour of the bill and its intent to increase a child's ability to be heard and improve their participation in their own care plans. The majority of concerns related to the importance of carefully managing and sharing domestic violence information so that practical implications and consequences are considered at the same time, noting that a DVO is not evidence that a criminal offence has been committed. The QFCC stated that the existence of a domestic violence protection order, which will affect the respondent's blue card status and their ability to obtain and maintain employment, may provide added barriers for women to report domestic violence and seek protection through domestic violence orders. Creating another barrier for women who are trying to leave abusive relationships is counterproductive to ending violence in the home.

 **Mr PURDIE** (Ninderry—LNP) (2.57 pm), continuing: The LNP is committed to protecting all children, especially those who cannot speak for themselves, no matter their economic background, gender or where they live. The need to empower children and support them in navigating their journey through care is paramount. How many heartbreaking stories do we hear of children pleading to be kept with their long-term foster families only to be forced to reunify with their biological family and placed in an unsafe situation such as parents using drugs, domestic and family violence including physical and sexual abuse, and guardians unwilling or unable to protect the child from harm?

In almost a quarter of the cases reviewed by the Child Death Review Board, cumulative harm was not recognised or responded to appropriately by the department. How can the department truly engage in the child's protection if history keeps repeating itself, each time further damaging the child on every level of their being and limiting their futures? Only a few weeks ago a former child safety officer blew the whistle on the terrible practices happening in Townsville and the disastrous outcomes for a young child.

The former departmental employee said that there had been a tenfold increase in carers' complaints about deteriorating workplace culture in the department. When we run out of carers, hope ceases to exist for many children. Carers are the department's right hand; it is a no-brainer to respect and look after them.

So much more needs to be done to improve the system that predicts the future of so many young lives. Sadly, under Labor, Queensland's child safety system and standards are at great risk of remaining unacceptably low. Those opposite must act now—not when they get around to it in another three, four or 10 years. I commend the bill to the House.