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Madam Speaker Lambley took the Chair at 10 am.

MESSAGE FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR
Message No 17 – Assent to Bills Passed in June 2026

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I have received Message Number 17 from His Honour the Administrator notifying assent to the Bills passed in the June meeting of the Assembly. The message is dated 1 July 2026.

VISITOR
Aiden Burke

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I acknowledge Aiden Burke, the Chief Minister's uncle-in-law, in the gallery. Welcome to parliament.

Members: Hear, hear!

SPEAKER'S STATEMENT
Standing and Sessional Orders

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, pursuant to the resolution of the Assembly to adopt the Standing Orders Committee report tabled on 11 March 2026, revised standing and sessional orders come into effect today.

PAPERS TABLED
Legislative Scrutiny Committee Report on the Inquiry into the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

Mrs CARLSON (Chair of Legislative Scrutiny Committee): Madam Speaker, I table the Legislative Scrutiny Committee report, Inquiry into the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026, and the associated minutes of proceedings. Pursuant to Standing Order 200(4), the report was sent to the Speaker and made public on 8 July 2026.

This report details the committee's findings regarding its examination of the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

The Bill seeks to amend the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* and related legislation to prioritise safety in decision-making and introduce a stepped escalation model for early intervention support, including a new proactive efforts framework and family responsibility arrangements. In addition, the Bill seeks to amend the working with children clearance framework to align with the national reform agenda.

The committee received 150 submissions and held one public briefing and two public hearings with 38 witnesses from 16 organisations.

Although stakeholders to the inquiry generally agreed that ensuring the safety of children is paramount, many submitters and witnesses opposed the Bill as currently drafted, sought clarification regarding its intended operation or made recommendations to amend the Bill. The committee sought clarification from the Department of Children and Families regarding many of these issues. On balance, the committee considers that the department's responses adequately addressed the issues raised by those stakeholders. However, to ensure the intention of the provisions is sufficiently clear to families, practitioners and courts, the committee has made a number of recommendations for how the provisions could be clarified.

Following examination of the Bill and consideration of the evidence received, the majority view of the committee is that the Assembly should pass the Bill with the proposed amendment set out in recommendation 4. Recommendation 4 proposes a legislative note to clarify that the CEO's obligations under the proactive efforts framework interact with existing obligations under section 42(4) of the *Care and Protection of Children Act*.

To accompany this amendment, recommendation 5 proposes that the department implement measures to enable families to understand their rights and obligations regarding proactive efforts made by the CEO.

Additionally, as set out in recommendations 2, 3 and 6, the committee proposes that a supplementary explanatory statement be tabled, clarifying the intended operation of provisions relating to the threshold for

removing a child from their home and the application of the underlying principles of the *Care and Protection of Children Act*.

On behalf of the committee, I thank all who provided submissions or appeared before the committee. The committee also thanks the Department of Children and Families staff who briefed the committee and provided comprehensive responses to written questions.

I also thank my fellow committee members for their bipartisan commitment to the legislative review process.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Legislative Scrutiny Committee Report on Inquiry into the Attorney-General Legislation Amendment (Boards, Committees and Statutory Offices) Bill 2026

Mrs CARLSON (Chair of Legislative Scrutiny Committee): Madam Speaker, I table the Legislative Scrutiny Committee report, Inquiry into the Attorney-General Legislation Amendment (Boards, Committees and Statutory Offices) Bill 2026, and the associated minutes of proceedings. Pursuant to Standing Order 200(4), the report was sent to the Speaker and made public on 8 July 2026.

This report details the committee's findings regarding its consideration of the Attorney-General Legislation Amendment (Boards, Committees and Statutory Offices) Bill 2026.

The Bill seeks to amend the *Electrical Safety Act 2022*, the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007*, the *Health and Community Services Complaints Act 1998*, the *Liquor Commission Act 2018*, the *Public Trustee Act 1979* and the Public Trustee Regulations 1979. The Bill seeks to disestablish the Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee, the Discipline Committee of the Electrical Safety Board and the Health and Community Services Complaints Review Committee. It amends procedures of the Electrical Safety Board and the Liquor Commission and the audit requirements of the Public Trustee.

The committee received five submissions to its inquiry and held a public briefing with representatives of the Attorney-General's Department. Following consideration of this Bill, the majority view of the committee is that the Assembly should pass the Bill with the proposed amendment set out in recommendation 2.

The majority of the submitters commented on, and noted their opposition to, the proposed abolition of the Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee in Part 2 of the Bill. However, following careful consideration of the Bill and advice from the Attorney-General's Department, the committee is satisfied that existing agencies and officers will be able to carry out the functions of the Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee capably without risk of undermining these important functions.

The Northern Territory Auditor-General's Office also raised concerns regarding the audit requirements of the Public Trustee. This Bill seeks to require the Auditor-General to complete their audit of the financial statements in relation to the common funds within six months after the end of the financial year. To facilitate implementation of this requirement and further enhance the purpose of the Bill to improve the clarity and transparency of the audit requirements under the *Public Trustee Act 1979*, the committee has recommended that the Bill be amended to require that the Public Trustee provide the Auditor-General the financial statements in relation to the common funds for audit within four months after the end of the financial year.

On behalf of the committee, I thank all who made submissions to the inquiry. The committee also thanks the Attorney-General's Department staff who briefed the committee on the Bill and provided comprehensive responses to the written questions.

I also thank my fellow committee members for their bipartisan commitment to legislative scrutiny.

I commend this report to the Assembly.

CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (EVERY CHILD MATTERS) BILL
Serial 67

Ms CAHILL (Child Protection): Madam Speaker, I thank the members of the Legislative Scrutiny Committee for the work they did. I put on the record that recommendations 1, 4 and 5 were adopted and the remaining recommendations 2, 3 and 6 will be addressed in my summation to this debate.

I table the 'Interim Report – Independent Review into the Conduct of the Department of Children and Families'.

I move that the Bill be now read a second time.

Mr PAECH (Gwoja): Madam Speaker, as the shadow minister for Child Protection I speak against the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

I begin with what should be common ground across this Chamber: every child deserves to be safe; to be protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect; and a stable home, people who will love them and the opportunity to grow into a strong and healthy adult.

When a child is at unacceptable risk the government should intervene. It should act decisively, competently and in the best interests of that child. No member of this Assembly disputes that, but child protection should never become a political football. It is too important for misinformation, race politics and attempts to divide Territorians into those who supposedly care and those who do not. That is insulting and a dishonest characterisation of this debate.

The question before us is not whether children matter. Of course they matter. Every child matters under existing legislation. The safety and best interests of a child are already paramount considerations in decisions made under the *Care and Protection of Children Act*. Child protection authorities already have the power to intervene when a child is not safe. The real question is whether the changes in this Bill will make children safer. The short answer is no.

The evidence presented to the parliamentary committee was clear: this Bill will not make children safer; it will place additional pressures on a child protection system that is already struggling to fulfil its basic responsibilities. The committee received about 150 submissions. The overwhelming weight of evidence from Aboriginal organisations, child protection experts, medical professionals, legal services, family violence specialists, advocates for children in care and frontline organisations opposed significant elements of this Bill. They were not submissions from people who do not care about children; they were submissions from people who work every day with children and families and people who understand the system, see where it fails and know what is required to improve it.

The Minister for Child Protection said yesterday:

> *If we all accept that too many children are being failed by the current system, what exactly is the alternative?*

The solutions were spelled out for this government in the 150 submissions and the decades of evidence and research on how to improve the system, yet this government has dismissed that evidence and continues to suggest that anyone who opposes its approach is somehow opposed to child safety. That is not leadership.

As SNAICC—the national peak body for Aboriginal children—said following the release of the committee's report:

> *You cannot claim to put children first while rejecting the evidence about what keeps children safe.*

SNAICC described the decision to proceed as:

> *… an extraordinary rejection of decades of evidence and the expertise of those working in the sector every day.*

The government had a choice. It could have listened to those who understand the system and amended the Bill accordingly. It could have worked constructively with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, health and legal experts, children and young people, foster and kinship carers and frontline workers. Instead, it chose to press ahead with legislation that expands government power while doing almost nothing to address serious operational failures inside the child protection system.

Legislative reform will not:

- create a child protection worker in a remote community
- build a house for a family experiencing overcrowding
- provide disability support to a child who has been waiting months for assistance

- place a family violence worker beside a mother who is trying to keep herself and her child safe
- establish an alcohol and other drug service in a community where no service exists
- recruit kinship carers, complete their assessments and provide them with the financial and practical support needed to care for children
- repair a system that too often fails to investigate reports of harm, support families early and keep children safe after they enter care.

The minister has acknowledged that families too often do not receive support until their problems become overwhelming. That is not evidence that the existing legislation is inadequate; it is evidence that the child protection system is failing to do what it was designed to do. The question the government should be asking is: why are families not receiving support before problems become overwhelming? We know, and the community knows, the answer is that there are not enough:

- child protection workers, with each child protection worker carrying more than 22 cases
- accessible and specialised family supports
- community-based prevention programs
- stable housing
- in-classroom supports for children with additional needs
- family violence, mental health, disability, counselling and alcohol and other drug services available where people live
- long-term and secure funding for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations
- support for kinship and foster carers
- accountability when the department fails to perform the duties that the law already places upon it.

The system is under enormous pressure and is failing to consistently meet the responsibilities it already has. That should concern every Territory family.

The Aboriginal child placement principle was not created by chance; it was created because Aboriginal people know the devastating consequences of children growing up disconnected from their family, culture, country and community. As Stolen Generation survivor Fiona told the Bringing Them Home inquiry:

> *Once that language was taken away, we lost a part of that very soul. It meant our culture was gone, our family was gone, everything that was dear to us was gone.*

Those words are a reminder of why the child placement principle exists. It is not to delay decisions or compromise a child's safety, but to ensure that when children cannot remain safely at home, every effort is made to preserve their identity, culture and connection to family because every child deserves not only to be safe but also to know who they are, where they come from and that they belong.

As an Aboriginal member of this Assembly, I reject the government's attempt to frame this debate as a contest between culture and safety. It is a false choice. Culture, connection and family participation do not come at the expense of safety. Family, kin, culture, language, identity and country are fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children; they are protective factors.

Almost nine in 10 children in care in the Territory are Aboriginal. That fact should lead this government to strengthen the Aboriginal child placement principle, not weaken the specific protections and obligations that support its operation—the very elements that would increase child safety.

The Aboriginal child placement principle is much more than a list describing where a child should be placed after removal. It consists of five interconnected elements: prevention; partnership; participation; placement; and connection, with expectations on the government to ensure accountability and compliance. Each element

matters. SNAICC, the peak body for Aboriginal children, has warned that weakening these protections will exacerbate existing problems rather than resolve them.

The majority of child protection funding flows to the tertiary end of the system, after families have reached crisis, rather than towards prevention and family support. This year $42m has gone to purchased home-based care compared with approximately $6m for kinship care and $11m for foster care. This is not a government that is serious about preventing harm to children. The CLP is spending significant resources on placing children after removal while failing to invest in service and practice reform that may prevent removal or support a child to be safely reunified.

The government has a responsibility to partner with Aboriginal families, communities and organisations in every stage of decision-making. This means a structural role in intake, assessment, intervention, placement, care planning and decision-making, not as an afterthought or not at all.

This Bill does not establish the Aboriginal family-led decision-making that experts have repeatedly recommended. The government could have strengthened these mechanisms. It could have required mediation or a family conference when requested by a parent, family member or organisation representing a child. It could have implemented royal commission recommendations. Instead, those opportunities have been ignored.

This Bill risks making permanent non-kin placements more likely. Last year only 67 Aboriginal children in care were placed with kin. The majority of children in care are placed in purchased home-based care, not with family or kin. Children in care must be supported to maintain meaningful relationships with family, community, culture, language and country. This is especially important when a child cannot be placed with family or kin. It requires more than the occasional cultural activity or the generic, incompetent or incomplete care plans that the government offers. We must have appropriate plans.

One young person, through the CREATE Foundation, said that one conversation with a person from Larrakia Nation taught them more about their family than their caseworker ever had. That should stop every member in this Chamber in their tracks.

Another young person said, ‘I feel more okay with my culture because my carer is also Indigenous, so she knows how I feel about wanting to learn more about it instead of just standing there, not knowing what my culture is’.

These are the voices the government should be listening to.

Instead of strengthening compliance with the child placement principle, the Bill falls well short of holding the government and the child protection system accountable. Issues with the Aboriginal child placement principle arise from poor implementation in the NT, not legislative design.

The Bill also introduces a strict hierarchy for considering a child’s best interests. The legislation already requires that a child’s best interests, including their safety, be the paramount consideration. That flexibility is important because children’s lives are complex. No two children have the same circumstances.

The Bill removes the flexibility that the department and the courts need in order to work with children and families. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that best interests should be assessed by a flexible, non-exhaustive and non-hierarchical list. Even the department pointed this out in its response to the scrutiny committee, yet the government chose to ignore its own department, as well as international legal standards, to limit the very powers needed to keep children safe.

The proposed family responsibility agreements and orders are another serious concern. The government describes these provisions as early intervention. They are not early intervention. Early intervention is a safe house when a woman and her child are escaping violence, and this government has refused to invest in and support safe houses; frontline family violence services, which have missed out on adequate funding; access to mental health treatment; disability support at school and in the early years; culturally safe alcohol and other drug treatment programs; transport to appointments; food security; stable housing; and assistance, when needed, with parenting.

What is meant to be a collaborative agreement through family responsibility agreements can quickly turn to statutory orders. Any family at any point can be subject to a family responsibility order without them knowing.

Family responsibility agreements introduce a broad threshold for intervention known as an event of concern. This includes vague antisocial behaviour, an event that adversely affects a child's wellbeing or a child not attending school. Many submitters raised that the lack of school attendance is not often an indication of parental neglect. The government provided no clarity and appeared to give no consideration as to how this may disproportionately affect children with complex needs; place additional pressures on family through fear and shame; and contribute to caregiver burnout, family stress and disengagement from services.

Family responsibility orders may also require families to attend services or meet conditions that are impossible to satisfy. A parent in a remote community cannot attend a program that does not exist. A family cannot move in to appropriate housing when the waitlists are eight to 10 years. A parent cannot secure disability services that have not been funded or staffed. A victim–survivor cannot control the behaviour of a violent perpetrator.

The evidence from family violence services is important. KWILS (Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service) raised that in many child protection cases it is the mother who is left to engage with the department and the courts, while the father or the perpetrator does not participate. Family responsibility requirements risk placing further pressure on women, who are already trying to protect their children, while failing to keep the behaviour of the person using the violence at the centre of the response.

Thirty-four per cent of child safety concerns involve family violence. That accounts for 4,370 notifications, yet only 24 referrals were made to domestic and family violence support services through Circuit Breaker. That is a profound gap between the number of families identified and the support provided.

The answer cannot be to punish victim–survivors because the system failed to connect them to services. The answer is not to further punish mums who are already trying to keep their children safe and their families together.

The Bill allows for family responsibility orders to proceed in circumstances when a parent may not have received proper notice. A document may be left at or mailed to a person's last known address. That is inadequate for families experiencing homelessness, housing instability or movement between remote communities.

Even more worrying, a hearing may occur without the parent present. They may then be found to have breached requirements they did not properly understand or did not even know existed. That is not procedural fairness and it is not creating safety. It is unlikely to build trust between families and the services that need to work with them.

Effective child protection depends on relationships. Parents must have confidence that seeking assistance will not automatically trigger punitive action or the permanent loss of their child. Increasing surveillance and coercion without increasing support risks driving vulnerable families away from health services, schools, domestic violence services and community organisations. That can make children less visible and less safe.

I am deeply concerned by the government's emphasis on permanency. This Bill makes it easier to take kids away from families permanently by putting a two-year clock on reunification. This is dangerous. That view is backed up by the majority of the 150 evidence-based submissions opposing the Bill.

This Bill limits the department's obligation to pursue reunification efforts to two years. A two-year timeframe is woefully inadequate to address serious health, mental health and substance abuse issues; family violence behavioural patterns; and housing inadequacy. A parent living with disability may require long-term assistance. A grandmother trying to become a kinship carer may need a larger home, house repairs, financial assistance and help navigating a complex assessment process. A parent in a remote community may wait months for a specialist service. Children and families cannot be blamed for delays created by the government's failure to provide services.

The government says that it is creating stability. Permanent separation is not a successful outcome merely because a file has been closed or a long-term order has been made. Safety and permanency are not mutually exclusive. The government has an obligation to keep children in care safe and at the same time maintain safe relationships and continue reunification efforts when it is safe to do so.

Strict timelines tried in other jurisdictions have failed because parents were less likely to access the supports needed to address protective concerns within strict timeframes. When time limits are inflexible and cannot be overridden by a court, children are denied opportunities to enjoy their rights to identity, family, culture and community. We should learn from that experience rather than repeat it.

The Bill also suggests that permanency in care is synonymous with safety; it is not. One in three children in care experience further harm. Twenty-three per cent of children in care had multiple notifications of alleged harm or exploitation. The majority of harm in care occurs in purchased home-based care or foster care arrangements. In 2024–25 only 2% of investigations into harm in care were completed within the required timeframe. These are confronting figures.

Once the government removes a child, it assumes an enormous responsibility. Before the government creates a faster pipeline of children into permanent care, it must demonstrate that the system is safe, properly monitored and capable of meeting children's needs.

Submissions, hearings, advocacy and significant research show that the Territory child protection system is struggling. Legislative reform alone will not fix this. The Bill distracts from the real issues confronting Northern Territory child protection—that the system is underfunded, under-resourced and under strain. That is where the government should focus its efforts.

Opposing this Bill does not mean defending the existing system. The existing system is far from good. Children are experiencing harm; families are not receiving timely adequate assistance; workers are carrying unreasonable caseloads; investigations are taking too long; kinship carers are not being properly identified or supported; and children in care are experiencing further harm. Young people are leaving care without a plan, housing or enduring relationships.

One young person in care said, 'I have been homeless since I turned 18 because there is no available housing for kids leaving care'.

Another said, 'As soon as I left care, reality hit me. I was homeless and had no family to go to. No-one wanted to know me.'

The child protection system needs reform, but it must be evidence based, properly resourced and developed with those who understand what children and families need.

First, we need to implement the solutions that have already been identified. We need to recruit and support frontline child protection workers to ensure case loads are manageable.

Second, we need substantial investment in prevention and early intervention. That means long-term funding for family support, family violence prevention services, mental healthcare, disability services, alcohol and other drug treatment and parenting assistance. It means services based in communities.

Third, we need to significantly strengthen and invest in Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Aboriginal organisations should not be expected to carry increasing responsibilities while receiving a fraction of the funding provided to large non-Indigenous providers.

Fourth, we need to strengthen the child placement principle, establish Aboriginal family-led decision-making and have accountability measures for genuine active efforts. Families, elders and community-controlled organisations must be involved in decisions before they become irreversible.

Fifth, we need more support for kinship carers, including financial assistance, housing, repairs, respite, training, case management and help navigating assessments.

Sixth, child protection system reform is a major public health issue requiring an adequate response. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians called for more comprehensive health and developmental assessments for children entering care; ongoing paediatric and mental health reviews; shared health management plans across placements; timely specialist referrals; and public reporting on child health outcomes. That is the type of practical reform that will improve children's lives.

Seventh, we need strong, independent and transparent oversight and reporting. When obligations are not met, there must be accountability.

Finally, we must address the structural drivers that bring families into the child protection system.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection submitted:

> *There is increasing recognition nationally and internationally that child protection systems must move beyond narrow 'child rescue' approaches.*

Child protection reform must rethink structural responses to poverty, housing insecurity and exclusion from services long before families interact with statutory systems.

Government policy and investment can make a significant difference. That is the hard work. It is more difficult than changing legislation. The evidence shows that this Bill will not increase child safety. Legislation has a role, but legislation that is poorly designed, inadequately resourced and contrary to the evidence causes harm, not safety.

The government has attempted to present this Bill as a simple choice: support the Bill or fail to support child safety. It is a reductive proposition, and we owe the children and families who will be affected more than that.

Territory Labor supports decisive intervention when a child is unsafe, the paramountcy of child safety and strong action against abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation. We also support evidence; prevention; family participation; kinship care; the rights of Aboriginal children to remain connected to family, community and country wherever it is safe; workers having the resources to do their jobs; and a child protection system that is accountable for the safety and wellbeing of children once they enter its care.

The government should withdraw this Bill, listen to the evidence and return with reforms that strengthen safeguards, properly resource the system, support families and hold the department accountable. The government has a responsibility to do more and to govern well. Territory children deserve nothing less.

I have a statement that was put out by all Australian jurisdictions, bar the Northern Territory and Queensland, in relation to the child placement principle. I seek leave to table that document.

