



Speech by

RACHEL NOLAN

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

Hansard 23 October 2002

CHILD CARE BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (3.20 p.m.): The social acceptance of child care has become much more widespread in the last few years. It is not so long ago that women, such as my mother, who were at the forefront of women who were going back to work when they had children were made to feel bad for leaving the home and for leaving their children in the care of others. It is not so long ago that there was a very conservative view in our community that a woman's place—and particularly a mother's place—was in the home.

I am a big believer in child care. I believe that as part of, I guess, a multifaceted way of bringing up and caring for children, children who go to child care can gain better social skills than they would if they were simply at home with their mothers. They can gain, I guess, better intellectual development and better intellectual stimulation than they would if they were simply in the home. So I am a supporter of child care as one aspect of the good raising of children. It does not just give mothers the opportunity to work, to make their own choices and to make their own way in the world; it also gives children a real opportunity for intellectual and social development.

While our society's attitudes have changed enormously in the last 30 years or so since mothers started going back to work in a big way, there are still, sadly, some in the community who promote a very conservative view of the role of women. Sadly, I think the leader of that view is the current federal government which seems very intent on promoting the notion that women probably should be at home looking after their children.

I believe that one of the ways in which we can promote the importance of child care as part of good parenting is to develop a strong, well-regulated network of child-care centres in this state. The maintenance of high standards in child care is extremely important in maintaining the credibility of child care, in maintaining the safety of children and in promoting their development. At the same time it is important, of course, to maintain an economically viable industry. It seems particularly important now to have a good child care industry in the absence of genuine paid maternity leave in Australia.

The development of this bill has been a real balancing act, with the challenge being to develop a reasonably consistent and transparent regulatory regime across the diverse sectors of centre based care, family day care and the previously unregulated area of outside school hours care. Through the development of this legislation I have been involved in consultations with the outside school hours care providers and, more recently, the family day care providers. While the process of developing this legislation has been very lengthy, I am happy that both the minister and her department have made a genuine effort to be consultative and to talk to many people about this bill.

What I want to talk about today is the Queensland Child Care Strategic Plan 2000-2005 which has been the process through which the principles of this legislation have been developed. Choosing child care is one of the most critical decisions a family can make. This government has worked hard to make this decision easier by providing more flexible options, upgrading existing services and insisting on standards to improve our children's safety.

We know that the shape of family and community life has dramatically changed. Families are more mobile, isolated and smaller. Even in a regional area such as Ipswich we find that a lot of young people move away and, hence, do not have the support of extended families which is an important part of a traditional child care network.

Workplaces have changed: the way we work, the hours we work and what is needed to support families. These have all undergone significant change. The fact is that we can no longer presume that the support and systems that we had, or our parents had, will be what is needed or wanted by today's communities.

The availability of child care plays a significant role in supporting the work force participation of parents. Many parents, without outside assistance, would not be able to go to work each day, study, and take up training opportunities. It is estimated that child care and early education services, such as preschools and kindergartens, employ over 20,000 Queenslanders, with an estimated investment in infrastructure of over \$1.4 billion and a contribution to the state's economy of over \$350 million per annum. This represents a significant work force making a major contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of the state.

I guess the recent move to bring those child care services into the mainstream economy has been one of the biggest changes that we have seen in our economic structure in recent years. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that most parents work. Only about one-third of dependent children in couple families and half of those in lone parent families now have a stay-at-home parent. When the youngest child is one to two years old, 50 per cent of mothers are in the paid work force. This leaps to 68 per cent when the youngest child is aged three to four years. About two-thirds of employed mothers whose youngest child is aged between 0-4 years worked part-time in 2000. Increasing flexible working hours means that people are working longer, as the member for Bulimba said, and, just as importantly, are working outside standard working hours. For many families, both parents must work to earn a living wage, and that means unsociable working hours or unpaid overtime.

For all Queenslanders to enjoy a high standard of living, wherever they live, there are a number of things that we need to do with respect to child care. These include the need to: ensure that child care and early education services are of a high standard, supporting children's increasingly diverse and complex pathways of learning and development; ensure the delivery of integrated education, health and family support services that improve the quality of life of all Queenslanders; encourage employers to recognise and support the family needs of employees, so that employees' skills and knowledge are utilised to their full potential and are retained for the benefit of industry and business; promote family-friendly policies that support Queensland families; ensure that appropriate child care services are available to those who need them; acknowledge the direct contribution of the child care industry to both the economic and social strength of this state; and understand the importance of child care in facilitating work force, education and training participation, and understand how we can assist in reducing unemployment.

This government has responded to those challenges. In October 1999, the government launched the Queensland Child Care Strategic Plan 2000-2005. This plan identifies a vision, priorities and directions for child care over the five years to 2005 and is designed to reflect the dynamic and changing nature of Queensland, the needs of families and the child care industry. The vision of the plan is 'Child care—valuing children, supporting families, and contributing to the social and economic development of Queensland'. The plan identifies 12 principles. The first is that good quality child care and early education services which support parents in their child rearing, and children's development, are important investments for the future of our state. Children have the right to be cared for in safe environments in which they can learn and play. Child care services should support and address the changing needs and cultural features of families and communities. Parents with young children should be recognised as important contributors to the social and economic development of the state. Appropriate, flexible child care directly supports Queensland's social and economic development. All parents should be able to participate in paid employment and community life. Access to child care is vital to jobs and job security and economic and social mobility for Queenslanders. Cultural diversity provides both social and economic benefits to our state. Queensland parents should have access to services which meet their needs. Integrated service delivery is an important factor in the provision of quality child care services and contributes to the quality of life of Queenslanders. Regulatory efficiency contributes to quality, flexible and innovate child care services. Finally, collaborative relationships between government and stakeholders are vital to success.

A key step in this process is the development of a new regulatory framework that supports the provision of sustainable, high quality child care services which are sufficiently flexible to respond to the diverse and changing needs of families. Today we are debating the outcome of this key area with a bill which delivers these outcomes and which responds to the expressed feedback from parents and key stakeholders. It represents a strengthened regulatory framework for the provision of child care services. As I said earlier, the bill is the result of widespread and extensive consultation with stakeholders, the industry and parents. An exposure draft of the proposed new legislation was publicly released in 2001 for consultation. This followed extensive consultation with the sector and key stakeholders over the past two or three years. During this period there was widespread discussion about what was needed to deliver a regulatory framework for a modern child care industry.

I am pleased to say that this bill has been developed in recognition of the fact that the availability of good child care services is important to this state for both social and economic reasons. The bill has been drafted so as to ensure that our state has a responsive, high quality and sustainable child care system. I believe that the bill has managed to do that. I believe that it has managed to promote a system that working parents can have faith in so that they can go to work safe in the knowledge that their children are being well cared for. I believe that the bill intrinsically understands that child care can bring enormous benefits to young people, and I commend the bill to the House.
