



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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CARERS (RECOGNITION) AMENDMENT BILL AND SENIORS RECOGNITION (GRANDPARENTS PROVIDING CARE) BILL

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—LNP) (8.26 pm): I am pleased to rise in support of the Seniors Recognition (Grandparents Providing Care) Bill 2010, which was introduced by the shadow minister for community services and housing and the shadow minister for women, the honourable member for Burdekin, on 10 March 2010. As members are aware, this bill will be a cognate debate with the government's bill, the Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill 2010, which was introduced into the House on 8 June 2010 by the Minister for Disability Services and Multicultural Affairs.

I note this bill resonates in many ways with the LNP's bill and is a clear indication that this Labor government expects the LNP to pave the way with good policy and then mould it to suit themselves—in this case three months later. Honourable members heard earlier this evening from the honourable member for Hinchinbrook, the shadow minister for disability services, who elucidated very clearly the facts and the history that preceded this bill. Indeed, the LNP has been the leader when it comes to developing policies which recognise the efforts of carers, seniors and grandparents. Honourable members of this House are reminded that it was the LNP, and notably the honourable member for Burdekin, who introduced the Carers (Recognition) Bill 2008. The bill was passed with unanimous bipartisan support, albeit only after the government moved its own amendments. Subsequently, the government's amendments removed the requirement to consult with carers and consult the Carers Charter when making decisions that affect carers, which significantly weakened the original intent of the bill. The LNP's bill before the House today intends to reinstate the elements of consideration and consultation that carers have been denied by Labor.

As members have heard from the shadow minister, the contribution that our seniors make to society is immeasurable. This private member's bill seeks to acknowledge and protect the increasing number of grandparents who have the challenging task of caring for their grandchildren in a primary capacity. The passage of this bill would see Queensland become the first state in Australia to legislatively recognise grandparent carers to this degree.

Specifically, this bill aims to establish the Grandparent Carers Charter which sets out the contributions of grandparents providing care, the importance of consideration of grandparents in decision making and the unique place they hold in our community. It will implement a legislative framework that recognises the contribution of grandparents who provide care for their grandchildren and provide a mechanism to allow this recognition to be used as part of a decision-making process ensuring that such a framework will assist decision making by authorities that directly affect grandparents providing care for their grandchildren.

Grandparents raising grandchildren usually fall into one of three categories: those who have their grandchildren placed with them by the Queensland child protection authorities, those who have gone through the federal Family Law Court and have what used to be called residency orders, and those who just step up to the mark and protect their grandchildren without any legal backing at all. The bill before us, the Seniors Recognition (Grandparents Providing Care) Bill 2010, covers all of those categories.

There are many reasons grandparents can become primary carers for their grandchildren. The death of one or both parents, substance abuse, incarceration, poverty, domestic violence or neglect—the list is exhaustive. Regardless of the reason, it is fair to say that children are traumatised and it creates varying grades of distress for grandparents and other family members. Estimated figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2003 put the number of grandparent carer families in Australia at 22,500, encompassing one per cent of all families and approximately 31,000 children. Australian Bureau of Statistics data estimated that this number had decreased to 14,000 families in 2006-07. However, data is prefaced by a statement admitting the difficulties in capturing the changing complexity of Australian families are often beyond the scope of what the census is able to achieve. Therefore, we can quite properly surmise that those figures are modest and the situation of grandparents as primary carers is considerably higher.

An email sent to members of parliament on 11 September this year by the Council of Grandparents, which is based on the Gold Coast, states—

Those with no formal orders are the most disadvantaged section of grandparents we represent. They are scared and frightened to come forward for assistance of any kind for fear the parents, or agencies, may take their precious grandchildren away.