Leave granted.

Mr PAECH: I table this important document because it goes beyond the conversation we are having in this parliament.

This statement has been supported by Hon Tanya Plibersek, the federal Minister for Social Services; the WA Minister for Child Protection; the South Australian Minister for Child Protection; the Tasmanian Minister for Children and Youth; the New South Wales Minister for Families and Communities; the ACT Minister for Children, Youth and Families; and the Victorian Minister for Children. Unfortunately, the Northern Territory and Queensland were unable and unwilling to sign this document.

It states:

> *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) has been nationally agreed to by all jurisdictions. It affirms the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities by ensuring culture, family, community and Country are central to child protection decision making. These ATSICPP objectives are entirely consistent with child safety.*
>
> *The ATSICPP has been embedded in child protection legislation, policy and practice of all Australian states and territories, and is supported by the Commonwealth, noting that child protection matters are within state and territory responsibilities.*
>
> *A majority of the states and territories and the Commonwealth maintain their continued commitment to the ATSICPP and recognise and abide by its critical objective to promote the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, through recognition of the imperative of their continued connection to family, community and culture.*
>
> *Jurisdictions note the introduction of the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 (NT) and the uniform view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group (Aboriginal Leadership Group) members that the Bill represents a diminution of the ATSICPP that will be detrimental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in that jurisdiction.*
>
> *A majority of the states and territories and the Commonwealth express concern that the NT's Bill has been progressed against the strong recommendation of Aboriginal stakeholders, as a regrettable divergence from the Safe and Supported Partnership Agreement made by all Australian governments and the Aboriginal Leadership Group to implement the ATSICPP to the standard of active efforts.*

These jurisdictions unequivocally affirm that the ATSICPP, and its requirement for connection to community and culture, is supportive of, rather than at odds with, the safety, welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.

It is important to place that on the record to demonstrate that this government, at every attempt, has chosen to ignore years of evidence, best-practice standards and stories. A rally is happening now at which Aboriginal people are raising concerns about their community because they have been ignored by this government. One-hundred-and-fifty submissions is not something to ignore. It is a warning that what you are doing is wrong. It is an alarm bell to say that you will create more harm than good.

I take great offence at members of this government calling my community, our stakeholders and everyday Territorians morally bankrupt just because they do not support this Bill. It is offensive and not true. They are people who have raised valid concerns, and many of them have lived experience. Many people who have raised concerns are members of or are related to family members who are a part of the Stolen Generations. They are not morally bankrupt. To throw those words around is disrespectful to the hundreds of people and organisations that have raised valid concerns.

Of course, every child in the Northern Territory deserves to be safe; to be protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect; to have a stable home filled with love, hope and happiness; and to have the opportunity to grow into a strong and healthy adult. Where there is risk, work needs to be done.

Child safety already matters in the existing legislation. The safety and best interests of the child are already paramount considerations in decisions made under the *Care and Protection of Children Act*.

The fundamental change in this Bill is the government shifting its focus from reunification and embedding permanent care orders. It is a shift away from allowing families to work on reunification, to bring a young person back home to their community and family. The government wants to bring in an order that says if the time threshold is reached, you can never have your child back in your family. It is terrible. Yes, there are processes in place; they are long and lengthy processes that will make it hard for a family to be reunified after the prescribed timeframe. Reunification should be an important aspect of child protection.

The government could make simple tangible changes. It could prioritise families who want to provide kinship or foster care by moving them up the housing waitlist, so they do not wait five to eight years for a house. Prioritise them so that we are do not have to put children in purchased home-based care. These are things that we could be doing, which have been done before and worked. This is important.

We need to look at how we can do this work. We need greater investment. In the Territory budget the biggest chunk of new money, or reallocation of funds, goes to purchased home-based care, because this government knows that it will be removing more children from their families and has budgeted for it. It has not increased funding for intensive family supports to help young people and families with prevention and the early intervention work. The government has gone straight to the reactive end and said, 'We will remove more children. We have no idea what to do in the early intervention and program space.' The government could have honoured its commitment and invested more money in domestic and family violence prevention. The stats for programs like Circuit Breaker speak for themselves: only a fraction of referrals have been delivered.

Every child matters, and no-one in this parliament should dispute that. It is crucial. We must not always focus on the tertiary end or be reactive in child protection. We need to do more work. Those 150 submissions were from not just everyday people but also experts with lived experience. These are people in the child protection system who deal every day with the complexities of Northern Territory families. They know what can happen to the trajectory of a young person.

We have not heard how this government will respond to the horrific statistic that one in three children in care are further harmed or abused. We heard that the government will make it easier to bring in permanent care orders. It will water down a principle that was not created overnight, but was built on years of hard work, advocacy and lived experience from previous failed policies such as the Stolen Generation. That led to the development of the child placement principle. We should be amplifying, investing in and building on that principle, not watering it down.

We will not support the Bill as it stands. In consideration in detail we will ask further questions of the government to expand on a number of clauses which it is introducing against the lived experience and evidence of experts and what the data tells us. We will put forward amendments to strengthen this Bill so that it delivers what the Territory needs, not what the government wants its slogan of the day to be.

Mr MALEY (Agriculture and Fisheries): Madam Speaker, I support the Every Child Matters Bill.

I will rebut some of the misconceptions and untruths the Member for Gwoja mentioned. He should be ashamed of himself for peddling information to the public—this is a public forum—that is simply not true.

He mentioned that after two years there will be no way to reunite families. That is not true. Anyone can apply for a court order about their children. The Member for Gwoja's untrue words show that Labor cannot be trusted.

Everyone agrees that children are at the heart of our community, and they need and deserve to be safe. That is what this Bill does. I will be interested in what other Labor members say; will they say untrue words to try to whip up public sentiment and create division? That is what those opposite are doing. Our government wants to make sure that children in the Northern Territory are safe. It is a simple proposition, yet the Member for Gwoja is peddling untruths.

He said at the beginning of his contribution that we are doing nothing to change the department. This is a department that Territory Labor managed for eight years before we came to office. We have been in office for about two years, and we are fixing things. We are making decisions that the previous Labor government, which could not be trusted, was too scared to make. The Member for Gwoja was a senior minister in that Labor government for eight years—never mind that Labor was in power for 19 out of 20-odd years—and managed the departments that he criticised. He should be ashamed of himself for criticising government departments. These departments are doing what they can. They have good Territorians who have children's best interests at heart, but the Member for Gwoja criticised them. He should be ashamed of himself.

It is untrue that the government is doing nothing to change the department. The minister tabled an interim report today from two people, Karen Webb and Greg Shanahan. This report is about trying to fix the issues we found when we came to office, which were created under the previous Labor government. We are taking action, so when the Member for Gwoja says that we have done nothing to change the department, it is another untruth.

He talked about there being not enough child protection workers, houses, care workers, alcohol and drug counsellors and support for carers. This is the department that he and Territory Labor managed for eight years before we came to office. We have started to fix it. The minister should be commended for making the tough decisions that the previous government was too scared to make to fix this sector.

It is simple: Labor cannot be trusted. For eight years Labor members failed Territorians and Aboriginal children. Today they are creating division and trying to fail Aboriginal children, and children in general, across the Northern Territory.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about how we are changing the Aboriginal placement principle. There is no change to that principle; it is staying the same. That is another untruth. It is a misleading statement to create division and uncertainty, which is not what this sector needs. We need to give young children safety and certainty in their lives, and this Bill will do that.

The Member for Gwoja said that there are no programs in communities, putting further pressure on women. He neglected to say, and I feel like a broken record, that Territory Labor—which cannot be trusted—managed this sector for eight of the last 10 years. We came to office and, in just under two years, we are making those decisions. He criticised his own Labor government, because it was the one that managed and dealt with this department for 19 of the last 20-odd years.

The Member for Gwoja gets on his high horse and says all these words, but there are no answers. There is no new policy or anything about what Labor would do. He did not tell the people listening what Territory Labor would do to fix this problem. Labor members have short memories. There were eight years of Labor government, which members opposite were a part of as senior ministers.

We are here to fix the problem. We have been in government for two years. It will not be fixed overnight. This is a serious problem. We are saying that child safety should be paramount. It does not matter where you live and what your background or culture is, children deserve to have a safe household and to grow up in a loving home with people they can trust.

The bottom line is that Territory Labor failed Aboriginal children for years. The Member for Gwoja said that one in three children in care are harmed or suffer further neglect. It is a broken record: this is a department that the Labor government's senior ministers managed for eight years. They caused the problem.

I commend our minister to fix the problem. We are giving carers more support. We are making sure that they are at the table to have input into the rules and the laws that they use to look after these children because children's safety is paramount.

The Member for Gwoja told stories about young people who are 18 years old being kicked out into the big wide world with no support or housing. This is another untruth. These young people are eligible for care and help up to the age of 25. Non-government organisations are willing to help them, and that support is funded by the government. Once they turn 18, they are not shown the door and told, 'See you later. You are on your own'; they have support for another seven years to help them get back on track.

In a previous life, before I came to parliament, I was an independent children's lawyer. I have been in the care and protection court and sat through multiple hearings. I have read stories which you would not believe are true. I have seen the scenarios of 18-year-olds going to support people to get help. It takes a community approach. Everyone needs to be involved. Where are the parents? The Member for Gwoja spoke about the two-year timeframe. If a care order is needed after two or five years, these children still have parents; they can still come into their children's lives when they are 18 years and one day old, if they want to, and be parents, which clearly they choose not to for whatever reason. Our government is here to support those young people up to the age of 25.

There were more words that are misleading, more division and more chaos, which is what the previous Labor government was known for, and infighting; that is happening. There have been reshuffles; new people are sitting at the front. Those opposite have chaos in their DNA because NT Labor cannot be trusted.

I feel like a broken record. Over eight years the Member for Gwoja had direct control over the issues he raised. He chose to do nothing. He failed Aboriginal children. Today in the House he provided misleading information and untruths, of which I have pointed out just a few. I am sure the relevant minister will go through that in more detail to make sure that everyone knows that this government is here for the safety of children. That is our number one proposition.

Every child in the Northern Territory deserves to be safe. All children deserve to grow up in a safe and loving environment, free from abuse, neglect, violence and the uncertainty of not knowing where they belong. That should not be a controversial statement.

We are prepared to make the decisions that other governments are too afraid to make. Our government believes that all children deserve to be treated with the same level of care, whatever their race, religion and culture. Whether they are from a remote community, a regional area, Central Australia or the Top End, every child matters. If the current system was working—the Member for Gwoja says that we should not change it—why are there so many Aboriginal children in care? It is a simple question to ask yourself. I will go out on a limb and say that there are so many Aboriginal children in care because the system did not work. It did not do what it was designed to do, and we on this side of the House will make the tough decisions to ensure that every child is safe.

This Bill outlines a clear hierarchy of consideration to create stronger child-centred practices, protecting them from harm and providing permanency and stable and nurturing relationships. The responsibility of this parliament is to make decisions that put the best interests of children ahead of policies and the comfort of people who are defending a system that is clearly failing too many. The reality is that we inherited a child protection system under enormous pressure. The previous Labor government held the strings—it had the control—and it failed Territorians. More importantly and sadly, it failed Aboriginal children and all children in the Northern Territory because it neglected the system it had control over for many years.

I am interested to hear what the other side has to say. The Member for Nightcliff is only new in this parliament. When he makes his contribution I hope that he will have read his history book about the failures that the previous Labor government had in this space and others.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about domestic violence. It was up by 82% under Labor's watch. We have brought it down in two years. It has been reducing. I hope the Member for Nightcliff does not just read what the Labor machine gives him, because it cannot be trusted. I ask the Member for Nightcliff to do his own research about what happened in the previous 19 years of Labor government to see how we got to where we are today.

What are we doing to fix it? We are making the tough decisions. For years previous governments watched vulnerable children cycle through the system and child protection notifications rise. Those governments just turned away from the difficult decisions.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about more funding being required. What did the previous Labor government do? It did not do that.

The system is under enormous pressure. I agree with the Member for Gwoja on that. Those people do a great job. Instead of bashing public servants like the Member for Gwoja did, I am here to support them and say, 'We have got you. We want to ensure that you are cared for properly because you are helping these young Territorians.' The previous Labor government failed to do that. It failed the children of the Northern Territory.

The *Care and Protection of Children Act* was introduced nearly two decades ago. The world has changed. The challenges and pressures faced by families and communities have changed, and the system has not kept pace. Too many children found themselves stuck in limbo because the previous Labor government failed them. They were moved from placement to placement, suffering uncertainty. That is why this Bill gives those children the safety and certainty they need.

That was not good enough. A child does not get a second childhood. Every month of uncertainty matters. I have a young family, and members on this side have young families. It goes back to children only getting one chance, and their parents need to step up. When they do not, the government needs to come in and make sure that child is safe. That is the paramount consideration. Certainty helps young people, giving them love and security. That is why these changes refer to permanency and stability as primary considerations in the new hierarchy. The Bill provides that an intensive reunification effort take place in the first six months after removal to try to get that happening. A two-year goal and capping those orders is in the child's best interests.

Much has been said about this legislation. The Member for Gwoja is whipping it up. He is probably out the front now with the protesters, telling them how bad this is. Like I said to the Member for Nightcliff, do your research. Read what happened in the eight years under the previous Labor government and how and why we got here. The answer is that we need to make sure that child safety is the number one consideration.

People say that this Bill weakens protections. Others suggest that it somehow threatens Aboriginal children. That is not the case. This Bill recognises the importance of keeping Aboriginal children connected to family, culture and language. It recognises kinship and supports the participation of Aboriginal people in family decisions. The choice before us is not between child safety and cultural connection; it is both.

Importantly, the changes strengthen the voices at the centre of the issue—the children. They will have their own independent children's lawyer. In my previous life, I have been in the court as an independent children's lawyer for many cases. I have read real-life stories which, quite frankly, disgusted me.

I recall one story of when an Aboriginal child had been placed with two doctors. This child had severe mental health and health issues, yet the child was taken from those carers and put with an aunty on an island. You cannot tell me that the child would have the same care with the aunty on the island that they had from two doctors. The Member for Gwoja spoke about the lack of programs and other things. It is an unfortunate reality, but the current system that the previous Labor government presided over and managed has allowed that to happen. That is just one case that stuck in my mind. I get upset because it is a true-life story.

These changes will provide meaningful information and enable children and carers to have their say. I would have loved that opportunity in the case of the two doctors. They could have jumped into the witness box and let me ask them questions about the care they provided to that child. This will allow that to happen. It will allow the court to make an informed decision. That is why this Bill will be in the best interests of the child.

There has been a lot of consultation and many public submissions. This has been an open and transparent process, and I am here to make sure the debate continues because it is important.

I am proud to stand with the carers and deliver all these critical changes.

Mr SMELT (Nightcliff): Madam Speaker, I oppose the changes by the CLP government in the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill.

As the father of four young children, there is nothing more important to me than their wellbeing, growth, development and safety. I know that I share this desire with all members of the Chamber for the young people in our lives whom we care deeply for.

We also know that due to historic and ongoing inequality in our society many kids do not receive the care and support they need to grow into happy, healthy and thriving adults. There is a clear and direct role for

government, on behalf of everyone in our community, to assist parents and families to provide the best possible care for their children, but this Bill is the CLP government's attempt to fix a complex, multifaceted and interlinked system with a sledgehammer.

This Bill distracts from the real challenges of the NT child protection system by deliberately avoiding the key issues of resources, funding and operations. It does nothing to recruit new staff, provide extra family support and education or reduce overcrowded housing. The CLP government not only lacks vision or a plan for the challenges it faces but also fails the basic steps of policy development and problem-solving.

The explanatory statement notes:

> *The Bill amends the Act to keep children safe and central to decision making; hold parents accountable in caring for and meeting the basic needs of their children; and promotes an early intervention model to respond to child wellbeing concerns.*

The current legislation, the guidelines and the operations of the department already aim to do this. The minister has simply not explained the problem that the CLP government is trying to solve. What is 'safe'? What is 'accountable'? What is 'early intervention'? We know that the current Act already prioritises children's safety and there is a range of options for intervention and support.

Further, it is unclear what the measure of success will be. Is it about reduced child notifications or a reduction in child removals and out-of-home care; or is it the opposite that the government is after? We do not know because the minister has not explained or detailed what the real problem is and how it will be measured. Without a clear problem definition or measure of success it is impossible to know what solutions might work and what actions should be prioritised or receive funding. A key step in trying to tackle any major issue is exploring a range of solutions to a well-defined problem.

It is clear from the minister's recent op-ed that exploring solutions was not the focus of the development of this legislation. The minister wrote:

> *If we all accept that too many children are being failed by the current system, what exactly is the alternative?*

I am glad the minister asked. There are recommendations from numerous inquiries, reports, submissions, coronial investigations and expert advice that have largely gone unimplemented and ignored. The best place to start would be to listen to the experts, implement these recommendations and pay attention to the work that has already been done, particularly the 2007 Little Children are Sacred report from the inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal from sexual abuse; the 2010 'Growing them strong, together' report from the investigation of the child protection system in the Northern Territory; and the 2016 Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. All these investigations referenced the lack of progress from previous inquiries and repeated calls to strengthen the role and operation of the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

There is no value in using the sledgehammer approach when there are solutions already researched, assessed, road-tested and operating in jurisdictions across the country and sitting in reports that directly relate to the NT. Instead of strengthening child protection legislation so that the principle can operate as intended, this Bill strips back the key elements even further from what was originally recommended in those inquiries and reports. Weakening the principle risks entrenching more systemic disadvantage in the child protection system and creating more harm for children and families. Overall, issues with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle arise from poor implementation in the NT, not legislative design. It needs to be strengthened, not weakened, to get the best possible outcome for our community.

What does not seem to matter to this government is the hard, systemic, policy and practice reform backed by resourcing that is required so that the child protection system can do what it is meant to do. The minister wrote in her op-ed:

> *Families too often don't receive support until problems have become overwhelming.*

Exactly—the findings from the interim Webb Shanahan report confirm what the Labor opposition has been saying: this is a system failure, not a legislative one. The CLP approach is clearly wrong.

The questions the minister should be asking are: why has her government failed to adequately fund frontline family violence services? Why are supports not in place earlier? Why do child protection workers have an

average of more than 22 cases per person? Why do one in three children in care experience further harm? Why are Aboriginal children in care so over-represented in the NT at 89%? At its most basic level it is because there are not enough child protection staff; specialised services; community-based services where people need them; funding to keep these essential services and workers going; quality reporting and information sharing; and, importantly, enforceable requirements on the child protection system to make sure that it is doing what it is supposed to.

Child protection staff operate under considerable pressure. Children and families in remote and urban centres often cannot access the services they need, and the resourcing of the department to address these issues has remained stagnant.

By taking this legislation-first approach, it is abundantly clear that this government is not serious about child safety or getting families the help that they need. Legislative reform that causes more harm than good will not make children safer and protect them from harm. It is people, policies, practices, supports and services that will do so. That is the answer.

The scrutiny committee inquiry received 150 submissions and in-person testimony from many organisations that work with the current legislation and within the existing challenges of the child protection system. Overwhelmingly, the changes proposed in this Bill were not supported and were considered to be counterproductive to improving safety and outcomes for kids known to the child protection system. I will read out a few quotes from these submissions.

First, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) stated:

> *Experience in other jurisdictions demonstrates the risks associated with permanency-focused child protection frameworks. A similar two-year time frame and tightened permanency settings introduced in Victoria resulted in significantly increased numbers of Aboriginal children being permanently removed from their families … Victoria has walked back these changes …*

Second, the Australian Centre for Child Protection stated:

> *There is increasing recognition nationally and internationally that child protection systems must move beyond narrow 'child rescue' approaches …*
>
> *…*
>
> *… there is significant unmet need in supporting families with multiple and complex needs, largely due to low investment in necessary structural supports, including (but not limited to) housing, infrastructure and family support services. This is even more pronounced in the context of remote communities in the Northern Territory.*

Third, I quote from Unions NT:

> *The Northern Territory Government has not demonstrated that the reforms are financially sustainable or operationally achievable. For a government concerned with economic discipline, workforce attraction and efficient public administration, the reforms represent poor fiscal policy. Expanding statutory demand without adequately funding workforce growth and preventative services will increase long-term government expenditure while worsening outcomes for children and families.*

Fourth, I quote Dr Steven Roche, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University:

> *Currently, the NTs child protection system already does not support parents with children on short term orders to the degree and intensity required to support the reunification of their children.*

Across a range of organisations, experts and practitioners, the message is loud and clear that these changes are not supported. Once again, this CLP government has ignored, sidelined and rejected evidence and expertise at the expense of vulnerable people in its care.

