




Speech By  
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**MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY**

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**CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS BILL; WORKING WITH CHILDREN (RISK MANAGEMENT AND SCREENING) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Ms CAMM** (Whitsunday—LNP) (11.51 am): I am pleased to rise to contribute to the cognate debate and will commence my comments with the Child Safe Organisations Bill 2024. Queensland's history of institutional child sexual abuse is a shameful part of our state's history which should never have happened, but unfortunately it has happened too often. The atrocities that vulnerable children were put through at the hands of those who were supposed to be the ones to care for them are unspeakable and at times unimaginable.

From 2012 to 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse heard the stories of many victim-survivors. While they are hard to hear, it is important that we listen and that we believe—and they are still important to ensure we do all we can, as legislators in this House, to put in place safeguards so it never happens again. The adults who told their stories have demonstrated courage, and it is clear that the actions of others while they were children will remain with them forever, altering their lives. Many of them never experienced a safe childhood, allowing them to be kids, or had it robbed from the first instance of abuse. A number of Queenslanders shared the impact that this abuse has had on their lives. One stated—

My inner being was cut to the core. My physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wellbeing was shattered.

Another spoke to the complex mental illness she carried into her adult life when she said—

For as long as I can remember I have been painfully sad, I have suffered from major depression all my life, post-traumatic stress, anorexia, debilitating anxiety, panic attacks ... self-harming, sexual dysfunction, confusion, traumatic nightmares, phantom body pain and general malaise.

These and many other victim-survivors bravely shared their stories in order to provide a better and safer future for all and in particular our next generation of Queensland children.

The recommendations of the royal commission were a pathway to protect our institutions and community from a repeat of the past. While far too many institutions have failed and betrayed our children in the past, it must be acknowledged the work that many have done to bring transparency and safety to their organisations now and into the future. Many have already taken the measures this bill introduces and will welcome these provisions. They have listened, admitted the mistakes of the past and made changes to prevent it from happening in the future. They have rightly taken on the costs to change infrastructure, systems and practices to protect children and limit the potential for predators to perpetrate offences against vulnerable children. It will not take away the pain of victim-survivors and what they endure each day. We know that nothing can do that. However, if change is genuinely instituted, at least there is hope for a better future.

It would be good if we had seen the same attitude from this government in the past decade. Once again, it has dragged its feet, dishonouring victims who have stood up for change. There was a purpose to the royal commission, and by neglecting the changes recommended this government has reduced it

to another report that sits gathering dust on the shelf, ever waiting for a government to act. Victims stood up for justice and change and this government continues to make them wait. In 2017 the final reports were handed down. There were 317 recommendations directed at the Queensland government. Some 97 of those were outstanding by the fifth annual implementation report in December 2022. Over 30 per cent were still not implemented.

Recommendations around child safe standards and a reportable conduct scheme have been among those the sector has been waiting for, with many organisations informally implementing them. In 2021 a consultation draft was issued—three years ago—and we heard nothing after that. Until a horrific case was reported in the media last year, there had been no real progress. Other bodies like the Queensland Family and Child Commission were calling on the government to introduce these changes. In its policy submission to the regulatory impact statement, the QFCC stated—

The QFCC acknowledges the work undertaken by the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Service and the Department of Justice and Attorney General to analyse and develop the Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement ... however, five years has passed since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Exploitation of Children recommended these schemes, and Queensland has fallen behind other Australian states and territories in establishing these protections.

In Queensland, we do not have a coordinated system that oversees the people who pose a risk to children nor a system that advocates for prompt and united action to build systems that protect children. Our Blue Card scheme is only effective against people who have been caught. In New South Wales ... the Office of the Children's Guardian responded to 1,531 complaints about individuals in 2021-22. In Victoria the number of allegations reported to the Commission for Children and Young People was 2,898. It is likely that there is a commensurate number of concerning cases in Queensland that warrant our attention.

It is time for Queensland to commence implementing both schemes, and there is no reason why they cannot be fully legislated within the current term of Parliament.

As a key body for children and young people, the QFCC would welcome a role in the implementation of child safe standards and a reportable conduct scheme in Queensland.

Queensland has fallen behind other states and territories in this critical area, as it has with all numbers in child safety. How is it that the safety and protection of children does not matter to this state government? We are now seven years on from a royal commission and it should not have taken this long to get here. The LNP welcomes the changes and we will support them throughout the debate. They are the right changes we need to increase the safety of children in the organisations they interact with, but they are long overdue.

