




Speech By  
**Tim Nicholls**

**MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD**

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## **WORKING WITH CHILDREN (INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES) AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr NICHOLLS** (Clayfield—LNP) (5.48 pm): Disadvantage and disempowerment of remote and Indigenous communities is a very real and significant issue in Queensland as it is, I am sure, in many other parts of Australia. I can well remember my first visit to Palm Island as a newly minted member of the then Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee, LCARC, back in 2007 after the 2006 election. That committee, of which I was then the deputy chair, had been dispatched to consider the somewhat esoteric investigation into the participation of Indigenous communities in the electoral process as part of an annual review—important no doubt to understand what motivated people in remote, Indigenous and far-flung communities to take part in the democratic process.

Along with Palm Island, we visited communities near Cairns and Mount Isa. We spent time in each, and we visited elders and community representatives. Each had its separate issues and difficulties, and there was no denying that. Certainly participation in voting was not top of the pops when it came to the issues that they were dealing with. There were issues about housing; there were issues about employment and unemployment; there were issues about education. There were issues in relation to domestic violence and violence in the communities themselves, which all rated far more highly than participation in the electoral process, because worrying about who you are going to vote for when you are going hungry, when you do not have a roof over your head, where you are not sure where your kids are and where your kids are not sure where home is, is far more important in those communities. It was on Palm Island that the challenges faced by Indigenous communities were most apparent on that journey.

I take people back to the time that we arrived on Palm Island in early 2007, which was a relatively short time after the 2004 events that occurred on that island. We have seen the results of that play out for over a decade and a half since then. On arrival, we drove to the recently rebuilt community centre, because the old community centre had been burnt down in November of 2004. While on that short trip from the airstrip to the community centre, we witnessed two men. Those two men were fighting and fighting hard. They were fighting for the better part of 40 minutes and the island closed down. While that was obviously disturbing enough, it was the sight of large number of the community, including school children from Palm Island State School, barracking for one or other of the combatants on the roadways and the open spaces near the state school that stuck in my mind since that visit and highlights the challenges in that community, and I expect in other communities.

We have just heard the member for Traeger talk about the challenges up in Doomadgee in his part of the world. After that fight eventually ended we, of course, did meet with the elders and community representatives and others about the challenges. The clear issue that arose was the lack of purpose, and the lack of employment opportunities on that island and in the community. Again, this is not unique to Palm Island, but it is what I remember from my visit there.

With that in mind, we are very conscious of the aims of the member for Traeger and what he seeks to achieve, but the LNP cannot support the bill before us in the form that it is. While we understand and share the frustration and the concern of the member for Traeger, we are not satisfied that this bill will solve the issue and we think it may well have unintended consequences. I have listened to the member for Traeger. I listened to his speech here today and I have read his previous speeches. The member for Traeger, you must be sick of saying it, but we have heard it, the story of workers not being able to work for QBAS and others in the sewerage works. The member has put that evidence before the committee not just this time around, but in 2019 as well when he presented the bill previously. We acknowledge the passion and the perseverance that he brings. It is evident in the presentations he has given to the committee—not only for this bill, but in each of the previous two bills he has introduced over each of the last two parliaments.

He is representing a frustrated community where the current system is not working and the government is, once again, woefully slow to act. I listened to the Attorney-General who said, 'We need to do more and we need to do better.' I imagine the question that the member for Traeger has, and the members of his community have, is: but how much longer do we have to wait for you to do better? How much longer do we have to wait for you to do more, because this has been going on for far too long?

The report by the Queensland Family and Child Commission started in 2016 and reported out in June of 2017. Come this June, it will be six years. In April last year, when the committee was investigating this particular bill—if memory serves me—only 16 of the 81 recommendations of that report had been implemented in full. Some 16 out of 81 recommendations in a report that was made in 2017. In fact, the situation has become so bad that the committee—this is a committee across the parliament—in recommendation 6 calls on the government to accelerate implementation of the report *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: review of the blue card system*.

In particular, government should urgently progress work on recommendations 41, 43, 46 and 54.

We had a government which we know—we have seen evidence of this in the last 48 hours—is woefully slow to react. Too slow, and who pays the price? The community pays the price. Realistically, we should not have gotten to this point. Comments in the report itself show the frustration of stakeholders. It paints a picture of a system that falls short of meeting the needs of people and the organisations that interact with it. Organisations need more support and practical assistance. Members of the community do not fully understand the role of the WWCC, the working with children checks, in the broader system. ATSI people experience significant disadvantage at every stage of the process. Many withdraw from the process when they may have been successful if they had the right support.

The report from the committee is a condemnation of this Labor government's inaction over the last six years and the update from the Attorney-General's department sent to the committee in April last year that I mentioned previously, tells us that five years on from that report only 16 of the 81 recommendations have been completed in full. In her contribution today, the Attorney-General does not enlighten us any further about any more recommendations except for further vague promises which have been heard far too many times before.

The review identified the issues to be fixed—it was 240 pages long. It is not a case of not knowing. It is not a case of not having the material before it; it is a case of the government simply needing to do the job that it is elected to do. To the member for Traeger I say: we understand your frustration, we share your frustration. We understand the very good intentions behind bringing this bill to parliament and representing your constituency and taking their suggestions.

Unfortunately, this piece of legislation will not achieve that outcome. It will have unintended consequences but, perhaps more difficult, it will have consequences that may be only too readily foreseeable and that is in creating different categories of blue card licence and putting in place limitations and geographical boundaries. Those have very real problems, together with not complying with, or not meeting the expectations of the *Royal commission into the institutional responses to child sexual abuse*. Given the paramount obligation to protect children and the clear problems that are outlined in the report, as tempting as it may be, that path cannot be followed. Member for Traeger while we cannot agree, we support your intention and thank you for bringing this to the House.