Every Territorian should be concerned if this Bill passes today. It expands the Department of Children and Families' powers to intervene without addressing how well the system operates or how it will provide greater support to families in need. It makes it easier to take kids away from families permanently by putting a two-year timeframe on reunification. It will increase pressure on the child protection system without any

new support or resources for families or workers. It ignores the evidence and expertise of frontline workers. It will not fix the systemic issues with this poorly constructed legislation that are far more complex and difficult to improve.

With this Bill the arrogance and dismissiveness of this CLP government is once again on full display. It has poor and ultimately tokenistic consultation, ignores experts and evidence, takes a sledgehammer approach to a complex system and has no real purpose to solve underlying problems. There is no funding reform on the table to support families and services or to reduce the impossible workload of child protection workers. The CLP government may say 'mission accomplished' with the passing of this Bill, but it has only created new problems and issues while ignoring the advice and expertise that could make a difference.

This Bill should not be supported.

Mr BURGOYNE (Lands, Planning and Environment): Madam Speaker, the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 is important.

Today I speak as not only the Member for Braitling and a minister in this government but also someone who had the privilege of being a shadow Territory Families minister for four years. It was during those four years that many people in the community spoke of their concerns about child protection and how the system under Labor was failing.

Today I heard the Member for Nightcliff ask: what problem are we trying to fix? Under the previous Labor government, young children were being put in environments that were unsafe. That is what we are trying to fix to ensure that every child matters, irrespective of background, race or religion. We needed courage from the previous Labor government to fix those issues so that children could be safe. What we got was excuses. Time and again, through my electorate office, I wrote to the then Territory Families minister. I elevated the concerns I had to the Children's Commissioner. Instead of courage, we got platitudes and excuses.

I am proud to be a part of a government where Minister Cahill, through her courage and conviction, will amend the law to ensure every child matters and that safety is the number one priority when anyone is considering what must happen to a young person. This is not just a principle; this is written in black and white in the legislation. That is why today's amendments matter so much. I am glad to be a part of a government that has a minister who has the courage to make these hard decisions, knowing full well that there are those in the community who will seek to tell mistruths about what we are here to do today.

There have been claims that this Bill removes protections for Aboriginal children and scaremongering that this Bill risks another Stolen Generation. I have even seen a respected law agency claim that this Bill is the youth removal Bill, the child removal Bill. It is simply untrue.

We heard about the various reports that the previous Labor government based its amendments on, not only as it related to care and protection but also in regard to youth justice, and that this is what we should be taking our lessons from. Let us look at what happened over the eight years under the previous Labor government when it wrote into legislation those changes that were recommended.

When youth justice changes were made, youth crime spiralled out of control. We saw young people interacting with the courts and the law system more than we had ever seen before. Time and again, the revolving door put them back onto the streets where they were unsafe to themselves and others. We saw the real impacts that had on the community of Alice Springs when youths in a stolen car crashed into and killed support worker Shane Powell. That is what happens when a government follows recommendations blindly without understanding the real impacts they can have on a community.

We are talking about the care and protection of children. Many of the mistruths I have spoken about point to why it is important to stand up and call out the misinformation.

This Bill seeks to strengthen child safety and wellbeing, which is such an important factor. It seeks to improve long-term stability and permanency for children. When I was the shadow minister for Territory Families, but also as the Member for Braitling, foster and kinship carers wrote to me of their feelings about a child protection system that was purely focused on reunification and kinship care, taking young people away from a safe environment with kinship carers and placing them in what was alleged to be an unsafe environment.

A letter was written to the Children's Commissioner, outlining what a kinship carer had relayed to my office. With care and protection orders, young people are initially placed with kin on weekends as they transition away from their foster parents—whom they may been with for years—and back with family. The carer had

taken to weighing the child when they returned because they were so concerned that the young person was not being fed and looked after properly. After one of those reunification trips, the child, who was two years old—the average weight of a two-year-old is about 12 kilograms—came back four kilograms lighter. This was reported, and nothing happened.

What we are doing matters so much to many people in the community. Minister Cahill is not afraid of the detractors and has taken it on the chin, as we all will on this side of the House because we know how important this Bill is. It was poor Labor policy that led to the failure in the previous placement principle, which led to poor outcomes. Through our legislation we are now ensuring that poor policy is fixed so that young people are safe and when a young person is in a caring and loving environment for two years, they and their foster carer can have certainty moving forward. Too often through the reunification process a young person is traumatised, and that is not often spoken about, but from the letters I have received and stories I have been told, it has rung true to me.

We acknowledge that child protection has failed in the past. It needs to be better, and with these changes it will be. This legislation is important. It ensures children are protected and safe and that irrespective of a child's background, they are aware that they matter. This government is ensuring that their safety is its number one priority.

Mr KERLE (Blain): Madam Speaker, this is a hard Bill to talk about as it is personal for many of us. We are here because we have campaigned and connected with our communities, and it is almost impossible to live in the NT and not see every day the evidence of the previous government's failed child protection system. I admit the Northern Territory has a challenging situation because of our history, but that cannot be an excuse for inaction. I support this Bill.

Every child has the right to safety, a safe home, food to eat and loving parents or guardians. I think we all agree on the end goal, but I think we disagree on the value propositions that we take to get there. On this side of the Chamber, we take a moral stance that the safety of the child is paramount. The child must be at the centre of any considerations about their future. The pride of other individuals, even the parents, cannot take a higher place in decision-making than the safety of the child. Once the safety of the child is assured, we can, by all means, take a look at the fuller picture.

I have been thinking about this Bill and what I would say ever since it was tabled. The other night I was hugging my son and thinking about this Bill. When you have kids, a fundamental transformation takes place in you—I think everyone in this Chamber has kids, so we all have been through that fundamental transformation. You look at things differently; some things you cannot listen to or consider. There were news reports that I could read or watch before I had kids and now I cannot, because I think of my own kids and cannot imagine what it would be like for those kids to go through that.

When you have kids you are no longer responsible just for yourself; you are responsible for a small human as well. You become a parent, and your rights must take second place to the need for safety, shelter, food, love and care for this person whom you have brought into the world. If a parent is not willing to meet those needs, the child still has them and they should be met.

I regularly patrol my electorate and Palmerston hotspots, along with the Member for Drysdale, and I have many times seen groups of children roaming late at night. I wish they could be taken to a safe place. I wish they were home with their parents and being looked after, given a decent meal and put to bed. Obviously that is not happening, because they are on the streets. When I speak to them and look into their background, their home and what is happening, it becomes clear that these children believe—I have to trust them because this is what they are telling me—that they are safer on the streets than at home. Often there is no dad. I have asked a kid, 'Hey, mate, where is your mum or dad?' Without skipping a beat, this poor little boy who is six or seven years old said, 'My dad is in jail'. That was in early 2024, under the previous government.

These kids do not consider themselves safe at home, so they go on the streets and meet up with other kids who are in the same position and hang out. Then someone thinks it is a great idea to break into a house, get the car keys, take the car and go for a drive. The number of youths from Palmerston whom we have lost in stolen motor vehicle accidents is far too high. It recently happened in Katherine, and it has happened in Alice Springs. I am sure it has happened out bush. It is a consequence of failed parental responsibility.

Parents need to take ownership. Having a kid is not just a consequence of a fun time; it is a responsibility for life. You have a responsibility to a person, to raise a human being with honour, dignity, self-respect and the opportunity to make a better life than the life that you have led. I hope for my kids that they stand on my shoulders and can strive to reach greater things than I have ever reached, and every parent should hope the

same for their kids. The kids I see walking around Palmerston late at night have been let down by the people who owe them most: their parents. The parents are the ones who should be held accountable, and this Bill works towards that.

Rivers of ink have already been spilled on this Bill. Any parent who is listening to what I am saying knows the difference between a child who is safe and a child who is not being harmed. That is one of the key points of discussion of this Bill. Those who oppose this Bill are keen to say that safety is already in the legislation. Show me where the word 'safety' is in the current Act. What it says in black and white is:

> *… in the best interests of a child … to protect them from harm and exploitation …*

I challenge any parent to say that it is the same thing for a child to be safe and for a child not to be harmed or exploited. Are the kids I see walking around late at night being harmed? No; they are walking around and no-one is hitting them. Are they being exploited? No; they are there of their own free will. Circuit Breaker workers do their best; they engage, as do the police. They ask the kids whether they can give them a lift home or give them some food, and the kids say no. Are they safe? Is it safe for an eight-year-old to be walking around the CBD of a major region late at night? No, so I do not think it is that big of an idea to say that we should make safety the primary consideration in the best interests of the child.

I encourage anyone who is listening to read the Bill and look at the current Act. The Act talks constantly about the best interests of the child. Where the best interests of the child is defined, we are inserting that the primary consideration is the safety of that child.

I dream of a world where the children of the NT all have a safe place to sleep at night; their parents ensure that they have three square meals a day and snacks, clean clothes and hygiene; and they regularly attend school. I dream of a world where the idea of children walking the streets at night because it is safer than being at home where there is domestic violence, alcohol abuse, physical violence and no food is unthinkable, but that is not the world we live in. Therefore, we have to wrestle with competing interests: the safety of the child on one hand and the capacity of the parent on the other.

There are many stories. I have a number of them with me, and I might go through them if I have time, about the capacity of the parent being insufficient to look after the child and the child suffering harm as a result of not being safe.

The scrutiny of this Bill has been interesting to watch. Many people seem to be extremely offended by the suggestion that the safety of the child should be the pre-eminent factor. They say it already is, even though the word 'safety' is not there. You have to interpret it; it is in practice and in guidelines, but not actually there. It is there as a negative onus—protection from a harm—rather than a positive onus. One of the things I appreciate is the theme that this Bill brings, being the positive onus on and proactive duty for the department to pursue reunification and seek resolution and the safety of the child.

On the final day of committee hearings, the Member for Drysdale thanked the CEO of the Department of Children and Families by saying:

> *Mr Warren, I will just say from the last two days I am glad you have not consulted with some of the moral bankruptcy that exists in the Northern Territory, so thank you.*

Moral bankruptcy—when you have a Bill that tries to put the safety of a child paramount and create a process to help the department engage with families before they fall off a cliff. The minister has been saying this until she is blue in the face: the system that survived eight years under Labor waited until the child was hanging off the edge of a cliff, suffering harm or exploitation. There are so many stories. Arnold Walker from Yuendumu's medical history was tendered in the coronial—a litany of notifications. There were so many missed opportunities. This is the kind of moral bankruptcy that is more offended by the publication of child notifications than by the death of a child.

A lot of the recommendations to the scrutiny committee had not as much to do with the legislation but focused instead on budgetary or operational matters. These matters are in the hands of the CEO and the minister. I am sure that they have these matters well in hand.

Before lunchtime, I will briefly talk about Deborah Melville. I am holding a photo of her, and I seek leave to table that photo.

Leave granted.

Mr KERLE: Deborah Melville was a child in care in Woodroffe in July 2007. Matthew Cunningham from the *NT News* has written extensively on this case. The coronial is online. Coroner Greg Cavanagh had 87 pages detailing, in horrific detail, the story of Deborah.

Her parents passed away when she was quite young and, along with multiple siblings, she was placed with a kinship carer, an aunty who also had multiple children. Her aunty was unable to provide meaningful care for all the kids. There were a number of missed opportunities.

Deborah Melville died horrifically on a driveway in my electorate. I will not name the address, but I know it. I was letterboxing my newsletter in the last week or two and I went past that address. Every time I go past I look at the driveway and think of Deborah and the missed opportunities that led to the loss of her life.

That is what this is about. It relates to these children who never get the chance to grow up, fall in love, dream, travel and see the world and experience joy. That is what we are here for. These kids are missing out on life for no reason of their own making.

I was letterboxing in the last two weeks and came across a domestic violence incident. I stopped and called 000 and observed whether I would need to intervene. There was a mother, a grandmother and a grandchild. The mother was experiencing a mental health episode, going off and smashing things and abusing her mother, the child's grandmother. While I waited for the police to come, the mum experiencing the issues took off. She had an ankle bracelet on, so the police managed to eventually locate her and hopefully provide her with the support she needed. When I talked to the grandmother she said, 'It is not her fault. She has FASD.' This is a woman in her early twenties. She said, 'When I was young, I was a heavy drinker. I have stopped now. I am clean and sober, but the damage is done.' Her daughter has also been a heavy drinker, so now the two-year-old child—a beautiful baby boy—has FASD and is non-verbal.

These are the people we are here to help. These kids need every opportunity for safety and to flourish. Sometimes that means balancing the desires of the parent and the desire for cultural enrichment with the child's safety. There is no end of cases when a kinship carer could not be found for an Aboriginal child. The process drags on, and in the meantime the child suffers insecurity of placement.

The Department of Children and Families is full of deeply passionate people. They do not go into social work because they have a seared conscience; it is because they care deeply about those kids and want to make a difference. I cannot believe that any child protection practitioner in the department would not exhaust all opportunities to place an Aboriginal child with family or kin; sometimes they cannot be found.

In her evidence the Children's Commissioner referred to a Supreme Court case, so I read it. It is a sad story of an Indigenous mum and a non-Indigenous dad. Mum had a drinking problem and disappeared. Dad looked after the kid. He had mental health issues and was unable to care for the child. The child went into foster care. Many years later those parents wanted to move interstate. The father tried to re-engage. In the NT Court of Appeal, documented in black and white were the extensive efforts the department made to find someone on the maternal side of the family who could care for the child. It was unsuccessful.

In cases like this when the department is unsuccessful, the child should not be forced to suffer and not have security of tenure and placement. The most important thing for children after their base needs of food, shelter, clothing and a safe place to sleep, is security of attachment. Children need to know that they are loved. They need to know that their parents, guardians, caregivers, foster parents or kinship carers care for and love them and that they will always be there for them, because that frees them up. If a child is insecure about their primary caregiver, they have no security in their world whatsoever.

I posted yesterday about the story of an 11-year-old boy in the NT. In 2023 the *Australian* published a harrowing video of an 11-year-old boy; it called him Benny, but obviously his name was changed to protect his details. He had been placed with foster parents and for whatever reason—maybe there was a reunification attempt; the details are not public—there was a court order to remove him from the foster parents, so they came with police. The poor police have to follow the law. They do things they do not want to do because they swear an oath and that is their obligation. This poor child was removed and then self placed. He ran away and came back to the foster parents. In the video, he is being taken away again from the foster parents, who provide him security, love and a safe place. He screams, 'I'm not moving'. Benny tells them when they finally get him to the van, 'No, thank you'. Struggling to retain his composure, he tells them, 'You have no right to touch me. I said no, thank you. I want to stay here. It's not up to you. It's up to me. I don't want to go.'

This Bill does a few things. It makes clear in law that the safety of the child is paramount. It strengthens the Aboriginal child protection principle to a universal child placement principle while retaining important

Aboriginal considerations. Importantly, and this is something that has been missing, it gives children a voice in legal proceedings and gives the court the ability to order the appointment of a legal representative for the child so that they can have their voice heard in child protection matters relevant to them. It gives a voice to foster carers in those same legal proceedings.

Too many times we have heard stories. I have foster and kinship carers in my electorate and around Palmerston who have horrific stories about decisions being made in court about children in their care and they are not a party to the proceedings, even though they have had these children for years. These children call them mum and dad, yet they are gagged and are unable to speak up for the child.

I will finish after Question Time.

Debate suspended.

The Assembly suspended.

NOTICES

Ms UIBO (Opposition Leader): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next General Business day I shall present a motion that the Assembly calls on the Finocchiaro CLP government to reverse its 5.3% hike to power, water and sewerage charges and give Territorians cost-of-living relief.

Mrs HERSEY (Education and Training): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next meeting day I shall present a Bill titled Education Standards and Registration Board Bill 2026.

PETITION

Petition No 23 – Replace Katherine Hospital with a New Facility Outside the Katherine Flood Zone

Ms UIBO (Arnhem): Madam Speaker, I present a petition from 2,421 petitioners praying for the replacement of Katherine Hospital with a new facility outside of the Katherine flood zone. The petition bears the Clerk's certificate, and it conforms with the requirements of standing orders. I move that the petition be read.

Motion agreed to; petition read:

To the Speaker and the Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

This petition as signed below calls the attention of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly to: the serious risks facing Katherine Hospital, which is located in a flood zone, becomes isolated during floods, and has been evacuated or closed in major events in 1998, 2006 and 2026. Flooding disrupts or prevents critical services, including emergency care, primary care for vulnerable populations, and treatment for admitted patients, despite the hospital serving more than 18,000 people, including remote Aboriginal communities. Continued investment in this flood-prone facility is unsafe and inefficient, and flood-related closures force patient transfers that place additional strain on Darwin and Palmerston hospitals.

The Petitioners therefore Pray and ask that the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly:

- *Commit to the urgent planning and construction of a new, fit-for-purpose hospital for Katherine located outside the flood zone;*
- *Allocate funding and establish a clear delivery timeline for this essential infrastructure.*

And your petitioners further request that:

- *Katherine Town Council actively advocate to the Northern Territory and Australian Governments to secure funding and prioritise the delivery of a new hospital.*

And your petitioners, as in duty bound will forever Pray

Ms UIBO (Arnhem): Madam Speaker, I move that the petition be referred to the Public Accounts Committee to consider whether the petition should be debated.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTION TIME

Cost of Living

Ms UIBO to TREASURER

You told Estimates that you signed off on Cabinet's decision to increase power, water and sewerage prices by 5.3%. How much more will the average Territorian pay in this cost-of-living crisis? In regard to the CLP's decision, what will the 5.3% price hike on essential services cost the average Territory household?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, we know power prices increased by 0.01% above what we estimated the 2025–26 CPI to be in the budget and that the cost of generation has increased significantly over the recent period, but there is a history lesson about the cost of generation and gas as well.

Those opposite put a two-year moratorium on Beetaloo gas which has delayed cheaper gas prices for Territorians by a number of years. We are now paying more for gas than we would have been if Beetaloo had come online. Knowing that there were supply issues with Eni and Blacktip, the previous Labor government still put the moratorium in place which, of course, increased prices for Territorians.

In this budget we have increased the CSO (community service obligation) to every Territorian. Every Territorian who looks at their bill from Jacana has an idea of how much their bill is subsidised by government. On average, there is over $2,000 per household off their power bill through the CSO.

There are additional benefits for those who are elderly and our single mums as well. Through our benefit for seniors …

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; the question asked what the average Territory household will have to pay because of the 5.3% increase.

Madam SPEAKER: The Treasurer has some time to answer that.

Mr YAN: Our seniors also get a rebate of up to $2,000 on top of the $2,000 CSO payment. For single mums—those doing it hard; we know they do it tough—there is also a $2,000 rebate on top of the $2,000 CSO.

If we were in a better financial position we would not need to move power prices with CPI, and it has always been a move with CPI. Look at the financial position left to us by the previous government: debt had increased beyond control; we were staring down the barrel of a …

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; with just 30 seconds to go, what is the average cost that Territory households will have to pay because of the 5.3% increase?

Madam SPEAKER: Opposition Leader, you have asked the question three times. Treasurer, it is up to you how you answer it.

Mr YAN: That debt impacted our ability to maintain power prices. The Leader of the Opposition is right: whatever your bill is, there will be a 5.3% increase on that.

We are clear about what we are doing. We are trying to do what we can to maintain power prices, but they will always be linked to CPI and we are supporting all Territorians through the CSO and our other obligations.

Crime Statistics – Update

Mr O'GALLAGHER to CHIEF MINISTER

Territorians elected our CLP government to reduce crime, rebuild the economy and restore the Territory lifestyle after years of rising crime, unsafe communities and victims being forgotten under Labor, including the victims in Karama, Malak and Knuckey Lagoon in my electorate.

In this government's year of growth, certainty and security, can you update the Assembly on the latest crime figures and outline how our united government—unlike the shambolic bunch across the bench—is supporting victims and improving safety across the Territory? Are you aware of any alternative approaches?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Karama is out there fighting for the people of Karama, Malak and Knuckey Lagoon. He is doing an excellent job. The people in that community, just like every other Territorian, want one thing: to be safe. That is what we promised we would do and that is what we have delivered. The Member for Karama has been a huge part of that.

Last week the May data came out for the crime statistics. When we compare last May with this May we see that there was a 13% drop Territory-wide. Bear in mind that when we compare last May with this May, we are comparing work that the CLP already did; crime had already dropped last May through our hard work since coming to government. To put that into perspective for people listening at home and those in the Member for Karama's community, there are 10,000 fewer offences under the CLP government than there were under Labor.

We have single-handedly wound back the clock on crime to 2017 levels; crime is going backwards. Territory-wide, total offences are down by 13%; assaults are down by 10%; house break-ins are down by 24%; commercial break-ins are down by 29%; motor vehicle theft is down by 23%; domestic violence offences—I hope those opposite are listening—are down by 13%, after they rose 83% under the previous Labor government; and property offences are down by 15%. I could go on and on.