The child safe standards and the recommendations around these standards are important. The standards include that child safety is embedded in institutional leadership, governance and culture; children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously; families and communities are informed and involved; equity is upheld and diverse needs are taken into account; people working with children are suitable and supported; processes to respond to complaints of child sexual abuse are child focused; staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training; physical and online environments minimise the opportunity for abuse to occur; implementation of the child safe standards is continuously reviewed and improved and not left on the shelf with time lagging; and policies and procedures document how the institution is child safe and checking annual reports on progress.

These standards are principle based so they can be adapted to various organisations across our diverse state. With this basis, organisations can assess how they can best protect children and minimise the risk of harm, from providing education on child safe practices to ensuring doors have windows in them to reduce hidden sections of facilities. I know that many organisations have already implemented these standards and are doing all they can to mitigate risk. Having the standards legislated will increase education and awareness and provide prevention to ensure any organisations that have yet to take this on board do so. There will be some considerable cost to those organisations that are yet to implement the standards and they may need support to implement them effectively. It will be important for the department to work with those organisations to ensure outcomes are reached.

The reportable conduct scheme is very important. The royal commission found systemic issues with institutions when it came to responding to complaints. There needs to be a scheme in which people can raise complaints and concerns, and a reportable conduct scheme will achieve that. In early 2017, in their response to the royal commission the government released a public discussion paper on reportable conduct schemes. The government said, 'The establishment of a reportable conduct scheme is a priority for Queensland.' They also said 'as a priority, continue to work with stakeholders and with other states that have schemes to finalise a Queensland reportable conduct scheme'. That was 2017. It is unacceptable that it has taken this long. The work to finalise the scheme has taken seven years, so clearly when Labor say something is a priority in Queensland we know that it will mean years before they act.

The royal commission recommended a reportable conduct scheme include: an independent oversight body; obligatory reporting by heads of institutions; a definition of 'reportable conduct' that covers any sexual offence or sexual misconduct committed against, with or in the presence of a child; a definition of 'reportable conduct' that includes the historical conduct of a current employee; a definition of 'employee' that covers paid employees, volunteers and contractors; and protection for persons who make reports in good faith. It also includes oversight body powers and functions that include: scrutinising institutional systems for preventing reportable conduct and for handling and responding to reportable allegations or reportable convictions; monitoring the progress of investigations and the handling of complaints by institutions; conducting, on its own motion, investigations concerning any reportable conduct of which it has been notified or otherwise becomes aware; the power to exempt any class or kind of conduct from being reportable conduct; capacity building and practice development through the provision of training, education and guidance to institutions; and public reporting including annual reporting on the operation of the scheme and trends in reports and investigations, and the power to make special reports to parliament.

The reportable conduct scheme will add another layer of protection where complaints can be raised, investigated and recorded. The royal commission also demonstrated the interconnection between the scheme and child safety organisations. It stated—

The creation of a child safe environment requires vigilance and necessitates paying attention to systemic issues. A complaint of child sexual abuse could indicate wider systemic child safety issues within an institution, or that there may be deficiencies in its child safe approach.

Never has that been more pertinent given what communities across the state are feeling and given what many families have been observing with a case before the courts.

We welcome the expanded role of the QFCC and the related increase in investment. The QFCC will provide oversight to the schemes by both providing some education to the public and the sector and also administering, monitoring and enforcing compliance. It is right to have this body look over the schemes given that they have been advocating for them for so long. I know that they will welcome it.

I turn to the Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2014. The proposed changes to the blue card system are another case of a seven-year-old report that has sat dormant and this Labor government is now desperately playing catch-up to look as if they are getting the job done in the dying days of this term. Following the tragic death of Tiahleigh Palmer, the QFCC published the report *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: review of the blue card system*. That review was commissioned by the government. However, once again they forgot that when you receive the report of a review you have to put it into practice. On the release of the report, the government released a media statement which stated—

My government has had the courage to take a detailed look at how we can keep children safer and the fortitude to follow through on the recommendations in these reports.

