




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

Record of Proceedings, 21 February 2023

WORKING WITH CHILDREN (INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (5.29 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

Here we are some 10 years after I first addressed the issue of the blue card, and this is the third time I have presented to the parliament on the Working with Children (Indigenous Communities) Amendment Bill. It has been voted down twice previously by both LNP and Labor. We are still here, for a good reason. We have discussed this thoroughly as a priority for our party each election because we are about trying to solve issues in this place and trying to work with the parliament through the laws of the state to address the issues as they are presented to us in the electorate. Unquestionably, one of the great issues we are facing in the north at the moment is the struggle in our First Nations communities with social disruption, alcoholism and things that go with it. There are some terrible injustices there. Those are not my words, those are the words of the committee chair who I felt was quite accurate. I will read a paragraph from the chair's foreword, reflecting on the committee, saying—

We also heard how the chronic housing shortage in these remote communities and negative Blue Card notices are contributing to social displacement and impeding kinship care arrangements. Our inquiries revealed manifest disadvantage, including that negative notices impact not only individual families but the wider community by disconnecting young people from family, country, language and culture. This disconnect is a modern day injustice, with a haunting reminder of other times in our history when First Nations people were separated from family and country against their wishes. We have to do better.

Indeed. We have to do better as a parliament. As a crossbench, we should be doing better. I wish I had thought of better ways to push this bill, but we have to do better for these people. They are struggling in these communities.

I do not have a lot of answers, but this one was thrown in my lap. It was not my idea; it was presented to me by Mornington Island Justice Group. I can give you the names, but it was about 10 years ago. They said, 'We've just got a problem.' That was compounded. Members will probably find themselves that once you start talking about an issue and presenting it and people see that you can help them with it, you become a lightning rod for that, and you will have more and more. We have found through our offices that there is a revolving door of people who are not asking for but pleading for help. They are in a sea of misery. They are trying to climb out of this hole. The first thing we present to them when they are trying to tidy up their life and present to work is this bureaucratic hurdle. It is there for a reason, we acknowledge that; of course it is. There are many things we have encountered now and have introduced with the best intentions and they have played a role—they certainly have—but you have to look at things on balance.

There are many fables and stories about people becoming so safety conscious that the activity itself that you set out to help with discontinues to exist because you try to mitigate the risks so much that you make the whole activity invalid in the end, and that is what we are approaching here. The whole point of what you are setting out to do is to protect the kids. We would strongly argue that one of the best ways to protect the kids is to repair these family environments. One of the most critical elements in repairing a family environment is to address the chronic alcoholism and those types of habits through

meaningful work. One of the greatest things you can offer men and women in those communities is hope and meaningful work. What comes through time and time again, through our interactions in these communities, is 'Give us an opportunity to work.'

I can scarcely say I have ever had anyone in Doomadgee or Mornington say, 'Hey, Rob, can you make sure I get more money in my pay? I want more cash to spend.' However, what I do get time and time again is, 'Rob, how come that fella there has got the job? How come us locals haven't got the job?' Usually there is a pretty good answer to that: they cannot get their blue card. You may ask, 'What is the problem, are they going for nursing jobs or schoolteacher jobs?' No, the sewerage worker at Kowanyama could not get a job because he could not get a blue card. He had trouble maintaining his job because he could not get a blue card. I spoke to a leader of Indigenous rangers the other day who shook his head and said, 'Don't talk to me about blue cards. I had two young blokes who we recruited, they were going well, but a critical part of our activities is fires and burning'—he had to get the rural fire certificate, I think it is called. Whatever it was required a blue card. Bang, they are out. That is another horror story. There are compounding issues of this one element. We will address further how this bill will impact and how we mitigate these perceived risks around the kids, but I am just trying to paint a picture of how pervasive this problem is.

The intent of the bill remains largely the same as before, but I think it has been a while, so we need to go over it again. The way it operates in those First Australian communities, we would argue, is that there is currently no mechanism to allow the local community to have adequate impact into the issuing of blue cards for that community. There is no mechanism that exists that recognises behavioural improvements from the positive impact of employment. There could be a provisional card given to someone who is going really well which is, I believe, how they approach it in the Northern Territory. There are positive impacts on the community if they do get it.

The current application process has no set time frame. The time frame for the issuing of a blue card is almost as big an issue in itself, and that creates a significant barrier to marrying it up with the employment time lines. The current application process does not allow an applicant to undertake work during the application process. Even if it is determined—and this has happened so often—that the individual poses no risk eventually, often that job has gone, and they have moved on as well perhaps psychologically; they have moved onto another place which often is not positive.

Mr Dametto: Regressed.

Mr KATTER: Regressed, as the member for Hinchinbrook said. Some of the statistics that we should be mindful of which I do not believe have been highlighted throughout the committee process is that people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders account for five per cent of total blue card applicants, but they make up 22 per cent of rejected applicants. Unemployment in these communities: Doomadgee, 17.6 per cent; Kowanyama, 40.6 per cent; Palm Island, around 10 per cent; Mornington Island, 13.5 per cent; and Yarrabah, 37 per cent. The Queensland average is 3.7 per cent. We are getting an idea here of the really high unemployment rates. Most of the services are saying, 'We are screaming out for someone to do the job. We are desperate to get a local to be the teacher's aide or to be the gardener at the school.' There is an obvious disconnect there. The average household income in these communities is around \$65,000 per year versus the state average of \$87,000 per year.

Most of these jobs you can think of in these communities require a blue card. You might be working for QBAS as a builder, but you have to invariably go on site at a school or hospital. We talked about the sewerage work, but there is scarcely a job in those communities where you will not end up being somewhere at schools or hospitals. There is very little private industry. There is now a mechanic in Doomadgee and a roadhouse a bit out of town, but outside of that there is no other private employment. It is all government type jobs. Very rarely do positions become available that do not require the blue card.

Let's face facts: they are very violent communities. There are a lot of offences which we do not like to think about or reflect on, but they are very violent communities. I was acting witness for one of my constituents who was applying for a blue card and he told me how he assaulted someone seven times on the right shoulder with a boomerang and a number of times on the other shoulder with a boomerang. They said, 'Shouldn't that scare you that this person should get a blue card?' My response was that that is difficult for me to say because a confrontation for me is an argument over the fence over a bloke running his mower at night or such, but in Doomadgee, an argument is akin to some pretty violent altercations. It is commonplace. It is a terrible thing to say and acknowledge, but it is. So when you have this one-size-fits-all approach to the blue card, of course it is going to discriminate in these communities. It is not fit for purpose. The numbers are saying that in spades and the people are telling you that, but we seem to be stubbornly sitting down here saying, 'It has to be the same,' and—

(Time expired)