Whether it is Alice Springs, Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine or Tennant Creek, the number of offences are going down because we are putting people's right to be safe above the rights of offenders. We are doing the important work. We have come to this parliament time and again to strengthen the laws; give our police the powers they need to keep us safe; and build new correctional facilities that focus on therapeutic support, rehabilitation and getting people the skills they need to get a job. In fact, we are giving people in prison a job, and they are doing excellent work. The community is responding to their support in fixing things after the floods and for a range of community activities.

On top of that, we have more than 100 extra police than there were under the previous Labor government. Police were leaving in droves because Labor turned its back on them. Our numbers are higher than ever. Territory-wide there are 21 police public safety officers doing a fantastic job. There might be only 21 of them, but you would think there were thousands; they are everywhere, and they are doing an incredible job.

We will continue to deliver on our promises to reduce crime, rebuild the economy and restore our beautiful Territory lifestyle because that is what we took to the election, that is what we told Territorians we would do and that is what we are delivering for all people of the Northern Territory.

Local Government – Utilities Cost

Mr SMELT to MINISTER for HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT and COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

What will your 30% increase in power, water and sewerage charges cost local governments this financial year? Do you accept that Territory ratepayers will ultimately be left to foot the bill?

Mr Howe: Where is Albo's 275?

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please.

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, there is a range of local governments across the Territory. We have a combination of municipal services—the Member for Nightcliff was once a councillor with the City of Darwin, as was the Member for Karama. The Member for Karama knows how this works; he has seen different things happen over the years. There is a number of regional councils, including the Barkly Regional Council, and there are municipal councils in Alice Springs and Katherine.

Local governments have been working through their budgets for well over 12 months. We made some decisions last year, and they were circulated to each council to prepare not only for any rises in electricity costs but also their budgets overall because when it comes to planning and delivering services, local government has a role to play at the grassroots level in every community across the Territory. The local government sector has responded well to any expected cost rises. Councils have responded by preparing their budgets. They have been planning for a number of months what services they will deliver and what

revenue they will generate through grants, rates and other fees and charges—dump fees, for example—so they know what their budget looks like for the next 12 months.

So far, I have seen a couple of things in the media from local government. Local government is well prepared to deliver services, and I commend the work that local government does across the Northern Territory. Working with some of the different councils and listening to some of the challenges …

Mr SMELT: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. We still have not got to the total cost for the financial year for local governments.

Mr EDGINGTON: I was getting to the services that local government delivers.

I reflect on the recent local government forum in Canberra. Local governments from across Australia are asking the federal government to increase the funding for local government across the board. Just as the Northern Territory Government is underfunded by the federal government, local government has suffered year-in, year-out when it comes to service delivery and maintaining roads. The federal government not only has underfunded the NT but also is underfunding local government.

Local governments are well prepared, and they will continue to deliver the services that Territorians expect.

Maternity Infrastructure Improvements

Mrs ZIO to MINISTER for HEALTH

Supporting Territorians with a better and stronger health system is central to making the Territory the best place to work, live and invest. Having good public maternity services is an important part of the CLP government's commitment to restoring our unique Territory lifestyle. Other members of our CLP government and I have been advocating for this because every family deserves the best possible start, and better maternity services mean safer births and healthier mums and bubs. Stronger maternity services improve health outcomes and support families during one of their most important moments. Our CLP government has been advocating to the federal government for upgrades to public maternity services for some time. Can you provide an update to Territory families on maternity infrastructure improvements?

Ms Uibo: It took the minister eight months to pick up the phone. It was eight months before he asked for help.

Madam SPEAKER: The Minister for Health will be heard in silence.

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I congratulate all our colleagues in the Chamber because over the last 12 months we have been advocating strongly to the federal government to increase funding for maternity services in the Northern Territory.

Upgrades to the Royal Darwin Hospital maternity ward were neglected by the former Labor government. It had nearly 20 years to work on it. What did Labor do? Nothing. While our CLP colleagues advocated across the board for more money and better services and infrastructure, we have heard crickets from across the Chamber.

Who was the last Health minister, prior to the CLP coming to government? It was the Opposition Leader, who had every opportunity to do something about the maternity ward at Royal Darwin Hospital. What did she do? She did nothing. We did not hear her advocating; she was silent on the issue. She allowed the staff to put up with conditions that are unsatisfactory. Worst of all, she allowed the infrastructure to deteriorate to such a standard that mothers were giving birth in a clearly unacceptable situation.

We have been advocating strongly since the federal government provided money for the Central Coast in New South Wales and for Tasmania. We continued fighting for Territory mothers and their families.

I am pleased to announce that yesterday, through working with the federal government, there is $10m to upgrade the maternity ward at Royal Darwin Hospital. I thank the federal government, particularly the federal minister for Health, whom I have been working with to identify and work through these issues at a time when we have heard nothing from the Labor opposition.

I thank the Member for Fannie Bay, who has been having regular meetings with the mothers' group, Our Birth, Our Voice. I thank all of them for the contribution they have made to helping us advocate for more money for the maternity ward.

While this $10m is welcome …

Madam SPEAKER: Your time has expired, minister.

Schools – Utilities Cost

Ms UIBO to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

What will the 5.3% increase in power, water and sewerage prices cost our Territory public schools? Will schools be forced to absorb that cost? Will you guarantee that not a single dollar of Better and Fairer Schools funding will be diverted to paying higher utility bills for our Territory schools?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, we will not leave schools languishing like the previous Labor government did …

Ms Boothby: She was the Education minister too.

Mrs HERSEY: … with poor attendance. She was one of four Education ministers, Member for Brennan.

There was poor school attendance and poor literacy and numeracy across the Territory.

Our CLP government is making sure that we are getting kids back in school. There has been a boost of 1.2% in attendance rates. We have teachers boosting literacy and numeracy.

As happened last year, schools will not be paying for those extras. Last year they were funded by the department, and arrangements were made with schools that had higher power prices.

We are working hard across the Territory to get kids back to school. There are only 20 teacher vacancies across the Territory, which is the lowest we have seen in over a decade. We have had a 1.2% increase in attendance across the Territory. We are boosting literacy and numeracy by getting explicit teaching happening. There are school-based constables and Aboriginal liaison officers in schools.

Mr Kerle: We have the anthem back in our schools.

Mrs HERSEY: Yes, thank you, Member for Blain. We are now making sure that children in schools are proud of their heritage and proud of who we are as a Territory, making sure that they know what Territory Day means—which is not just about blowing things up—the roots of self-government and both verses of the national anthem. The department is working hard. Yesterday I got a video of Ramingining students singing the national anthem, which was great to see.

We still have a lot of work to do. We will not take our foot off the pedal …

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; the question was specifically about the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. Will the minister guarantee that not a single dollar of that will pay the 5.3% increase in power, water and sewerage costs for our Territory schools?

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: The minister has answered the question.

Mrs HERSEY: The Opposition Leader has cloth ears because I answered that part of her question. She was probably too busy talking to her colleagues and not listening.

Ms Uibo: No, you said from last year.

Madam SPEAKER: Opposition Leader!

Mrs HERSEY: This side of the House knows we cannot trust Labor. We are making sure that we get kids back in schools, put teachers on permanent contracts and boost literacy and numeracy across the Territory.

Katherine Work Camp

Mr KERLE to MINISTER for CORRECTIONS

Following our joint visit to the Katherine work camp last Friday, can you update the Assembly on how the government's investment in this new facility is delivering a nation-first model that combines vocational education, rehabilitation and employment pathways for low-security prisoners? In particular, how is this work camp supporting the Katherine community in the wake of recent floods? How are preparations at the CDU rural campus shaping the next prisoner intake and strengthening rehabilitation outcomes?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Blain is genuinely concerned about reducing crime in the Northern Territory. He listened to the people in August 2024. One of our strategies is to reduce crime, and that is what we are doing. The Member for Blain has a real interest in the Corrections system because he knows that this government will put victims' rights over the rights of offenders. We will reduce crime, and this is one part of it.

It was a good opportunity to walk around that facility together and see the camp firsthand. We spoke directly to the staff and prisoners about their work on the ground in and around Katherine during the floods and for the Katherine Show.

Unlike Labor, our government is committed to breaking the cycle of reoffending, and the Katherine work camp is a step forward to help us do so. In our year of growth, certainty and security, this government is committed to the new 200-bed facility in Katherine. This is a year of growth, and this is part of our growth to keep the community safe and grow our community.

The partnership between CDU and the prison is groundbreaking because the facility has them together in one spot. The open-rated prisoners work with CDU onsite to do training and rehabilitation. Then they use those skills to make the Katherine community better. People in Katherine can see the prisoners doing jobs, picking up rubbish, cleaning graffiti and paying their debt to society. That is what this government is about. Education is the key to reducing that cycle, and this facility has them operating jointly. The prisoners are on one side, and the CDU staff are on the other. The prisoners train at the facility, giving them the best opportunity to break the cycle of reoffending. Having the prisoners together gives them a real opportunity for a pathway out of that cycle.

Unlike the previous Labor government which did not care, we have this model which is working and delivering.

Mr Kerle: You cannot trust Labor.

Mr MALEY: You certainly cannot trust Labor.

The real strength of this program is the dedication of the staff, who turn up with practical experience and do the training. This is unlike Labor's Back on Track program which cost $35m and 35 people finished it. This is the difference between our government and Labor's: we are committed to breaking that cycle, reducing crime, growing our economy and restoring our lifestyle. That is what we are here to do.

Mr Paech: Time is up.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Gwoja, we can all read the clock, thank you.

YiSSA Crisis Accommodation

Mr SMELT to MINISTER for CHILDREN and FAMILIES

What alternative accommodation options are you pursuing for the 400-plus people, including children, currently relying on YiSSA for a roof over their heads, given all existing crisis and short-term accommodation in Darwin is bursting at the seams? Can you guarantee that they will have a safe place to stay before you close YiSSA in under 90 days?

Mr Paech: And do not fall off the axis.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Gwoja!

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I am glad the member asked this question, because it has been such an incredibly challenging time as we work to make sure that we can provide good, solid, secure housing for those in need.

Since coming to government, we have increased homelessness services from 67 to 103, and a significant number of them cover accommodation options. We have been working closely with the sector to see what we can do better, how we can house people safely, get them home and make sure that every night they know they have somewhere to sleep.

The sad reality of the situation with the Batten Road facility is that the proponents those opposite leased infrastructure from—government-owned land which somebody else built stuff on. We pay nearly $3m a year just to lease the infrastructure back so that we can house people in that accommodation structure.

We have been working with the proponents over the last almost two years. We knew we needed to do something, and that this project would come to an end. We made a fair offer and they turned us down. We continued to negotiate. We got close to the end of the contract and extended the YiSSA contract by a year to enable us to facilitate a good result for everybody, and we now find ourselves four months out from the end of the lease and the proponents, Ausco, just would not come to the party.

We offered them that they would not have to make good on that site. That would be millions of dollars of savings to them. Not only that, we offered them $3m as—I cannot really call it compensation because we already compensated them by telling them that they did not need to renovate the site, and they turned us down. They wanted somewhere between $8m and $12m—extortion! We simply cannot justify it. I am …

Mr SMELT: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; we have not gotten anywhere close to what will happen in the next 90 days to all the people living at YiSSA.

Madam SPEAKER: I think the minister might be getting to it.

Mr Paech: Where are the 400 people going?

Ms Uibo: Four hundred—160 kids.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Gwoja and Opposition Leader, it is not your call.

Ms CAHILL: We will spend that money wisely. We are working with the sector to look for alternative options. We are negotiating with various proponents in the sector and asking how we can work with them to get a much better value proposition for these people who need that security.

Nobody will be on the street. We are working to house the about 300 people in that facility—it is not 400. We will make sure they are cared for and looked after appropriately.

YiSSA Crisis Accommodation – Supplementary Question

Mr SMELT to MINISTER for CHILDREN and FAMILIES

Can you guarantee that everyone at YiSSA will have a safe place to stay within the next 90 days?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I will repeat the sentence I just said for the Member for Nightcliff. We will work to make sure that everybody who is currently accommodated in YiSSA is cared for.

Victims of Crime

Mrs CARLSON to ATTORNEY-GENERAL

While those opposite remain distracted by a crisis entirely of their own making, the Finocchiaro CLP government remains focused on the people who really matter—that is, victims of crime and all Territorians. One of the clearest commitments the CLP made was to put victims first and ensure offenders are held

accountable for the harm they cause. Can you update Territorians on how this government is delivering greater support for victims of crime, strengthening offenders' accountability and continuing to unwind Labor's crime crisis?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I know how much time the Member for Wanguri spends in her electorate supporting victims of crime. I thank her for that work, and I know that the people in her electorate appreciate that because they need support when they become victims of crime.

We were elected by Territorians to reduce crime and put victims first, and that is exactly what we are doing. I have spoken about the fact that we now have 10,000 fewer victims of crime under the CLP government compared with under Labor. Member for Wanguri, hopefully that means there will be fewer people you need to spend time with and support because they are victims.

Last year we increased the victims levy which means that the offenders who are found guilty pay more for their crimes. That money goes into the victims assistance fund. More victims can have more support, which is exactly what they should be getting. I am proud to say that this has resulted in more than $3.59m in that victims fund. That is an increase of 24% compared with before we made that amendment in this House.

It is such a contrast when you compare this CLP government with the former Labor government which let crime get out of control. Victim numbers were through the roof. Crime rates were through the roof. You only have to look at the fact that crime increased by almost 40% under Labor and it is coming down under the CLP. The number of victims of crime has fallen under the CLP by 12.8%, which is monstrous. Assaults were up by almost 60% under Labor, but they are down by 10% under the CLP government. Commercial crime climbed through the roof under Labor, and it did not care about the businesses that were being broken into. The CLP has reduced commercial break-ins by 29%; that is incredible. Domestic violence is one of the most horrific crimes, and victims endure so much. Under Labor it rose by 83%; under the CLP government it is down by 13%.

Mr Paech: Under the CLP, crime is up in Palmerston.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Gwoja!

Ms BOOTHBY: Territorians know that you cannot trust Labor to reduce crime, but the CLP can do that. Territorians know that they cannot trust Labor to provide consequences for offenders and reduce the number of victims. Only a CLP government can and is doing that.

Nurses and Midwives – Stop Workplace Violence and Aggression Campaign

Ms UIBO to MINISTER for HEALTH

Yesterday the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation of the NT launched its Stop Workplace Violence and Aggression campaign with a 10-point action plan that the Territory Labor opposition fully supports. You did not attend the launch, and you tried to get the ANMF to water down the wording of its plan, rather than supporting it in full.

Can you explain to our hardworking health staff why you tried to water down an action plan that was aimed at getting threats, abuse and violence against nurses and midwives to cease? What is your CLP government doing to address the 10 points that are contained in the pledge and in this action plan to ensure that our Territory health staff can come to work in a safe environment?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, this is an issue that we feel strongly about. That is why we introduced laws to protect our frontline staff. We introduced mandatory sentencing for anyone showing violence towards our frontline workers, including midwives and nurses. We have taken the steps that Labor failed to take when it was in government.

We know—we have heard it many times today—that you cannot trust Labor to do anything. The Opposition Leader was the Health minister for the 12 to 18 months prior to the last election. She had many opportunities to bring in legislation to protect our frontline workers, but what did she do? Nothing.

There is no place for any violence against any of our frontline staff, including nurses, doctors and midwives. It simply will not be tolerated under this government. We already heard that crime is going down under our government. We are rolling out 150 personal duress alarms. We also have security at the ED 24 hours a day to respond to occupational violence and aggression against our staff.

The Leader of the Opposition says that we tried to water down a 10-point plan. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I said, you cannot trust Labor. We have not tried to water down anything. We strengthened the laws to protect our frontline staff in the Northern Territory, which Labor did not do in the 20-odd years that it had the opportunity to do so.

I was not there yesterday. The chief executive of the Health department represented us at the signing of the 10-point plan. Nothing has been watered down. In fact, the last time I met with the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation, I expressed my support for the 10-point plan. For the Opposition Leader to suggest that we tried to water that down is fabricated nonsense.

I thank all our frontline nurses and midwives. I thank the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation. The last time I can recall Labor froze their wages. We are working with them to increase their wages and protect them on the front line.

Bus Network – Update

Mr PATEL to MINISTER for LOGISTICS and INFRASTRUCTURE

The CLP government has been clear that reducing crime across the Territory is a priority, and we are seeing encouraging data emerging across a range of areas. Can you update the Assembly on what the latest statistics show regarding safety on the Territory's bus network? In particular, can you outline what the data tells us about incidents on buses, at the interchanges and across the network? How are the CLP government's actions contributing to improvements while continuing to make public transport safer for all Territorians?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, this is an important question because safety on our bus network has been a priority for the CLP since we came to government. It was not a priority for those opposite. We know the issues our bus drivers faced on the network with the security screens; the previous government did nothing to deal with it. What was one of the first things that we did on coming into government? We made that a priority to make sure that our drivers were safe. They are real practical steps to restore safety for drivers, transit officers and our passengers.

You could not trust Labor to deal with antisocial and criminal behaviour on our public transport network, but we got in and dealt with it. The numbers are showing that. When we compare the last 12 months of the Labor government with the last 12 months of our government, we see that total jobs on our public transport network attended by transit officers are down by 51%; driver requests for assistance are down by 32%; alcohol and drug-related incidents on our buses are down by 55%; incidents occurring on buses are down by 42%; and serious incidents attended are down by 67%. These are significant real reductions. That goes to show the work that we are doing is having results, and that is what we want to see.

Now we have the PPSOs on the network. As the Chief Minister said, our first 21 PPSOs are on the ground and they are also working with our bus network to reduce the incidence of crime and antisocial behaviour.

That is just the incidents on the network. There is other stuff about worker safety which we are committed to. Assaults on our bus drivers are down by a staggering 77.8%. That is huge number, and it makes a real difference to our drivers. Assaults on transit officers are also down by 56%. That is what we want to see: safer conditions for the people who are out there who keep our public transport network running.

Since the closure of the Casuarina interchange, incidents on Bradshaw Terrace have gone down by 77%. The Member for Casuarina was a huge advocate for that change. Now we have done it we see the results at the Casuarina shopping centre, with antisocial and criminal behaviour reducing significantly.

There is still more work to do. We gave a commitment to deal with issues at the Palmerston bus interchange. That work is underway. We are working through how we will make that happen. There are some lessons learned from Casuarina that we will implement in Palmerston.

We are fully committed to making our bus network and our public transport network safer.

Home Builds – Alice Springs

Mr PAECH to MINISTER for HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

What is your target for new home builds in Central Australia, specifically urban—in the town of Alice Springs—and the remote communities across the bush? People are asking, and we need to know: how many new homes are you planning to construct this year across Central Australia?

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please!

Who exactly are you directing this question to?

Mr PAECH: It has long been touted by the government that Bill Yan is the Minister for Housing Construction …

Madam SPEAKER: Just answer the question.

Mr PAECH: That is who I have asked a question of.

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I thought the Member for Gwoja directed the question to the Member for Barkly, but I am happy to answer the question.

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Can you all pause.

Minister, answer the question.

Mr YAN: I am pleased to answer the question. I spoke about this at length in Estimates.

There is an issue we inherited from the previous government that we are dealing with now. There was a push to deliver housing and construct modular housing for delivery out bush, but the previous Labor government forgot to get blocks ready to deliver that housing to. That has been a focus of our government and the department for the last 12 months. We have been working hard to develop subdivisions in our remote communities so that we can get the housing that is desperately needed into those areas.

We are also working in Central Australia. The Member for Braitling is working on the project at the St Mary's site to deliver a number of blocks for social housing and to put in place housing for vulnerable women. That has been lacking in Central Australia. Up to 80 to 100 lots will be available in that area once that is completed. We committed to doing the headworks and we are working with the Commonwealth to deliver the funding to get that project rolling.

We are working hard across the regions to make sure we get the subdivisions done and the lots ready to deliver housing …

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. I asked a direct question of the Minister for Housing Construction: what is the government's target for remote communities in Central Australia and Alice Springs in the financial year?

Madam SPEAKER: Minister, you have the call.

Mr YAN: As at May 2026, there was $14.8m of the $32.8m committed from the Social Housing Accelerator Payment funding, with the construction of eight new homes in the northern suburbs of Darwin. They were completed in June. We are getting two homes brought back online in Alice Springs.

There are a further 19 new homes across regions that are anticipated to be completed in this financial year, with another 25 homes awarded to contractors for completion in the next financial year. Again, that is dependent on the lots to put these houses on. In the Member for Gwoja's electorate, we developed housing blocks at Hermannsburg. We are doing some stuff at Yuendumu so that we can deliver. However, it is not just those two …

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. The minister has given us numbers. I am asking the government directly: what is the target number for Central Australian remote communities and the town of Alice Springs? The government must have a target.