This government does not have a demonstrated record of keeping Queensland kids safe and has not prioritised those recommendations. It is not good enough to request a report, do some media, release it and then forget about it. It must be followed through and there must be accountability to deliver work for change. Last year it was revealed that out of 81 recommendations only 28 had been completed. That is the disgraceful record of those opposite. The Blue Card System Review Implementation Reference Group stopped meeting after April 2022 and was not reconvened until September 2023, a month after blue cards were back in media headlines. Time and time again, the priority of this government appears to be protecting their own image rather than protecting Queensland kids. The website now states that 52 recommendations have been completed. There is a reason we have a blue card system, and to treat it as anything other than a high priority to protect our most vulnerable is unforgivable.

The bill introduces a new decision-making framework, simplifies the disqualification framework and provides the chief executive with discretion to impose a suspension when there is a change in assessable information and the chief executive considers the person would pose a risk to the safety of children if the person was permitted to engage in regulated employment or to carry on a regulated business pending the reassessment. It enables the chief executive to seek the specialist knowledge, skills or experience considered necessary to help with making a decision in relation to blue card applications. It makes risk assessment guidelines a statutory instrument; includes new categories of regulated employment and regulated businesses, which includes removing the exemption for lawyers; provides a consistent exemption for parent volunteers; provides the chief executive with a new power to facilitate compliance with the working with children act; and enables genuine researchers to access data about the blue card system for improved research purposes.

For many years the removal of the blue card requirement for kinship carers has been called for by the sector, by family and carers and also by many in this House. Stories from around the state of children being unable to stay with kin due to unrelated offending that occurred many years ago are heartbreaking. Children have been separated from their families and their connection to community and to culture. In some areas, that has led to devastating outcomes for those children resulting in disconnection, mental health and, even worse, suicide.

We do approach this with caution, acknowledging that a rigorous system must ensure checks are still in place for this cohort of carers and that must be consistently monitored to ensure children's safety is at the forefront. However, where those checks are conducted and a home is deemed safe, the increase in kin carer numbers will be welcomed. Given the reducing number of foster carers across the sector, we need to do everything we can to recruit and retain our kin carers. Kin carers need support, they need investment, they need respect and they need appreciation. As I have travelled the state it has become clear that that has not always been the case under the current government policy. If we are to increase the number of kin carers then we need to do things differently.

Today, in question time, was the first time I had actually heard the minister receive a question related to her portfolio of child safety. Our child safety system is under increasing pressure and is at breaking point under this government. Over this term, I have had the honour of serving as the shadow minister for child protection and I have spent the last four years listening to foster families, kinship carers, families, service providers, peak bodies and, most importantly, Queensland kids. Meanwhile, three ministers have cycled through this portfolio. We wonder why it takes years and years to get reform!

This is how much young Queenslanders mean to the Labor government. Those opposite pay lip-service regarding child safety officers. It is the child safety officers who have bravely come forward to me and, off the record, shared that they are at breaking point with their case loads and not being able to investigate serious allegations of harm. They feel that they have been let down by this Labor government.

This minister can barely get up to speed across the portfolio and has given no clear direction to the department for the changes that are needed. This has been recognised by me and others in the last 12 months. Foster carers are leaving at a rapid pace. Residential care has grown 105 per cent in the last five years. The residential care review, commissioned over 12 months ago, served seemingly no purpose to this government. The main priority of that review was to look at under-12s. Not once in that final document, apart from in the terms of reference, were under-12s even mentioned. Now we have this very important legislation, yet there is no focus on those children who are being cared for by residential care providers.

This is the most comprehensive policy put forward by an opposition or government to reform the system and, quite frankly, it was disgraceful to hear the minister in question time today insulting the residential care providers that are picking up the slack from the failures of this government. There is no place for toilet humour in this parliament. While the road map discussed different options, no additional funding was provided so the changes have not been prioritised. We have more children than ever—almost 2,000—in residential care under this state government. That is not a proud record.

I want to acknowledge the work of the committees with regard to some of the content of these reforms. Many of us in the House are confronted each and every day with the tragic circumstances that children have endured across this state when the system has failed them or when somebody they trust has failed them. I would also like to acknowledge the work and advocacy of the QFCC in bringing forward these reforms and ensuring they are implemented appropriately.

The LNP have a plan for safer children and safer communities. We have answered the calls from the sector and will take the steps that are needed. We are listening and we are committed to continuing to listen and continuing to act. The LNP are committed to making our community safer and will keep fighting for that. Today, the Leader of the Opposition committed to a major inquiry, if elected, into the recent child protection failures that we have seen in our community. We have a plan to protect Queensland kids. We have the right plan for Queensland's future and the next generation of Queensland kids. We need to change the government, and Queenslanders can do that on 26 October.