



Speech by

RACHEL NOLAN

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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EVIDENCE [PROTECTION OF CHILDREN] AMENDMENT BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (2.54 p.m.): I, too, rise to speak briefly and also to add my strong and heartfelt support to this bill brought to the House by the Attorney-General. Other speakers who have preceded me have outlined the specific elements of the bill, and I do not wish to be repetitive. The crux of the bill aims to protect child witnesses to sexual abuse who come before our courts. The bill brings Queensland into line with national standards and it puts in place a range of measures which will make the courts more accessible and, hence, justice more accessible for young people who, very sadly and very horrifically, have experienced sexual abuse.

We can talk about this bill in isolation, and it certainly stands alone as worthy of support. But what is most important about this bill is that it is a part of a package of measures which this government has introduced to allow children to come forward to speak about the abuse that is occurring to them, to get justice and to be heard. One of the measures that came before this bill was the Forde inquiry, which this government instituted in 1998 shortly after being elected and which revealed some horrific instances of sexual and physical abuse of children in state-run institutions.

The Attorney-General has already brought in legislation that deals with paedophile networks. The serious violent offenders legislation that we debated in this House not long ago is helping us to keep serious violent sexual offenders—the kinds of people who prey on children—in jail. We have considerably increased the funding to the Families Department and, perhaps most importantly of all, we have put these issues on the public agenda. We are currently running an advertising campaign, which I note the opposition regarded as some kind of publicity stunt, to put these issues on the agenda, to say that we as a whole community must stop sexual abuse.

Sadly, child sex abuse is a fundamental result of the huge power imbalance that exists between adults and children. Sexual abuse of children is allowed to flourish only because offenders can be confident that their child victims will not speak up and, indeed, if they do they will not be believed and they will not be heard. So to describe a publicity campaign as some kind of publicity stunt from the government I think fundamentally misses the point of child sex abuse.

This government has been consistent in its dealing with these matters. We have consistently spoken up. We have consistently rejected those who have been found to be sexual abusers of children and we have consistently put in place measures both to protect children from having this happen to them and to protect children as witnesses when, sadly, abuse has occurred.

Ten years ago these issues were not on the agenda and there has been a lot of discussion in the community about how horrific it is that we see so much evidence of child sexual abuse these days. It has been suggested to me that a lot more sexual abuse seems to be going on now than perhaps there once was. The question of whether there is more sexual abuse of children now is a question which we will simply never be able to answer. How can we ever quantify the numbers of children who were abused in state-run institutions, who were abused by churches and who were abused in their families? How can we begin to count the number of people who walk around in our community now and still bear the scars of that abuse but find it impossible to come forward and too embarrassing and too hurtful to speak of?

A very good friend of mine who grew up in a church-run home suggested to me recently that things are much worse now than they used to be. As I spoke to her I recalled a book I had read some years ago—Bill Hayden's autobiography. In his autobiography he recalls growing up in South Brisbane, I imagine around the forties. He makes only a passing reference to a dirty old man who used to hang around in South Brisbane. This fellow seemed to think that he had the right to prey upon little children.

It seems that this character did this perhaps with the knowledge of some children like Bill in the community, but nothing was ever said and nothing was ever done. I think the best we can do is put these issues on the agenda, speak about them openly and protect the children who do come forward. That is what this bill is about, and I very sincerely commend it to the House.