Madam SPEAKER: I think the minister is answering the question.

Mr YAN: Under the federal funding agreement, we have an additional 99 homes underway across the Territory.

I am happy to supply housing figures to the Member for Gwoja. I am happy to take that question on notice, but I have a funny feeling it was asked in Estimates and we provided those numbers then. I am not sure why the question has come up again, but I am happy to provide those numbers on notice to the Member for Gwoja at a later stage.

Foster and Kinship Carer Payments

Mr HOWE to MINISTER for CHILDREN and FAMILIES

Foster and kinship carers open their homes to Territory children at the toughest moments of their lives, often at short notice and with nothing but a phone call's warning.

Can you update the Assembly on how the Finocchiaro CLP government is backing the Territorians who step up for our most vulnerable children, by increasing foster and kinship carer payments after eight years of neglect under those opposite?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, as someone who has hands-on experience in the youth officer support space, the Member for Drysdale has a strong feeling and connection to the people who open their homes and hearts to kids in need. I know that he is doing a lot of work in his electorate to support foster and kinship carers and the children in their care.

One of the amazing things about this group of people is how giving they are. No matter how much you ask of them, they are always prepared to do a little more. One of the things they should not have to do is dip into their own pockets for the basic necessities when they are looking after children. For that reason, after 12 years of no increase in the placement support payment—it was $200 under those opposite—we have increased it to $1,000.

When those people open their arms, homes and hearts to these kids who need immediate support, they will know that they can provide them with the basics for immediate care and support. They can do it easily and comfortably, which is important because the last thing we want them worrying about is how they pay for the nappies, food and whatever else they need to help those kids in a moment of crisis.

We have also uplifted the carer payments by 10%. It was immediate and no-one had to wait; it happened automatically. We did this because we know the cost of living is increasing and we need to support the families who look after children who are in desperate need at times of crisis so that they can support those children without stressing about how they clothe and feed them when they open their hearts.

One of the things that has been most beneficial working with the foster carers and kinship carers is their willingness to share their stories with us. When I first met with them, they were cautious; they felt that opening up about how they were feeling and what they needed would come back to bite them on the proverbial because that was their experience under the previous government.

As we have heard, you cannot trust the opposition to keep things close and protected, and these people need and deserve that. That is why we are supporting them in education and wellbeing and making sure that the payments are reflective of the costs and the support we give them is meaningful.

We are giving them a voice at the table. We have created a carer network where they can directly input into the situations they are dealing with and where they can give advice and information to the department that will help guide us to look after these children and the people who open their homes to them.

Data Centres – Water Usage

J DAVIS to MINISTER for TRADE, BUSINESS and ASIAN RELATIONS referred to MINISTER for WATER RESOURCES

You asserted:

> *The scientific evidence suggests that we have so much water underground in the Northern Territory that it actually impacts the axis of the Earth when we have a really bad wet season. So we need to use some of it, otherwise we might find ourselves flipping the poles again.*

That is a striking claim to make while promoting the Territory to data centre investors. Given scientists are already warning that NT stations are taking unsustainable amounts of underground water, which water scientists have you consulted with to find out the capacity of the watertable to support data centres, and what did they say? If this is the level of rigour being used to sell our water to data centre investors, can you identify every company, investor, consultant or industry representative you have met with regarding its strategy, and advise what commitments and incentives have been sought to ensure that Territorians get something in exchange for our land, water and energy?

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: The minister will be heard in silence.

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I am not exactly sure what the question was. The statement that I made about the impact and the volume of water that is often in subterranean water storage under the Territory is a NASA-proven statistic, and I will be more than happy to provide that to the Member for Johnston. If you want to know about water, Member for Johnston, you should be talking to the Minister for Lands, Planning and Environment, so I will pass the question to him.

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Everyone, sit down; that includes you, Member for Johnston. I would like everyone to be a little respectful. Obviously, this is a more controversial question.

Member for Johnston, did you have a point of order?

J DAVIS: Yes, my question went beyond water use. There were aspects …

Madam SPEAKER: No, please take your seat. That is not a point of order.

J DAVIS: She is referring it to another minister to answer.

Madam SPEAKER: Which she can do. Member for Johnston, that is not a point of order.

Mr BURGOYNE: Madam Speaker, as the Minister for Water Resources I can confirm there is plenty of water across the Northern Territory for development. Some 170,000 megalitres is currently available in the Georgina Wiso, and there are 70,000 megalitres …

Mr Paech: Has NASA said so?

Mr O'GALLAGHER: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: No. Take your seat, please.

Member for Gwoja, if I hear your voice again you will be spending an hour outside cooling off.

Mr BURGOYNE: The Member for Gwoja is excited he got to ask a question. It seems to be the Leader of the Opposition and the deputy show today; no-one else is allowed to ask a question.

We have a lot of water in the Northern Territory. It is licensed, and we have water allocation plans, which are an important part of how we ensure there is water for the community and for development. There are

170,000 megalitres available in the Georgina Wiso Water Allocation Plan. There is also 70,000 megalitres available in the Aboriginal water reserve. That is water for Aboriginal people who are on Aboriginal land. As part of these water allocation plans, should they choose to do so, they could work with a data centre to trade that water and receive a financial impact. That is what our government is about—driving opportunity across the Northern Territory so that everyone can benefit.

When we talk about data centres—everyone has been speaking about this more recently; it seems to be a big topic—we want to ensure that they are doing the right thing by the environment and that if they need water, they put in for a water allocation, have a licence and bring their own power. We are working on this with proponents across the Northern Territory, and I commend the minister for …

J DAVIS: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. The question was: which water scientists have you consulted to find out the capacity of the watertable to support data centres, and will you table that?

Mr BURGOYNE: We have some of the finest water scientists in the Water Resources Division. The Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations is working with those data centre proponents that want to come to the Northern Territory. They will have to work across agencies to ensure that they are doing the right thing by the Northern Territory, the environment and water resources so that they can operate and have a positive impact on our economy.

School Attendance

Dr RAHMAN to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

It was my privilege to celebrate with you the return of students to school for Term 3 at Stuart Park Primary School, which is in my electorate of Fong Lim and coincidentally is turning 60 today. As I have said before, Stuart Park is an excellent school with over 90% classroom attendance. Can you update the Assembly on the return of students for Term 3 across the whole Northern Territory and outline what the Northern Territory Government is doing to encourage strong school attendance across all Territory schools so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, we were at Stuart Park with Principal Maria Albion, welcoming in Term 3. It was fantastic to be there with the Member for Fong Lim and talk about our attendance figures bouncing back by 1.2 percentage points. That is small, but mighty, with all the work that we are doing.

It has been a power of work; in fact, three of my 5.5 hours of Estimates was spent with opposition members asking me about attendance. As I stated then, it would have been great if they had spent so much time and effort to try to get kids to school when they were in government. Shame on them; the attendance rates plummeted, and there was a secret list of students who were not in the attendance rates. We have now brought them into the attendance rates, calling them the intensive support students.

We are making sure that across the Territory—I have spoken about this for the last two years until I am blue in the face—we have attendance teams. I was out with the attendance teams last week in Katherine. They are talking with families and working with students and schools. We have engagement officers and Aboriginal liaison officers in schools. Counsellors are back in the schools; the previous Labor government had them in the Mitchell Centre.

We are working hard on many measures to make sure that children get to school. We are holding parents accountable and making sure that students go to school every day and families are supported to get their young people to school. Every school must have an attendance plan so that they know the families they need to work with and put in an extra effort for. We need to ensure that every child has an opportunity, no matter where they are, to get an education at school.

Going into this term we had the lowest number of teacher vacancies across the Territory. For the last 10 years there were a high number of teacher vacancies, but this term there are only 20 teacher vacancies. We are making sure that every child across the Territory has a teacher in their classroom.

As the Minister for Education and Training, I will not apologise for the hard work or compliance visits we do because, at the end of the day, the people who are not complying will receive a fine. Some of those families will be referred to the federal government for income management.

We will continue to do the hard work in raising attendance rates because education matters.

Madam SPEAKER: I give the call to the Member for Nightcliff.

Mr Howe: He has got a knife, Madam Speaker—he already used it.

Madam SPEAKER: What was that?

Mr HOWE: I withdraw, Madam Speaker. I was making a comment about him knifing.

Madam SPEAKER: Just withdraw.

Mr HOWE: I withdraw.

Infill Development

Mr SMELT to MINISTER for LANDS, PLANNING and ENVIRONMENT

You are getting ready to allow suburban blocks to be subdivided to 450 square metres to allow two houses on a single block. This could change the face of many established suburbs in Darwin and Alice Springs, with potential impacts for traffic flow, parking, street amenity, breezeways, ventilation and the capacity of essential services.

Territorians have been given just 28 days to comment on your plans to make this change a reality, and Territorians deserve better. Will you commit to a comprehensive and genuine consultation process before making this change, rather than a blink-and-you-miss-it 28-day exhibition period? If not, why are you shutting out Territorians' voices when it comes to the future of their streets and suburbs?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I do not think the Deputy Opposition Leader knows what he is on about. He talks about increasing housing demand to ensure that there is housing for all; he is against Lee Point. I am not sure what he wants. Do you want more houses or not, Deputy Opposition Leader? It is a bit uncertain.

Members interjecting.

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 20; I cannot hear what he is trying to say due to the government's interjections on its own minister.

Madam SPEAKER: Good point. It would be nice if everyone could remain silent and listen to the minister.

Minister, direct your comments through me.

Mr BURGOYNE: Certainly, Madam Speaker. I thank the Member for Gwoja for that. He is trying to get up into that number two position.

This government has a vision for the future of the Northern Territory: every Territorian being able to own their own home. We are working towards that through a range of different measures. It does not matter whether they want to be in Holtze or Durack or to enjoy some of the wonderful sights that the Member for Nightcliff has in his electorate; that dream can become a reality for them.

With infill development, if people have large blocks of land and want to subdivide, we are saying to the community, 'Have your say on what you believe that would look like. Do you think that is the right idea for our communities?' This side of the House is about practical projects that will see the Territory develop. Through our $50,000 first home builder grants, we are delivering on that promise and vision for Territorians. It is an exciting prospect.

Whilst those on the other side of the Chamber, who do not know whether they are for or against housing projects, are saying that they want more housing for those who are at risk whilst also being against infill development, we on this side of the House have a clear vision. It is one that delivers homes for Territorians, no matter where they live, and ensures that first home builders can get into the marketplace, whereas previously they could not. On this side of the House we understand—I used to be an electrician by trade—

just how hard Territorians have to work to get into the housing market. It is a hard slog, but we are helping them.

Unlike those opposite who have been here for five minutes and do not understand the whole principle of what it is to be a Territorian, I am proud to be on this side of the House and working with communities across the Territory to deliver real housing outcomes. We will continue to do that, and I look forward to receiving the feedback from the community regarding infill development.

Planning Reforms

Mr MACKAY to MINISTER for LANDS, PLANNING and ENVIRONMENT

After years of going backwards under Labor, Territorians elected the Finocchiaro CLP government to rebuild our economy. In our government's year of growth, certainty and security, can you update the Assembly on how our government is getting the Territory economy moving by cutting red tape, delivering faster approval times and growing confidence for Territorians?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, while those opposite have been focused on cutting Deputy Opposition Leaders, we have been focused on cutting red tape. Our actions are delivering results.

Under Labor, we were last time and again in the CommSec report. Labor members simply threw them in the bin. Our government is delivering and, under the guidance of the Treasurer, we are now up to fourth. I hope we get even higher.

We promised to cut approval timeframes by 50%, and we are well on our way to achieving that outcome. The Approvals Fast-Track Taskforce was formed as soon as we came to government and produced a document about saying yes to business. That is what our government is all about. The final report had 70 recommendations. I am proud as the Minister for Lands, Planning and Environment to be responsible for 31 of those 70 recommendations.

As a government, 58 of the recommendations are now completed across the board. In Lands, Planning and Environment, 29 of them have been completed. There are only 12 to go, and we will continue that work.

Some of the significant reforms delivered include expediting low-risk development applications, saving approximately 14 days. Low-risk buildings are exempt from submitting a new planning application for minor changes. Certain Crown land transactions are exempt from requiring subdivision. NT Planning Scheme changes include converting low-risk developments to permitted use.

We are working now to amend minimum lot sizes and restrictions on lots limited to single dwellings. We have streamlined water renewal processes; are simplifying the water licensing regime into two tiers from three; and are updating risk criteria and standard conditions for exploration and extractive activities to streamline approval processes.

Whilst I am talking about extractive industries, the mighty Tanami goldmine—for those who do not know, the Melbourne Cup is travelling through the Territory at the moment. Many people in the Northern Territory may not know that the Melbourne Cup is made from 100% Tanami gold.

On Melbourne Cup Day, whilst the jockeys might be whipping those horses, those opposite will probably be sacking their Whips, but on this side of the House we are focused on delivering for Territorians. We are developing a risk-based approach to waste discharge activities in the Northern Territory because we understand how important that is.

Faster approvals and less red tape means businesses can avoid unnecessary costs and delays. Whilst Labor continues to cut deputies and shuffle its shadow Cabinet, we will continue to focus on cutting red tape and managing our economy.

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I ask that any further questions be placed on the Written Question Paper.

CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (EVERY CHILD MATTERS) BILL
Serial 67

Continued from earlier this day.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Blain, you have six minutes remaining on your contribution.

Mr KERLE (Blain): Madam Speaker, I thank the hardworking staff of the Hansard office who helped me get back to where I am in my speech.

This Bill introduces a power for the court to appoint a legal representative for a child so that the child has a voice in legal proceedings about them—where they will live and who their legal guardians will be. This is essential. When decisions are made about children, where they will grow up and who their primary caregivers will be, it is important that their voice is central to the decision-making.

It also gives a voice to the foster carers in those same legal proceedings. I put on the record my gratitude to all the hardworking foster and kinship carers. There are many foster carers in my electorate who take on the hard work of children who were damaged by their home environment to the extent that the department was forced to take them into custody. Even under the previous government and the Act as it stands, they take in children, who might have profound disabilities, hearing loss, FASD, oppositional defiance disorder, insecure attachment and all kinds of things, and love them and give them a secure home and all the foundations of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which a child needs.

Children thrive on structure and routine …

Mr Young: It is not funny; do not laugh.

Mr KERLE: It was something else; sorry.

Madam SPEAKER: Please, no interjections.

Mr KERLE: I will never forget doorknocking in Palmerston a few years ago and coming across a lady who had two young Indigenous children in her care. They were the same age as my eldest boy. My eldest boy at the time was toilet trained and speaking in sentences and we were working on colours, numbers and the alphabet. These beautiful young children—absolutely gorgeous with big bright eyes and happy smiles—were still in nappies and unable to talk. They grunted, I will say. It broke my heart that children in the modern era, in this day and age, when we have iPhones, rockets, the internet and all this technology, can still suffer this kind of neglect. Children are growing up with FASD because their parents could not control their own substance addictions.

Thank you to all the foster and kinship carers. I hope that this Bill gives you the voice that you have been lacking when the placement of the child you are looking after goes to court for a judge to make a permanent order. I hope that the people who have been looking after these kids, sometimes for years on end, have the chance to have their say, along with the child, as to what should happen.

This Bill also brings in family responsibility orders—or brings them back. I thank the Member for Lingiari, Marion Scrymgour.

Mr PATEL: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move an extension of time for the Member for Blain.

Motion agreed to.

Mr KERLE: The Member for Lingiari said in the *NT News*:

> *I recently wrote to the Chief Minister proposing two things.*
>
> *…*
>
> *The second would be to bring back family responsibility orders and associated enforcement provisions, which were regrettably removed from the Youth Justice Act in 2021.*

That was by the previous Labor government:

The enforceability provisions were designed to get parents to take family responsibility agreements seriously.

The Member for Lingiari knows what she is talking about, because she was the minister who brought in the *Care and Protection of Children Act* in 2007. Before that, we had the Community Welfare Act 1983, which was creaking and showing its age. The Member for Lingiari, the minister at the time, must have put a lot of time and effort into that Act.

The Member for Nightcliff mentioned the Growing Them Stronger, Together report, so I will put on the record a bit of history. I know he blew into the Northern Territory just a few days ago, in 2019. You have to pull on threads. If you have not lived here, you do not know what came before and you are likely to repeat the mistakes of the past. There was another report called A Life Long Shadow, which was released by then Ombudsman Carolyn Richards. That was in the shadow of the sad death of Deborah Melville and a baby who died in a car travelling from Adelaide to Alice Springs.

When the *Care and Protection of Children Act* was brought in, the Office of the Children's Commissioner was established, but it did not have the power to initiate its own investigations; the Ombudsman did. Whistleblowers went to the Ombudsman with 17 names of other children for whom they thought things could have been done better. Ombudsman Carolyn Richards commenced an investigation, which was titled A Life Long Shadow. I encourage everyone in the Chamber and those listening and reading these words to google that report. It is still up on the website. Have a read; it is informative.

What happened to the report? There was a Labor government at the time. By this stage the relevant minister was Kon Vatskalis, and when he got wind of it he changed the law. He removed the Ombudsman's power to investigate care and protection of children matters so that they must be referred to the Children's Commissioner who did not have own-initiative investigation powers. That effectively put an end to the Ombudsman's investigation. She was forced to truncate her investigation, finish her analysis and table the report as she had it. It is an interesting report because there was not a public call for submissions and public testimony; it was a forensic investigation. She called for the production of documents and forced things to be brought out into the open.

There are many homes where safety and culture go hand in hand, and in those homes this Bill has no work to do. Unfortunately, there are many homes, and many that I see regularly, where the care of children has broken down to the point where children with FASD have grown into adults with FASD who then have children who also have FASD and other conditions, and neglect and dysfunction become locked into generational cycles.

When I see children, for whom the safest place to be is walking on the streets at night because of the violence going on at home, who are so lacking in identity and role modelling from the parents who are meant to provide it that they follow young gangsters and try to emulate them, I know more needs to be done to keep them not just protected from harm but also safe.

This Bill is a commonsense practical tool to help the Department of Children and Families to keep children safe while it works with the parents. I believe that in the long term, the workload of the department will become more manageable as it focuses on working with parents rather than screening out notifications about the same children over and again. We have more work to do, but this Bill is a fantastic start.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr BROWN (Arafura): Madam Speaker, firstly, I would like to let everyone know that I am a kinship carer and I worked extensively with youths and the child protection sector throughout my career.

When I look at Bills like this and small changes or tweaks to legislation, I always think about the holistic approach that we need to take when dealing with youths. When I was with Amity Community Services I worked with the town camps in Darwin. The youths in those town camps were close to pubs and clubs and were getting into trouble, so it was a challenging job. I always had a holistic approach to working with them. I looked at their background, their living conditions, the overcrowding and poverty.

The Member for Blain can blame the parents. The parents need to take responsibility—absolutely—but if a parent is homeless, displaced or running away from domestic violence, it is extremely difficult. I worked with youth services at the hub in Maningrida. We went into houses with families living in tents to secure that family safety. That is hard to imagine, but for a mother who is single or running away from domestic violence,

that is the best she can do in that situation. We have houses where there is overcrowding and lack of services. These issues are real. We need to look at a holistic approach and deal with health and access to specialised services in communities. There are not enough child protection staff to help families and children.

My partner and I put up our hands in 2019. The application is vigorous. You have to go through 50 pages and get police checks. They come and check your house. You have to open up your house to the people who come to assess you. They look at your living conditions and whether you have enough room and are not overcrowded. In an Aboriginal community, we had to push family away to make it possible for Rachel to come and stay with us. We have had her for eight years now. She is thriving at Haileybury, getting awards.

In regard to having kids back with their families, culture and identity play a huge role in a kid's upbringing and where they stand in their community, region and tribe. There are kids who have gone away and when they come back, they do not know their language, country or family history. They pretty much are sidelined from the family. It is extremely important that we work with families to get something going so that the kids will not be sidelined and sent away for a long time. We know that 89% of children in care in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal. They have come from somewhere. When they go back home they do not speak their language or understand the ceremonies and are left out.

The number one priority is the safety of the kid. However, we have to look at the holistic view of that child's upbringing and access to housing, health and services. These tweaks in this legislation are going in a certain direction, but we need to look at it in a holistic way. We need to fund communities and the services on the ground and get people out there. We need DCF staff on the ground in Minjilang, Warruwi and Maningrida to direct them in the right direction.

My partner and I went through the process. We struggled with the application. Every now and then, every couple of months, they come through again and say, 'We need to assess everything again—the housing condition, whether there are other people living in the house and her school results.' That is all well and good in a stable household. Unfortunately, that is not the case with most of these houses in remote communities.