A shocking case from earlier this year highlighted the severe lack of common sense that the government has in relation to children needing care. In February, 68-year-old Brisbane grandmother Marlene Baker was told by the department of child safety that she was too old to care for her own grandchildren. The children, aged two and four, had lived with their grandmother and aunt for most of their lives. When the aunt was no longer able to cope they were placed in foster care, despite their grandmother being a willing carer. Anguish and heartbreak ensued for both the children and their grandmother. That outrageous decision has proved once again that the government is out of touch with the best interests of the child. Age is of little importance when considering the unique relationship that exists between grandparents and grandchildren, especially when we consider that grandparent carers can be in their 30s and great-grandparents can be in their 90s.

This bill proposes to establish the Grandparent Carers Charter for the state to recognise and respect grandparents who provide full-time care to their grandchildren. Such a charter would be separate to the existing Queensland Carers Charter, established under the Carers Recognition Act 2008, as the definition of 'carer' under that act does not cover the majority of grandparents providing full-time care for their grandchildren. Grandparent carers are unlike any other and, as such, deserve independent recognition that reflects and supports their unique situation. The underlying principles of the Grandparent Carers Charter ensure that the views of grandparent carers are acknowledged and supported by all levels of government. This bill provides long-overdue recognition for a group in society that is so often ignored.

Unquestionably, the onus of caring for one's grandchildren can put many grandparents in a precarious financial position. An article published in 2007 in the *Australian Journal of Social Issues* highlighted the limited financial situation of grandparents who provide care as a labour of love. The Australian Bureau of Statistics data revealed that around two-thirds of all grandparent carers are reliant on a government pension or allowance, which is an indication that low-income and strained resources are likely to shape their caregiving. Indeed, in many cases grandparent carers are seniors, potentially past retirement age and with limited working time left to recoup the costs associated with child raising. With cost-of-living pressures rising so substantially under this long-term Labor government, those finding themselves in this thankless situation undoubtedly will face even greater financial hardship five years on. But where is the Bligh government when people are in need? Offering up the cheapest form of public sentiment, a Grandparents Day, and a pat on the back do not go far enough to support those faced with the costs of raising a child.

The LNP bill provides a legislative framework to ensure that when decisions are made by authorities that directly affect grandparent carers or their grandchildren they are consistent with the principles of the Grandparent Carers Charter. To this end, the bill stipulates that a decision maker is required to issue a notice to senior carer bodies outlining the details of the decision and inviting submissions within at least 20 business days from the issuance of the notice. Those submissions must then be considered by the decision maker.

As mentioned by my LNP colleagues, the government's Carers (Recognition) Amendment Bill 2010 falls short of addressing the real needs of grandparent carers. While offering some recognition, Labor's bill stifles the specific and unique circumstances that frame caregiving by grandparents. This government is proposing to lump legislation relating to grandparents in with legislation designed for those providing care for the aged, disabled or chronically ill. Let me make it transparently clear that in no way does my statement devalue the role of carers who provide dedicated care to those in need. Instead, I am pointing out that the relationship for grandparents who are placed in the position of raising their grandchildren is unique and should be recognised as such.

In 2008 members of this House made history, showing bipartisan support for the Carers Recognition Act, which was the first piece of opposition legislation ever passed by a Labor government in Queensland.

Now Labor is back to playing its political games, essentially copying the private member's bill to avoid conceding to the LNP's highly regarded policy on the recognition of grandparent carers.

There are a number of grandparent organisations across Queensland, and particularly on the Gold Coast, that deserve recognition in light of the legislation before us. I wish to acknowledge the Queensland Council of Grandparents, which is based on the Gold Coast, and Maree Newman from GAGS, the Grandparents and Grandchildren Society, for their tireless efforts to promote awareness of the issues and hardships faced by grandparent carers.

Tonight we have an opportunity, through the LNP Seniors Recognition (Grandparents Providing Care) Bill to ensure that grandparent carers are treated with the respect and importance that they deserve. They have a critical role to play in keeping families functioning and in touch with their roots, providing a loving environment for children who are their own flesh and blood so that they can grow into wholesome and balanced adults in circumstances where they may otherwise not have that chance. I urge all honourable members to support the LNP's bill.