One of the biggest concerns is the two-year reunification aspect of the legislation. If the housing waitlist for a family is more than five years, they have no chance of changing things in two years. You have to link that with this. Families have put in applications for houses. Houses are being built, yes; at Maningrida there are new houses. Every community is getting new houses, but moving into the house and having the family there—we have to link these things. You have people on the ground who can do the research and come back to the department with the data and tell that story. If there is a two-year window and it takes five years to get a house, there is no hope for families. I think that is a bit over the top, so I hope that the minister and others think about changing it.

Mothers and families want to hold onto their kids. Aboriginal families do; they do everything they can. Mothers have travelled to Darwin to try to apply for housing. They move communities with their kids. My partner worked at the cultural hub at Maningrida. We would have a whole lot of families over and fill out forms and try to get them on the right track, but to change their lifestyle and be away from their family—they probably do not speak English, but understand it. To come to Darwin and try to live, get a job, provide here and change their laws of living—over there it is an open house policy. If family live down the street, you can have three or four mothers along that street and be fed along the way, but it is a different kettle of fish in town; you have to fend for yourself.

We hear a lot of stories where mothers are doing everything they can, but do not have access to resources. If you are serious about tackling child protection matters in the community—I know we all mean well—start looking at remote communities and funding services and houses. Get vulnerable people on the housing reference group. Look into that for families with children who have hopped from house to house. Get them settled, then their school attendance will come up and their health will improve. From there, they will go on to jobs and bigger things.

I will end my contribution, but think about all those little points I have put across.

Mrs ZIO (Fannie Bay): Madam Speaker, I support the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill.

This Bill is about children and whether we are prepared to act earlier, smarter and with more courage. When the system is failing the very people it exists to protect, it is not about politics; it is about child safety, stability, accountability and the responsibility we owe to vulnerable children across the Northern Territory. Despite what those opposite will try to tell you, this Bill goes to the heart of what this parliament is here to do: protect

the most vulnerable people in our community. Every child in the Northern Territory deserves to be safe, secure and free from harm. That is not a slogan; it is the first responsibility of government, and it must be the first principle of child protection law.

Those opposite sat on this side of the Chamber for almost 20 years with the power to make changes and protect our most vulnerable—our children. We have come to know that those opposite are more interested in putting their ideology in front of protecting a child who is at risk. When we look into Labor's history of what it has done for children at risk over the past few decades, we see it is pretty simple: it has not done much at all.

Over the last few decades, Labor refused to act on the worst epidemic that has swept across our regions: the epidemic of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of our women and children. It refused to make changes that would protect our most vulnerable. Labor sat by and watched as the statistics grew, as children were assaulted, sexually abused and psychologically traumatised. It sat by while children died. Labor sat by and watched as the statistics grew and grew, as women were assaulted, sexually abused and psychologically traumatised. It sat by while women died. Now, Labor has the gall to criticise this government that will not stand by and watch while women and children are assaulted, sexually abused and psychologically traumatised. This is a government which will not sit by while women and children die.

This morning Labor and the so-called Independent Member for Johnston were in the park in front of this building at a rally allegedly called 'In support of child safety in the Northern Territory'. They told people that the CLP does not care about our most vulnerable—our children and women. I would argue that probably the best example of not caring about our most vulnerable—our children and women—is being in government for almost 20 years and watching the statistics go backwards, getting worse, as children are traumatised or killed. That is not caring, and it is exactly what those opposite did.

I ask the people of the Northern Territory not to get sucked into that agenda. The truth is that you cannot trust Labor. Territorians gave Labor their trust for nearly 20 years, and it has proven time and again that it cannot be trusted to act on behalf of all Territorians. That is truly dangerous.

The every child matters reforms are built on the principle that we do care. They strengthen child safety and wellbeing; improve long-term stability and permanency; increase parental accountability; support earlier intervention with families; strengthen children's participation and legal representation; and modernise working with children clearance arrangements. In plain terms, this Bill says that we should not wait until a child reaches crisis before acting.

During the public hearings one question kept coming back to me: why should we accept a system that will act only once a child is in serious trouble? That is the wrong question. The right question is: what can we do earlier while a child can still be kept safe, supported and connected? This Bill answers that question.

It strengthens the best interests of the child and makes clear that safety comes first, followed by protection from harm and exploitation; permanency and stability; culture; and stable nurturing relationships. It also requires decision-makers to consider continuity of care, long-term living arrangements, positive relationships and timely reunification or long-term care decisions. That is not harshness; that is responsibility.

I heard the criticism from those opposite, and I say this plainly: if they have a better solution, let them put it on the table. What we cannot keep doing is defending the status quo while children keep paying the price. Those opposite sat in government for nearly 20 years, and what did they leave behind? A child protection system under pressure that was too slow, too reactive and too often failing to provide the stability that children need. Labor had time—almost 20 years, as I keep saying—and power because it was in government. Labor had the chance to fix it, yet here we are, still having the same conversation because too many of the same problems were left to grow under that government.

That is why I reject the politics of blame and the core of what everyone opposite say they stand for. When those opposite cannot answer the hard questions, they point fingers. When they do not have a policy solution, they reach for outrage. When they cannot defend their bad record that they do not seem want to look at, they accuse others of bad motives. That is not leadership; that is evasion.

I address directly the suggestion that supporting this Bill makes someone racist, which is one of the things that those opposite are promoting in public forums and this Chamber. The accusation is not only wrong but also reckless. It is an attempt to shut down genuine debate by turning child protection into a culture war.

We can respect Aboriginal children, families, cultures, language and country while still insisting that a child's safety must come first. Those values are not in conflict. This Bill does not abandon Aboriginal children; it strengthens cultural connection requirements and confirms that cultural principles operate alongside the child's best interests and permanency considerations. It recognises kinship groups and self-determination, supports participation by Aboriginal children and families in significant decisions and requires cultural connection to be actively supported when children are placed outside their immediate family or community. That is not erasure; that is a serious attempt to balance safety with identifying and belonging.

During the hearings we heard the same refrain from critics that the Bill is somehow about punishment rather than support. However, that simply does not stand up to the text of the Bill. Family responsibility agreements are designed to improve child wellbeing, increase parental accountability and provide early intervention support before problems escalate. These are not punitive traps; they are structured attempts to bring families into support before matters get worse.

The questions I put to the opposition are: if a voluntary support pathway is punitive, what is your solution for families who need help early? If you reject accountability, what do you propose instead when things like school non-attendance, antisocial behaviour or serious wellbeing concerns are already emerging? If you reject early intervention, are you prepared to explain why delay is supposedly kinder?

Another issue that came through strongly at the hearings was the problem of endless short-term orders and uncertainty for children. This Bill tackles that by limiting repeated short-term orders, requiring the court to be satisfied that reunification is highly likely and that another short-term order will not undermine the child's long-term stability. That matters because children do not need endless limbo; they need certainty, continuity and safety. A child's life should not be held in permanent suspense while adults avoid making hard decisions.

The Bill also strengthens the court process by requiring evidence of proactive efforts before a protection order is sought, including what steps were taken, why they were successful, what alternatives can be considered and whether parents engaged with support services. It is an important safeguard and means that the department has to do more, prove more and account for more before asking the court for orders that affect family life.

When people say that this Bill lowers protections, I ask: how does it lower protections? The removal threshold is unchanged. The department must prove more before it can seek a protection order. The law is not handing government a blank cheque; it is imposing more process, accountability and discipline on decision-making.

I also recognise the importance of legal representation and participation for children. This Bill strengthens children's participation by requiring that they be given information in a way that they understand, be supported to participate in decisions affecting them and have their views considered according to their maturity and understanding. It also provides stronger access to legal representation before certain long-term orders can be heard. That is a meaningful reform. It treats children as people with rights and voices, not just as subjects of administrative processes.

The same is true for carers. People who have cared for a child for more than eight months may now become parties to certain proceedings, recognising the importance of long-term carers in informing the court about wellbeing and stability. That reflects reality. Children often build their strongest daily attachments with the adults who are caring for them now.

In the public hearings there was much debate about whether this Bill is somehow too radical or conservative. It is neither; it is practical. If we know a child is at risk, we should act earlier. If we know that a family needs support, we should connect them sooner. If a child needs stability, we should stop dragging them through repeated temporary arrangements. If an old system has failed too many children, we should stop pretending that the old system deserves to be preserved just for preservation's sake.

That is why I back this Bill, not because reform is easy—it is not—and not because every provision is perfect. No Bill of this significance will be beyond debate. I support it because the core purpose is right: to make child protection more timely, accountable and focused on real safety outcomes. It is not about the ideology of what people want to be right.

Nobody needs to invent blame when the record speaks for itself. For nearly two decades those opposite were in government and the problem did not get better; it got worse. The Territory did not arrive at this point by accident. It got here because too many warnings were ignored, too many opportunities were missed and too many children were left waiting for the adults in charge to act. That is why I will not join the chorus of

those who do nothing and hope for the best, just like those opposite. Doing nothing is a choice. It is not caution, wisdom or compassion; it is simply another decision to leave children where they are.

We should be proud to say that every child matters, but slogans are not enough. This Bill turns that belief into law, process and action. It tells the system that child safety comes first. It tells families that support will come earlier. It tells the court to demand evidence. It tells decision-makers to look for stability, permanency and connection. It tells vulnerable children that this is a parliament that is willing to act for them, not just talk about them.

I finish where I began: our first duty is to children who cannot protect themselves. That is why I support this Bill. That is why I reject the false claims being made against it.

The measure of this parliament will not be how loudly we argued but whether we acted before another child was harmed. Every child gets one childhood, and this Assembly can either protect that or explain why it chose not to. That is why I urge every member of this Assembly to put children first and support the Every Child Matters Bill. We can keep defending failure or we can choose children. I know which side of that choice I am on.

I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

Mr YOUNG (Daly): Madam Speaker, I will explain why I cannot support the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 in its current form.

I pick up on the comment from the Member for Fannie Bay who tried to have a dig at us about standing out the front with our legal experts, health experts, Aboriginal organisations and families whom this will impact. The CLP government members were too gutless to come out and listen to the concerns of everyone. They sit in here, hide away and pretend to put on their big shoes. The Member for Fannie Bay could not even face the people this Bill will impact. That is how gutless government members are. That is what they stand for. We will not put up with that because we care about our children.

The Member for Fannie Bay said that this is about early intervention and it is why she supports the Bill. What does early intervention look like? It ensures that people have safe housing and the ability to live in their homelands on their country and practise their language and culture. Those on the other side forget that.

Mrs Zio: Embarrassing.

Mr YOUNG: According to the Member for Fannie Bay, I am embarrassing. That is what she just said.

We know that the best place for our kids is to be on their country. That is where we need to see investment because what we are seeing from this government is cultural genocide by taking away the many investments into people in their homelands.

Mr MACKAY: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 31; previously you have made rulings about generalised statements about the government. This government is not committing cultural genocide.

Madam SPEAKER: That is not a point of order.

Mr YOUNG: Clearly, they are sitting over there in guilt. Clearly, they do not like what we have to say because we listen to the experts. We are not afraid to do that. We can live with a bit of humility in this place. We are not afraid to work with those Aboriginal organisations that tell us they know what is best.

As I said from the outset and make clear: we on this side want all our children to be safe. Every child deserves to grow up surrounded by love, stability and opportunity. There is no disagreement on that objective.

The question before us is not whether we want better outcomes for children; it is whether this Bill will achieve those outcomes. After serving on the Legislative Scrutiny Committee and carefully reviewing the Bill, reading the submissions, listening to experts during public hearings and considering the evidence presented, I reached the conclusion that this Bill will not achieve those outcomes. In fact, I fear this Bill risks achieving the opposite. It risks making an already stretched child protection system more punitive, less flexible and less capable of working alongside families to keep children safe.

The Northern Territory has one of the most complex child protection environments in Australia. Nearly 90% of children in out-of-home care in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal children. That statistic alone should

remind every member in this Chamber that any reform to child protection must be developed with extraordinary care, deep consultation and a genuine understanding of the realities faced by Territory families. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

Throughout the inquiry witness after witness acknowledged that the child protection system needs reform. Nobody argued that the status quo is unacceptable, but almost every organisation also told us that this Bill is not the answer. In fact, 130 of the 150 people, organisations and stakeholders who submitted to the inquiry had genuine and deep concerns about this Bill.

Instead of addressing the underlying causes that bring families into contact with child protection, such as poverty, overcrowding, disability, poor access to healthcare and intergenerational trauma, the Bill introduces stronger compliance measures without ensuring families have access to the services needed to comply. The CLP continues its narrative that this is reform. Let me tell you: this is not reform.

One of the greatest concerns is the introduction of family responsibility agreements and family responsibility orders. On paper, the family responsibility agreements are described as voluntary, but witnesses repeatedly explained that many families simply will not be in a position to participate without significant support. If families cannot comply, they must instead become subject to a family responsibility order. What begins as a supposedly collaborative process quickly becomes another statutory intervention.

The approach misunderstands the lived reality of many Territory families. Parents cannot complete alcohol rehabilitation programs that do not exist. Families cannot attend parenting programs that are not available in their community. People cannot access disability services that have years-long waitlists. Women escaping family violence cannot simply comply with rigid statutory requirements while trying to keep themselves and their children safe. Legislation cannot substitute for investment in services.

I am also deeply concerned that this Bill shifts the balance from prevention and reunification towards permanency at almost any cost. Of course, children deserve stability; no-one disputes that. However, stability and connection are not mutually exclusive. For our children—Aboriginal children especially—family, language, culture and country are not optional extras; they are protective factors that are essential to our identity and wellbeing.

Throughout the inquiry we heard significant concerns that the practical operation of the Aboriginal child placement principle would be weakened. Requirements for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to participate are reduced; family involvement is narrowed; broader kinship networks become harder to consider; and reunification becomes more difficult. These are not minor technical amendments; they fundamentally alter how decisions affecting our children will be made.

History tells us painful lessons. For generations, governments believed removing Aboriginal children from their families was in their best interests. We know today the profound harm those policies caused. That history demands humility from every government considering reforms in this space. It requires us to listen, consult and ensure that we do not repeat mistakes under a different legislative framework.

Another concern raised repeatedly during the inquiry was about capacity. The government says that this Bill will improve outcomes, but where is the workforce? Where are the additional Aboriginal child protection workers, the interpreters, the family support workers, the programs to support our families, the parenting programs in remote communities, the mental health services and—as I started my speech—the investment in our homelands? Where is the investment that makes these reforms possible?

Child protection workers already carry extraordinarily high case loads, investigations regularly exceed statutory timeframes, care planning remains inconsistent and leaving care planning continues to be identified as inadequate. This Bill does not reduce that pressure; it increases it. Broader definitions of events of concern will inevitably bring more families into statutory oversight. Family responsibility agreements and orders will require additional administration, monitoring and enforcement. The department will be expected to do more with the same limited resources. That is not sustainable. It will not improve outcomes or safety for our children.

One of the strongest messages from the inquiry was remarkably consistent: stakeholders wanted reform, but they wanted genuine reform. They wanted collaboration; evidence-based policy; and Aboriginal organisations, legal experts, frontline workers, health professionals and community leaders involved in designing a better overall child protection system. Instead, many felt consultation occurred after key policy decisions had already been made. That is a missed opportunity. Almost every organisation appearing before the parliamentary inquiry told us to slow down and work with them. We could build something better, but the CLP government ignored that.

Good child protection is not measured by how many powers government gives itself. It is measured by whether fewer children enter care in the first place; families receive help early; parents overcome crises; children remain safely connected to family, country and community wherever possible; and the government invests in prevention instead of relying primarily on intervention. This Bill does not strike that balance.

Our opposition to this Bill is not ideological; it is evidence based. It reflects what I heard from those working every day with vulnerable children and families across the Territory. The concerns raised were thoughtful, practical and deeply informed by frontline experience.

I thank every individual and organisation that contributed to the inquiry. They are already overrun and have a high workload, yet they were given only one week to put in submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee. This government, and all future governments, should ensure that people have enough time to pull apart complex legislation so that the committee has the right feedback and gets the balance right. That did not happen in this case, yet 150 stakeholders, organisations and people still put in submissions. For these reasons, the Member for Johnston and I submitted dissenting reports.

I recommend that this Bill not proceed in its current form. Instead, I urge the government to undertake meaningful consultation with stakeholders, establish an independent advisory process and work collaboratively to deliver reforms that genuinely strengthen child protection without sacrificing prevention, cultural safety or opportunities for families to reunify.

I do not support this Bill in its current form.

Mr CHARLS (People, Sport and Culture): Madam Speaker, I support the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

Every child gets one childhood. Every child in the Territory deserves to be safe, secure and free from harm, regardless of their race, religion, background or where they live, but this debate is about more than protecting children from harm; it is about protecting their future and recognising the value and potential of every child. There are enormous opportunities ahead for our children, but they can seize those opportunities only if we give them the strongest possible start in life.

The child we support today could become tomorrow's nurse, teacher, tradie, engineer, small business owner, ranger, doctor, community leader or member of our Defence Force. Every child has something valuable to offer. Every child represents potential for not only themselves and their family but also the future of the Territory and our nation. However, a child cannot focus on learning when they do not feel safe. They cannot develop confidence when their life is defined by uncertainty. They cannot reach their full potential when the system waits until their family is already in crisis before offering help. That is why this Bill matters.

The current system often does little until a family reaches crisis point and the removal of a child is being considered. This Bill allows the department to step in earlier when the challenges may still be addressed, when families can still be supported and when removal may still be prevented. Removing a child is not success. The greatest success is preventing the need for removal in the first place.

Family responsibility agreements will be voluntary and offered early, connecting families with support before their circumstances reach crisis point. Family responsibility orders are also early intervention measures. They cannot remove a child, and they cannot transfer parental responsibility. The purpose is not to punish families; it is to help them address problems earlier and keep children safe within their families whenever that can be achieved.

There has been considerable misinformation about this Bill, so let me be clear: the threshold for removing a child is unchanged. It has not been lowered or loosened; it remains unchanged. In fact, the Bill requires the department to demonstrate more before it can ask a court to remove a child. The department must show what efforts were made, why those efforts did not succeed and what other options were considered. That is a higher bar for the department, not a lower bar for families.

The Bill also ends the cycle of successive short-term orders by limiting them to two orders or no more than one a year. Children should not spend year after year living in uncertainty, wondering where they belong or what will happen next. Stability matters to a child's development. It affects their education, relationships, mental health and ability to plan for their future. A child who has experienced trauma needs stability, consistent care and a genuine sense of belonging. They deserve the opportunity to attend school regularly, build lasting friendships, develop their talents and imagine a positive future. That does not mean parents are

permanently cut off after two years. Section 137 allows a parent to apply to the court at any time to vary or revoke an order when their circumstances have changed.

The reforms also give children legal representation before permanent care or long-term orders are made. Carers who have cared for a child for at least eight months may become parties to proceedings, ensuring the court can hear from people who understand the child's daily life and needs.

The Bill retains principles specific to Aboriginal children. Kinship carers close to the child's community are prioritised. When an Aboriginal child is placed with a non-Aboriginal carer, that carer must support the child's connection to family, community, culture, language and country. Culture and identity are not optional additions to a child's wellbeing; they are central to a child's sense of belonging and their future.

We must also be clear that poverty and homelessness are not neglect. A child cannot be removed simply because a family lacks housing or access to services. Circumstances must be assessed holistically, and families must be given meaningful support.

This Bill underwent substantial scrutiny. The Legislative Scrutiny Committee considered 150 submissions and heard from 38 witnesses representing 16 organisations over two days of hearings. It recommended that the Assembly pass the Bill.

The Foster and Kinship Carers Association NT and the Northern Territory Police Association also supported it in writing and gave evidence before the committee. These carers and police officers are the people who deal with these difficult circumstances every day. Their voices deserve to be heard.

Work on these reforms began in 2025. The minister has listened to carers, Aboriginal organisations, police, members of the judiciary, teachers, frontline workers and young people who have experienced the care system. We cannot keep responding to the failures of the system with another review, inquiry or report that tells us what we already know. Doing nothing is not caution; it is a decision, and it is children who pay the price. Every child matters because every child has potential.

If we intervene early to support families, protect children and provide stability, we give young people the foundation they need to succeed at school, develop skills, enter the workforce and contribute to their communities. At a time when the Territory and the nation need skilled workers, innovators, carers, builders, teachers and leaders, we cannot afford to allow even one child's potential to be lost because the system acted too late. Our responsibility is not simply to protect children through today's crisis; it is to help them build a future beyond it. A safe childhood can become a strong education. A strong education can become a skilled career. A skilled career can create independence, dignity and a contribution that strengthens the entire Territory.

The future of the Territory is not an abstract idea; it is sitting in our classrooms, playing in our parks and growing up in families and communities in our towns, cities and remote areas. Every one of those children gets only one childhood. Every one of them deserves safety, stability, opportunity and hope. Every one of them matters.

Mr GUYULA (Mulka): Mr Deputy Speaker, I say clearly that this government is wrong and the care and protection of children Bill is wrong. The Bill should be withdrawn.

This government thinks it knows what is best for Aboriginal people. Government members are not experts. They are not Aboriginal people. They have not consulted experts or Aboriginal communities, but they think they know what is best.

The former Children's Commissioner of the NT, Shahleena Musk, was also the first Aboriginal lawyer to graduate from an NT university. She is a highly respected and hardworking person. The failure of government to respect her statutory position and consult with her is disgraceful.

The Children's Commissioner is an independent statutory position created by this parliament; it should be respected. These are the leaders appointed by this balanda system because of their expertise. This is your system. This is a position that must be consulted when there are changes to the child protection system.

On behalf of me and my people, I thank the former commissioner for listening to us and standing strong for our people.

I also share her frustration with not being listened to. I am an elected member of this parliament. I have been elected three times. I was sent here by the people.

I stand here as an Aboriginal elder and a leader speaking on behalf of the communities I represent, and we are telling you that we do not want this Bill. Outside of parliament the people are telling you that they do not want this Bill. In the gallery there are people watching today who do not want this Bill because we all know that it will not make our children safer.

This government has made significant errors since the election that will cause long-lasting harm to our people, but its members are too arrogant and too ethnocentric to see beyond their culture to try to understand our *rom*—our way, our law, our culture.

One of the biggest errors is not listening to our people and not working with us. At the end of the committee hearings, the Member for Drysdale said to the CEO of the department:

> *I will just say from the last two days …*

Of hearings:

> *I am glad you have not consulted with some of the moral bankruptcy that exists …*

Of the people who gave evidence to the committee, who were morally bankrupt? Was it my countrymen? Was it my family from Gapuwiyak who said exactly what I would like to have said? Am I morally bankrupt when I tell this Chamber that this is the worst Bill that I have seen in 10 years?

I have seen a lot of concerning Bills that damage our people, but this Bill damages the heart of our communities—our children. As Theresa Roe said this morning, 'Our children are the air that we breathe and the reason that we get up every day'.

I am angry and devastated that the people in this Chamber are making decisions about the removal of our children without the decency to talk with us, work with us, listen to our solutions and fix the problems—and we are the ones who are being called morally bankrupt. This is not something I will take lightly. It will cause harm and hurt many people.

It hurts me and my family, and I do not intend to pretend that is okay. Up until this point, I have said to the government and members of this parliament, 'Come, sit down with me. Come, visit me on my country and learn about our culture.' They have chosen not to do that; they have decided that they know what is best for us.

I call on the government to withdraw this Bill and come and work with us—work with me. That is not a harsh thing to say, is it? I am only asking you to sit down with us, work with us and listen to us. Let us solve issues together, properly done. I cannot understand why we have been ignored. You are not welcome if you will threaten the safety of our children.

This Bill is underpinned by the flawed idea that safety and culture exist in conflict with one another and that decision-makers must choose between them. This is not correct. Safety and culture are combined and cannot be separated. Cultural connection is a protective factor which contributes to child safety, rather than threatening it.

If the child protection system took a child from a white family in Darwin and brought them to Milingimbi to be placed with a Yolngu family, the child would be without the language and culture they know and understand. We could provide physical safety, but there would be a level of trauma for the child, as they are placed in a foreign culture. In this sense, keeping all kids within their culture brings safety for children. For this reason, the Aboriginal child placement principle should be made stronger, not weaker.

Neglect of a child and child abuse are not part of our culture. The unsafe environments that have occurred in families and communities happened following colonisation, the forced displacement of people from their clan lands into larger communities and the disempowerment of elders through the intervention. This dysfunction is a result of things outside our culture which we are trying to manage, and we need government support for community-led solutions.

I have been calling on people here to listen to the people on the ground for a solution. Listen to us; we know what is best for ours. However, you have always said, 'No, it is okay; we have it under control for you.' This is the result when you ignore us and do not want to work with us, and now you are blaming me and my people, saying that we are doing all the no-good stuff.

The government's failure to work in partnership with our communities, listen to us and support our solutions makes children unsafe because it increases community dysfunction. I see clearly that when communities are connected to ceremony, culture and country, there are strong families and safe children. There is evidence of this across all of our communities.

For example, Garrthalala homelands—and other homelands that are now standing up to work—have a strong community-led school for children from all the surrounding homelands to attend. Every year they have a graduation celebration with healthy children who are strongly connected to country and culture and have successfully completed school. This is what we want to achieve by keeping our children on country with community-led solutions that keep them safe.

This Bill will bring more families into the courts system, rather than building strong support services around our families. It lowers the threshold for removing children, so it will be easier to remove our children and make it easier for our children to be removed permanently, forever taken from their community and families. Once the Bill passes, 70% of kids currently in care will lose critical opportunities to reunify with their families, not because the court has made the decision in the best interests of the child, but because this government has made that decision.

This government of non-Aboriginal people and a department led by non-Aboriginal people have made a decision about what is best for Aboriginal people, with no consultation and no partnership, and not on a small issue; this is an issue that is the heart and soul of every community.

Child protection has always been a part of Yolngu *rom*, our culture. When a child needs to be placed in a safer environment, we have done that within our kinship system. We all agree that children must be made safe, but the pathway the government is bulldozing does not bring safety; it is a risky pathway that brings children into greater contact with the youth justice system and possible child abuse in care.

The trauma caused by removal from culture combined with the high risk of future criminal activity and abuse in care are far too great when there is another option available. We should keep children in their communities and support families and kinship carers to create long-term safety with much lower risk to children.

The government has two choices today: it can pass this Bill that will do great damage to our communities, and maybe that is the clear intention of this government; or it can withdraw the Bill and choose to work with our communities and fund community solutions to help families who are struggling.

This is something that we want to see and have been calling for: how many members of parliament and the ministers responsible for families have been out on country to sit down with us and learn about who we are and how we are?

I have come all the way to find out. I have learned about my own studies, language, culture and songlines. I have taken it up, stepped in and worked and trained to be who I am. I worked as an aircraft maintenance engineer. I am a person who has always been doing welding and servicing. I have taken flying services in Ballarat and Melbourne. I live on both sides of the world. How many people from here have done that? That is why I understand balanda a little bit and how non-Indigenous people live, but not much. I still need to learn. I have learnt about the last 50 years, to actually come and be living in the white man's balanda system and law.

How do people, when you have not been there and walked out onto the country, find out who we are, how we live and how we can work together to make safe things? I have not seen anyone step in. I have not had people come to sit down with me and our people to learn. We will provide learning about our language and English and try to participate and be part of the roles so that we all work together.

I was always wearing my Yolngu *rom ngurrungu*. That is a diplomatic space where we Yolngu and balanda sit down together, except nobody wants to accept that. They are always saying, 'These people from the other side of the country can come and sit down and be respected', but what about us? Nobody wants to respect us and listen to us. People always spoke about doing treaty. Treaty is no good now, but that is what we want to see. Let us sit down and work together to make things proper so that we can make a better pathway for balanda children and Yolngu children so that we can live. It has not moved anywhere.

Please, listen; let us work together and get things done so that we all understand each other in a safe way. It is not good when people say, 'It is okay; do not worry about it. We know what is best for you. We have chosen this.' This has happened for a long time for us. For the last 10 years I have been here asking people to talk and make decisions about things, and people always said, 'No, it is okay. We think we know what is

best for you.' You need to stop that. If I was there, I would stop; I would rather listen to you. If that is the person who people are talking about, I would listen to them. I have represented some of the Indigenous people here and Indigenous people on my land. I represent them and talk on behalf of them, but you want to make a decision for them in your Bill. They have said, 'No; we have our member of parliament there with you. He is bringing the story to tell you so that you can work together for us.' I have always heard, 'No, that is all right; we have it worked out.'

That is why you are wrong every time. Vice versa, it would be wrong of me every time if I would not listen to your families—non-Indigenous people—and make a decision on behalf of you. I would make a lot of mistakes, and this is what is happening. You are not listening to the voice of our people through me, and this is what is happening. We are facing this law that is unacceptable for me and my people.

We need to come together, sit down and start working together to create a pathway for the future of our children.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO (Chief Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

I thank the Minister for Child Protection, Robyn Cahill; the Department of Children and Families; and all the teams who have been working tirelessly for well over a year to reform our child protection system.

I do not think there is anyone in this room or in the broader Northern Territory community who could stand with hand on heart and say, 'Our child protection system is working fantastically; leave it how it is.' We might have disagreements about the way forward to make it better, but one thing is for sure: it could not stay how it was. It continues to fail our children. Under a Finocchiaro CLP government we will not allow that to happen.

We acutely recognise that as part of our commitment to address the root causes of crime we had to look at our child protection system to make sure we are supporting the most vulnerable in our community—that is, our children. Our children are our future, so we have an obligation to make sure that they have the very best start in life. Everyone's start in life is different and everyone's journey is different; that is what makes the world so unique and special. However, there are key themes that destroy a young person's opportunity to have the life that they deserve—exposure to violence, sexual abuse, neglect and insecurity.

No-one should be surprised by the direction we have taken. It is not without controversy, but it is based on the fundamental principle of putting the right of a child to be safe first and above everything else.

The old Act had half a dozen, if not more, varying principles, none of which were organised in a hierarchy of considerations, so we had a system where care and protection workers were essentially set up for failure by virtue of the fact that they had many different areas they could choose from to try to ascertain whether a child and their family required some form of intervention to support them to stay together. The hard work has been done to outline the sequence, so there is a cascading or tiered structure within this legislation to provide explicit and careful direction to our professionals, who have to do this difficult and often heartbreaking work. They can work through what interventions, if any, are required, depending on the wide range of circumstances they encounter every day.

We have called this Bill 'Every Child Matters' because they do and because they are our future. That is why we are focused on this reform. We have been disciplined and stayed the course on this reform because we know it is the right thing to do. We have upset people in the process, but it is ultimately the right thing to do, and in time people will see that it is the right reform. Doing nothing was not an option.

What Labor did for nearly 20 years was turn its back on children in the Northern Territory. I was in opposition for a long time. I constantly heard Labor members say that they knew the correlation between the care and protection system and the youth justice system. They would stand here, lecturing us. Even though they knew the correlation, what did they do to try to address it? That is not a natural fit; it should not be like that. Labor members did nothing; they accepted that the care and protection of children was getting worse and the outcomes for those children were getting worse, resulting in these kids ending up in the justice system. They allowed that to happen.

Think back to the horrendous rape of a two-year old girl in Tennant Creek in February 2018 and the horror of that time under a Labor government. There were all the promises about needing a new IT system. The IT system was the problem, or it was this or that. At some point, the current Opposition Leader probably had control of these areas.

None of the change that required courage and conviction was delivered, so our children have been left in situations that do not pass any standard of care or responsibility. They cannot just be overlooked because it is the easiest thing to do. Making the right decisions is often difficult and you wish it was not that way, but if it is, you have to confront it and deal with it. That is what we have done.

By making child safety our paramount consideration—this is the glaringly obvious bit that those who oppose the Bill do not want to believe—we can provide early intervention to keep the family together and the child safe. Ultimately that is the endgame. Getting in early allows us to do that better than ever before. That is the entire point.

The Webb–Shanahan review was tabled in parliament today by Minister Cahill. It shows clearly at this interim point what is wrong with our child protection system. That is obvious to anyone. Despite how contentious this debate has been, I do not know anyone who would put up their hand to say, 'Things are great; leave it as it is.' No-one believes that. Therefore, we have to address the challenging issues.

We need earlier intervention and support provided to families to ensure that children are safe and intervention is not left until the last breaking point. Under Labor, the situation would be left to the most gut-wrenching unbearable point when there was no choice left but to remove the child.

On top of that, Labor would subject these children to a rolling temporary care situation, which in some cases lasted five or six years. Rolling temporary applications meant certainty for a child was never at the heart of anything they were doing or believed in. If you are six months old, one year old, four years old or 10 years old, you want to be loved, fed, safe and cared for and to know that there is grown-up in the room looking out for you. You can just be a kid; you do not have to worry about all the things that grown-ups worry about. I say that to my own children, 'You leave me to worry about those things; that is for mum and dad. You worry about enjoying your life and learning as much as you can.' It is unconscionable to think that it is okay—particularly when we talk about care and protection, we are predominantly talking about Aboriginal children—for Aboriginal children to be left in this mass uncertainty without stability. It is not okay for any child.

What we are tackling in this Bill is multifaceted. Number one is early intervention, because we are looking through that safety lens first.

The second is about stopping the revolving door of temporary placements so that a child has somewhere to call home and has certainty in their life about reunification—which is obviously the key goal. In the first two years it is all about reunification, whether that is at home or with an aunty or uncle—whatever it might look like. It is a family-first approach. If that will not work, we need to consider what is the next best thing for that child. How can we make sure the child knows where their home is and that they are cared for and has stability, certainty and all the essentials so that they can go to school, get an education and move through life—again with the overlay of, where possible, maintaining that connection to family?

These are, by their nature, complicated and difficult issues to talk about. I do not shy away from any of that. We all agree that we wish the care and protection area did not have to exist. In a perfect world it does not, but we do not live in a perfect world, so governments have to provide a system. That is imperfect; we would love families to uphold their responsibility at all times, but when they do not, governments—which are not an ideal parent—have to step in and provide safeguards on behalf of our most vulnerable.

Our family responsibility agreements are another key feature of this Bill. This is something we have been working hard on since coming to government. People will be familiar with our Circuit Breaker Program. Territory-wide 727 young people have been a part of our Circuit Breaker Program, which is fantastic. Of those 727 young people, 275 entered into family responsibility agreements, and that was while family responsibility agreements were still voluntary. That is a fantastic result when you think of the size of that cohort of families putting up their hands and saying, 'Yes, we need a bit of help with this'. Parents might have a child with challenging behaviour or it might be the parents who have challenging behaviour. In any event, whatever the circumstance, people have put up their hands and said, 'We want help; we want to sign up to support.' We have come in behind them with that.

The family responsibility agreements have been connected up and supported through the system. Of the 275 who entered into a family responsibility agreement, only five had to go into care. That is 0.006% of the children, who have been engaged with under a CLP government, having to go into care. Although five is five too many in a perfect world—the world we do not live in—0.006% reinforces and demonstrates through data our commitment to making sure that families are strong.

Those who want to tear this Bill down and believe ill of what we are trying to do will not see that for what it is. That does not take away from it being the truth.

This Bill does that important work, as well as giving the courts the powers they need to order family responsibility agreements and enforce them, which was the missing piece. Up until this point we have been doing all that voluntary work with families, and it has been paying off.

This Bill focuses on the child. When we think about the child, besides the fact that we now have a hierarchy of considerations and we put child safety number one, we are making sure that they are independently legally represented whenever matters go to court; that they get all the information they need in the language that they speak, no matter what the language is; and that children with a disability have the same standing as a child without a disability so that their decisions and wishes can be fully accounted for and incorporated into the process.

We are also preserving the Aboriginal child placement principle, which I know there has been a lot of concern about. This is still in the legislation. Again, we have the hierarchy on top of the broader universal child placement principle because children from other backgrounds deserve to have their culture and religion to be considered, just like an Aboriginal child. That remains.

We have also strengthened foster carer support. The minister spoke earlier about an immediate 10% increase to the payments and another 10% increase. We have just increased the settlement allowance from $200 to $1,000—five times as much.

We are doing the work at all ends to support a stronger system holistically. That is meaningful because when we are doing the urgent work when something catastrophic has gone wrong, we will have the people there to support people at their lowest and scariest hour.

The Bill does many other things. There is no doubt that it is a large piece of legislation. We can go through every tiny component of it in consideration in detail. We welcome the questions from those opposite, the questions from their constituents and the questions on their minds.

It is irrefutable that the system is broken; it is not working. It is not a ‘money will fix this’ problem, a ‘more staff will fix this’ problem or a ‘pretend this is not happening, and it will go away and fix itself’ problem.

We need to set families up for success, which is why all the other work we have been doing as a government is so important—the reducing-crime piece, the alcohol piece, which we have been working on, and making sure there is adequate housing. We talked in Question Time about more housing and dealing with overcrowding. We talk about getting kids to school and better health outcomes. All these facets feed in to many care and protection matters. It is not just one piece of legislation that manages the system.

This Bill gives a strong framework with clear timelines and priorities to make sure the safety of our most vulnerable—our future, our children—is put first and that we do everything we can to support them to stay with their family. We support the family to manage and look after their children. When they cannot, when there is severe violence or tragedies that take place, we can act quickly, work hard and, ultimately, make big decisions about certainty for that child going forward.

It has been an enormous body of work. It has been well consulted across the community. I thank the scrutiny committee for the important work it did. As a government we adopted many of those recommendations, as outlined by the minister.

I again thank the minister. She has had a lot thrown at her to get this done.

It demonstrates as a government that we are not afraid to do the difficult things. We do not stand down when the going gets tough. We do not shy away when the voices opposing us get louder and louder. It is the right thing to do. We get the job done. There is something to be said for that. It is because each of us knows that this will deliver a safer outcome for our Territory kids. At the end of the day when you know you are doing something that is right, you have to see it through. This is a great demonstration of staying the course, despite the opposition to it. We know it will make a huge impact on people’s lives.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Mr Deputy Speaker, this is a tragic day for the most vulnerable children in the Territory. Today we have the opportunity to fix the real and deep issues in the child protection system, and the

government has wasted it with a law that the overwhelming evidence has explicitly told the government will not work and will put children at risk. Our first duty in this Chamber is to protect children, and that is why today is so important.

By passing this law, the government is directly and abjectly failing children by refusing to listen to the evidence about how to make children safer that has been provided to it by an overwhelming number of frontline workers, community representatives, legal services, experts and children themselves. It is a tragedy and heartbreaking, and children will be harmed by this decision. Every person who submitted to the inquiry on this Bill was trying desperately to get the government to do something that will improve the lives of children in the Northern Territory, and they know more than anyone what needs to happen. Their advice could not be more valuable. It is based on deep knowledge, experience and expertise about the system we are debating.

We just heard from the Member for Mulka that this is the worst Bill he has seen in 10 years. He has seen a lot of damaging Bills, but this is the worst. He is angry and devastated that the people in this Chamber are making decisions about the removal of his people's children without the decency to talk to him and the community, work with them and listen to their solutions to fix the problem. The Member for Mulka has stood in this Chamber for 10 years and has said over and again, with incredible wisdom, grace, patience and generosity, that we need to work together. As he said today, 'That is not a hard thing to say; I am only asking you to listen to us and work with us.' That invitation has not been accepted.

Aboriginal communities know what is best for Aboriginal children. They have the solutions, but instead of taking the opportunity to listen and make real change, this government has ignored, sidelined and vilified them.

We are debating a child protection law on the same day that a review into child protection, commissioned by the government, handed down its findings. That review made the same findings and recommendations as the 120 people who submitted concerns to the scrutiny committee and opposed this Bill.

The key problem is not that the current law lacks powers. The key problems are delayed responses, overwhelming workloads, workforce shortages, weak governance and a system that is already stretched far beyond capacity. These are the problems that place children at risk, and this Bill fixes none of them.

Yesterday, in an extraordinary and almost unprecedented move, every Child Protection minister in Australia, except Queensland and the Northern Territory, issued a joint statement expressing concern about these reforms. Ministers from the Commonwealth, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT publicly reaffirmed that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle supports children's safety; it does not undermine it. They describe these reforms as a regrettable divergence from nationally agreed child protection principles.

SNAICC Chief Executive Catherine Liddle said that this kind of united intervention from governments around Australia is virtually unheard of. She warned that alarm bells should be ringing throughout the Northern Territory Government because it has things horribly wrong.

When your own scrutiny committee warns against this legislation, your own independent review says that the legislation is not the problem, frontline experts tell you that this Bill will make children less safe, Aboriginal organisations plead with you not to weaken protections and almost every Child Protection minister in Australia publicly tells you that you are heading in the wrong direction, at what point do you stop and listen?

Instead, this government has chosen to press ahead regardless. That is not evidence-based lawmaking; that is ideology. The consequences of ideology in child protection are not theoretical; they are measured in children's lives.

I also struggle to reconcile the government's repeated claim that child safety is its highest priority with the decisions the government has made over the last week. Today we are debating sweeping changes to the child protection system, despite the overwhelming evidence that this Bill in its current form will not make children safer. At the same time, the government has announced the closure of YiSSA emergency accommodation service, placing more than 150 children and their families at greater risk of homelessness. We know that stable housing keeps children safe and that homelessness places families under enormous stress, increases contact with the child protection system and makes it harder for children to thrive.

Later this week we will be debating legislation abolishing the Northern Territory's only independent Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee, leaving 144 deaths unreviewed, with no clear plan of when or how that will happen, and leaving the Northern Territory as the only place in Australia without an independent child death review committee.

The pattern is devastatingly clear. It is a pattern of weakening the systems that protect children instead of strengthening them; removing independent scrutiny instead of embracing it; and saying that child safety is the highest priority while making decisions that undermine the systems that children rely on.

I will address the CLP members who consistently mislead this Chamber when they claim that the safety of children is not the paramount consideration in the existing Act. The best interests of the child, which includes safety, is already the paramount consideration under the *Care and Protection of Children Act*. When CLP members suggest otherwise, they are deliberately misleading the public and parliament to justify a Bill that is not based on evidence.

We have heard that the overwhelming opposition to this Bill comes with no solutions, but nothing could be further from the truth. The CLP says, 'If you have the solutions put them on the table', but when 120 submitters put solutions on the table, 120 times the government ignored them. There is no argument that the system is in crisis, but as the government heard repeatedly in the scrutiny committee inquiry, the Act is not the problem.

No government should politicise children's safety, and we have heard that from across the Chamber. The overwhelming number of people who raised concerns about this Bill have been accused of being driven by ideology. Some have been, incredibly, accused of moral bankruptcy or not caring about children when they are working every day for the safety of children. They are not the ones being driven by ideology.

Like everyone in this Chamber, I have personal stories and connections with children who have been removed and children in care, including in my own family. My heart breaks for families who will bear the consequences of the decision we are making today.

These children deserve a government who will listen to the people who know this system best and have offered a genuine path to better safety outcomes for all children. The minister said yesterday in the *NT News* that public scrutiny makes legislation stronger, after ignoring the entire sector and communities that spent weeks detailing the safety risks to children introduced by this Bill. This is deeply disturbing. I am curious what this means. Which public scrutiny has made this legislation stronger?

This government has been told clearly what needs to happen. It has been told again today by its own review. If the government listened to frontline workers, communities and experts, it would have implemented their critical advice to address chronic under-resourcing with adequate and sustained funding to prioritise community-led solutions to confront the systemic disadvantage caused by the failure of governments over decades.

Even the small minority of people who supported this Bill gave evidence that it can work only if there are more resources, yet we heard from the department that there will be no resources, it was comfortable and there was a large and well-resourced organisation. Again, this has been directly contradicted by the Webb–Shanahan review.

We are talking about families who have their children removed because they cannot access housing because the public housing waitlist is 10 to 16 years. They cannot access support services because there are hardly any beds for alcohol and other drug treatment in the Northern Territory. They are given conditions to meet DCF requirements which are impossible. We heard many stories about this during the inquiry process, and I will share one of them.

A woman fled domestic violence with her two children to a Darwin tenancy program built for exactly that purpose, and her partner turned up. The children witnessed that violence. As a result, that was reported to the department and the children were removed. The tenancy program then evicted the mother because without the children in her care she no longer met the program's criteria. The department said that reunification was impossible because she had nowhere to live with her children.

This is not a family who failed the system; this is a system that has failed a family. This story and the many tragedies like it are manufactured by subsequent governments' failure, and it does not have to be like this.

I listened to the evidence, so I cannot support this Bill in its current form; however, I will move amendments based directly on the evidence given to the scrutiny committee. My amendments are an attempt to guard against the harm that witnesses consistently warned that this Bill could cause to the children we are all here to protect. They seek to preserve important safeguards to strengthen children's rights and better reflect the evidence provided by those who work every day to keep Territory children safe. I have circulated these amendments to all members for their information and consideration because children deserve to have the people elected to look after them to be making the best laws they can and which are built on evidence, not ideology.

The government knows the consequences of this Bill. It has been told unequivocally by experts in the Territory and across the country that it will not make children safer and risks funnelling more children into institutional care, exposing them to harm and trauma. It risks preventing children from reunifying with their families by placing an arbitrary two-year cut-off on reunification.

When governments make laws that impact children, they must think about how this decision will change their whole lives. Today we have an opportunity to make every child safer in the Northern Territory and we are abjectly, shamefully, failing.

I support the safety of children and young people, and that is why I cannot support this Bill.

Mr MACKAY (Goyder): Madam Speaker, I must say that I am disappointed with the quality of debate from the other side. It has become evident to me through listening to the speeches that many have not made it past a headline; they have not read the Care and Protection Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill.

The Member for Mulka said that this is the worst Bill he has seen in 10 years. I cannot for one second believe that is the truth.

Ms Uibo: Are you telling him how he should think and feel now?

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please.

Mr MACKAY: We heard from the opposition Whip, the Member for Gwoja, how this problem is not legislative; it is about the processes and the department itself. He will be pleased to know, as mentioned earlier, a report has been tabled this morning—he can see it on Territory Stories—into the inner workings of the department and what needs to change, because we all agree, as we have all said and as everyone will keep saying for the rest of the day, that child safety is paramount.

We heard the former Deputy Opposition Leader, the Member for Daly, have a little hissy fit, yell at the Member for Fannie Bay—I look forward to Facebook posts about it later from those who have previously called out behaviour in this Chamber—and then proceed to deliver what can only best be described as a poor man's ChatGPT summary of the Bill.

It pains me that everyone on the other side has focused hard on this idea that the Aboriginal placement principle is being abolished. It is not. We heard the Members for Johnston and Gwoja and others say that safety is already paramount in the Act. Therefore, this change we are making should have no effect; either it is in there or it is not. Let us just put it in there and be clear about it.

The Bill is 41 lovely pages. I will read out some snippets. On page 2 the definition says:

> *significant decision, involving a child, means a decision likely to have a significant impact on the child's life.*

Regarding the application of principles, the Bill says:

> *(1) The underlying principles of this Act are set out in sections 8 to 12D …*
>
> …
>
> *(4) To avoid doubt, the principles do not:*
>
> *(a) create, or confer on any person, any right or entitlement enforceable at law; or*
>
> *(b) affect the operation of any law in force in the Territory.*

This ensures that all Territorian laws are still being looked after and respected.

The Bill also says:

> *(1) When a decision involving a child is made, the best interests of the child are the paramount concern.*

Find me a Territorian who disagrees with that, and I will find you somebody who has been severely misled.

This Bill also says:

(2) In determining what is in the best interests of the child, the following matters must be considered in the following order of priority:

(a) the need to ensure the safety of the child;

Everyone is happy:

(b) the need to protect the child from harm and exploitation;

Which makes sense:

(c) the child's need for stable and nurturing relationships;

Everyone in this Chamber talks about how important that is:

(d) the child's need for permanency in the child's living arrangements;

(e) the likely effect on the child of any changes in the child's circumstances;

(f) the wishes and views of the child, having regard to the maturity and understanding of the child;

(g) the child's physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, developmental and educational needs;

(h) the capacity and willingness of the child's parents or other family members to care for the child;

(i) the nature of the child's relationship with the child's family …

(j) other special characteristics of the child.

(3) In addition to the matters mentioned in subsection (2), in determining the best interests of the child, the following matters may also be relevant:

(a) the need to strengthen, preserve and promote positive relationships between the child and the child's parents, family members and other persons who are significant in the child's life;

(b) in circumstances where the child has been removed from the care of the child's family, all possibilities related to reunifying the child with the child's parents;

(c) the child's right to enjoy the culture and tradition of the child's family and community including the need to maintain ongoing contact with the child's family.

That all seems pretty reasonable to me, but when you read a headline in the paper, a Unions NT media release or whatever it might be, you would think we have removed any relationship between the child and culture and family. No-one wants to remove a child from their family or culture, but if that child is not safe, they will do everything possible to make sure that child is looked after by a family member or somebody in their cultural kinship group. Having known quite a few people who work in this area and department, I know that these are the most caring compassionate people. No-one gets into Territory Families for the pay cheque; it is because they genuinely care and will do everything in their power to keep children with their families. However, if it is not safe we, as a government and a society, have a responsibility to ensure that our children are safe. We have an obligation to make sure that no child is left in a situation that is unsafe. This Bill, through existing processes and new references in this legislation, has reunification processes.

We heard about the short-term orders. Great news—there are long-term ones too. You may not consider two years to be short term, but for a 10-year-old child it is 20% of their life and for a four-year-old child it is 50% of their life. If you consider that to be too short, there is good news because there are long-term orders as well.

The main thing is we want the best opportunity to reunite children with their families if they have been removed. People have two years to sort out their lives. Find a family member or somebody who can look after that child. If after two years it is not working, we need to think about the child's stability.

We need to think about the child who is placed with foster parents and every two or three years when a family member comes out of prison the child goes back to them. Then they return to the same foster carers six months later, malnourished, wetting the bed and having been abused.

These are true stories I have heard in my electorate. I had foster carers come to me in tears when children were returned to them after being released for family reasons. They watched these children grow from six months old to five or six years old. They kept being taken back out to community. The grandma wants them to stay with the foster carers because she knows that they care and take the kids out on country to meet family. However, every time under the current system, when that family member takes control of the care of those children again, those kids stop going to school. Horrific things have happened, and it is not okay. Let us prioritise the stability of those children.

Just because a short-term order is over it does not mean that family visits cannot happen or that an application cannot be made for reunification. It is not the end of the story, but it provides a bit more stability.

The Member for Daly said that fewer children entering care is the metric we need to pay the most attention to, not the child's safety and not the number of children who have been abused and not removed from situations. His issue is that children are being removed, not that perpetrators are inflicting horrible abuse on children. That goes to show he is looking for the headline and the publicity, but he will not read the Bill.

There is stuff in the Bill about working with children cards, but not one member of the opposition has raised it. If that was in an omnibus Bill, it would be the only thing you would pick out.

Mr Paech: In consideration in detail, I will ask.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please.

Mr MACKAY: This Bill is the best attempt that any government in the Northern Territory has made in the last 20 years to improve the child protection Act.

In 2019 when the then Minister for Territory Families, Ms Wakefield—the Member for Braitling at the time—first made these first changes in this parliament, I do not believe she knew what she was doing. We can see the damage she has done to Territorians. There has been six years of worse conditions for children and an increase in the number of children being exposed to unsafe situations. That is not a win; it is not positive.

In 2023 the previous government made other changes, but it still did not get the legislation right.

As I read out, all we are doing is making sure that safety is really obvious in the Act, and in that case we are not doing anything to upset you because you believe that it is already in the Act.

We are making sure that children have a say because, at the end of the day, although they cannot vote, they should have a say in their future. If they do not feel safe going back to family or living in a certain house or area, that child's opinion matters. Every child's safety matters.

This Bill also stresses in proposed section 12D(1):

> *… the CEO must make proactive efforts to address the risks to the child with the aim of preventing the child from needing to be removed from the child's parents.*

This Bill still says that you have to make every possible effort. No-one wants to remove children. We heard some horrible words from the Member for Daly implying certain things. No-one wants to remove kids from their family or community, but if that child is unsafe, we have a moral obligation to step in.

The Member for Mulka said that this is the worst Bill he has seen in 10 years, but it does not change the threshold for removal. The same rules under Labor apply. It has stronger requirements before protection orders can be made. It increases the administrative bureaucracy, and efforts have to be made before protection orders can be placed.

This Bill is a step towards a safer Territory for children. There is nothing in this Bill that warrants the opposition we have seen from a group of organisations that have not got past the fact that the Aboriginal child placement principle is still in the Act. They have not looked at the Bill. All they heard was somebody saying an opposition spokesperson …

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Stop! Cease the interjections, please. Everyone, silence.

Mr MACKAY: All they heard was, 'They are adding a new principle. It must mean everything's going away.' This Bill does not do that. It may not be as fancy and nice a headline, but the reality is that every effort will be made to place children with their family. Every effort will be made to place children in their community and cultural background, where possible. Every effort will be made to ensure that children are safe.

The Member for Nightcliff, repeating the Unions NT press release, talked about how in the Northern Territory we cannot afford child safety. He made an economic argument on this issue, saying that we would bankrupt the Northern Territory by prioritising child safety. The Member for Nightcliff wants his community battery and I am sure he wants a lot of money for his electorate, but if he thinks the Northern Territory will not prioritise child safety for an economic reason, he is greatly mistaken.

Mr O'GALLAGHER: A point of order, Madam Speaker! The interjections …

Mr Paech: What interjections?

Ms Uibo: What is your point of order?

Madam SPEAKER: You are interjecting now. Everyone needs to be a bit more respectful to the members who are speaking.

Ms UIBO (Opposition Leader): Madam Speaker, it is clear that today's Bill distracts from confronting the systemic issues across the Northern Territory's child protection system. It is a system that is underfunded, under-resourced and under strain. That is what our Labor opposition wants the CLP government to address.

There should be concerted efforts to do this by the CLP government, which has a responsibility to govern for all Territorians. Its efforts should be on bringing in the reform that is needed, leading the way, listening to the experts, heeding the evidence and implementing it. That is what a government does when it is about improving the Northern Territory for all. Unfortunately, we do not see that with this legislation.

The real concern is the tit for tat, the back and forth and the narrative the CLP government has been driving as the reason for the reform, which it has picked and scraped through. It has not laid out how to unpick the mess that everyone agrees needs to happen to reform child protection.

Concerningly, this Bill will make it more difficult for families to work towards reunification. The timeframes are not realistic when you take a holistic view of a child's safety: housing; health; education; and employment. These areas matter when it comes to child safety.

A lot of comments have been made about people agreeing with the core principle of keeping Territory kids safe. It sounds as though there is no dispute regarding some of the key values. What is disputed, however, is the government's approach to these areas of much-needed reform. It is not addressing the issue of improving the child protection system in the way that the community desires. That is the biggest shame of today, because the government will pass the Bill in whatever form it wants.

As has been said many times, there was a large volume of submissions—150—and close to 130 of them sang from the same song sheet. That choir should be heard and the chorus should be sung by the government. Unfortunately, we have not heard any government members speak about reaching the middle ground that Territorians expect from the Legislative Assembly because all 25 members should always be about making better laws for the Northern Territory.

We talk about the difference in values, process and policy and what that means in practice across the NT. We are starting to see a shift from those core agreements, which some people have echoed on both sides of the Chamber.

Concerns have been raised, particularly the question of whether the CLP government genuinely wants good reform, better practice and strong laws for children in the Northern Territory. The CLP government's lack of willingness to come to the middle to listen to experts, organisations, community members and those with lived experience is causing friction. Harm and hurt have been caused across the Northern Territory because the Bill in its current form is not the best legislation to look after Territory kids and keep them safe. For that, CLP government members should hang their heads in shame because this is their duty. They may say that

they know best and will do whatever they want and will not apologise to anyone, but my goodness, they should apologise for not taking on the responsibility that every government in the Northern Territory is charged with—that is, making better laws for Territorians and listening and acting on the community desire to make laws better.

There were 130 submissions all echoing the same sentiment, 'Please do better. This is how we want you to do better. We support kids in the Territory and want to keep them safe, so here is how you can make the laws better.' However, it is typical of the CLP government to ignore expert advice, evidence and community sentiment. People laid out everything on the table, saying, 'We want to help you, the NT Government, make better law, better policies and strong programs in the Northern Territory that will keep our kids safe, protect them and help them to thrive no matter where they are, what colour they are, how much their family has and whether they have family or guardians'. The community expects a government of any political persuasion to listen to it. That is the opportunity that the CLP is missing.

Furthermore, the big concern is that the CLP government is actively deflecting its responsibility to ensure that the child protection laws of the Northern Territory are the best in the country. That is probably the biggest shame in all of this.

The Member for Mulka spoke about the Children's Commissioner, Ms Shahleena Musk, who recently resigned. The press release from the former Children's Commissioner of the NT was an indictment of the Northern Territory Government's failure to listen to, act on and implement what a statutory officer said to make things better, fill the gaps and do everything in its power on behalf of children. It was deeply concerning and disheartening to see someone of Ms Musk's calibre resign under those circumstances.

Remember that in the Northern Territory a statutory officer is not there to tell the government what it wants to hear; they are there to tell the government what it needs to hear. That is their sole responsibility, and they do that job independently for a reason. Each minister already has a staff member or adviser in a particular area whose job might be to tell them what they want to hear and endorse what they do, but that is not the role of a statutory officer. A statutory officer is there to independently oversee their responsibilities and, in the case of the Office of the Children's Commissioner of the Northern Territory, put the gaps in plain view of the government and recommend better processes, resourcing and legislation to the government without fear of persecution, with respect and without government members calling out vile offensive commentary about a statutory officer doing their job.

I point to the Member for Blain, who said in public social media posts, 'We will not be held to ransom by statutory officers', which shows a complete misunderstanding of the role of a statutory officer to help direct government to make better laws in the Northern Territory, particularly for children.

I call out some of the comments made in the debate. I heard the narrative. The CLP lines must have been shared around; they like to copy and echo each other. They are disciplined if they steer out of the way and do not fall in line; they cannot think for themselves. I heard from the Members for Fannie Bay and Sanderson and, indeed, the Chief Minister the mantra: doing nothing is not an option. I have not heard one Territorian say, 'Do nothing'. In fact, I have heard the opposite. I heard Territorians say, 'Do more, but do it this way', 'Lean on us as experts', 'Lean on us as those with lived experience' and 'Government, we will help you do more and do it better so that our kids can be safe and thrive'. Not one person has asked the government to do nothing about child protection, so that narrative is absolutely crap—I will not say other words.

This blown-up fake narrative of trying to divide the Northern Territory community, dismissing real concerns and, quite frankly, belittling voices, including those of statutory officers, is a dangerous slippery slope. When we see the CLP government act and speak the way it does, how it is turning its back on Territorians becomes more noticeable.

Today out the front of parliament, in Liberty Square, a community rally was organised. Some fierce Northern Territory advocates and people who hold roles in significant organisations are all saying the same message: the CLP's care and protection Bill is not fit for purpose in its current form. We agree with that.

Each community member I have spoken to and each organisation that provided a submission to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee echoed strong sentiments about what the CLP government is doing, how it is acting and its lack of respect and genuine care for Territorians who want to see things get better, do things better and support strong laws that reflect the needs and aspirations of Territorians today.

One of the key messages regarding the CLP's fluffed-up narrative is that the government's actions do not reflect community sentiment. It goes back to this weird mantra of, 'We do not apologise for doing X, Y and Z'.

A government that dictates finds itself in tricky situations, and not just in the Northern Territory; there are hundreds of examples around the world. When a government starts to dictate what people should do, listen to, hear, act and accept, we see what we saw with today's rally: people pushing back on the truth. The community should be a key driver of change. Some of the community members we saw rally together have been speaking strongly for decades, and some for their entire lives, about how the government of the day—the CLP now, but hopefully not in another two years—has a responsibility to listen to and act on community aspirations and, if it is true to its responsibility, support the community to drive real change.

The Member for Fannie Bay said that she believed one of the Bill's positive attributes was strengthening the ability for children in care, or potentially in care, to have legal representation with lawyers to support child decision-making if and when needed in the process of being in foster care, kinship care or out-of-home care.

I wonder whether the Member for Fannie Bay will apply that same sentiment and value that she shared in today's debate to another Bill that is due for debate this week, the Youth Justice and Criminal Code Amendment Bill brought forward by the Minister for Corrections. In its current form that Bill will provide laws to take away the responsibility of having a legal representative present when police are interviewing a child if they think something is happening. From what I can see, it is the opposite. The Member for Fannie Bay said, 'It is great. We have legal representation for young people's decision-making about who they choose and how they choose care. Their decisions will be heard through that process; we are legalising it.' Will the Member for Fannie Bay say the same thing about removing that legal right for a child when interviewed by police, which is in the Minister for Corrections' legislation that will come up later this week? I look forward to hearing her ways of addressing my question.

I was quite—I would not say shocked, because I am getting used to it, unfortunately—taken aback by the Member for Goyder's contribution in today's debate. One thing that stood out to me was he called out the Member for Mulka's speech and disagreed with the sentiment that the Member for Mulka clearly placed on the record in his own words from his own experience when he said that this is the worst piece of legislation he has seen in his 10 years here. I was elected to parliament in 2016, the same year as the Member for Mulka. The Member for Goyder has chosen to diminish, demoralise and deflect the Member for Mulka's sentiment about this legislation. That is the Member for Mulka's opinion and his truth, experience and representation of his constituents in his role as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. I thought that showed the true values of the CLP government and its members—that listening to someone else's truth and experience is not something that can be digested. It is rejected by the CLP government. That is becoming a clear and dangerous pattern with the CLP when it comes to the representation of community in this parliament, this lawmaking building.

We constantly hear the CLP's narrative. I do not know who is doing the CLP's calculations upstairs, but the little history lesson that is starting to run like a bad reel in CLP contributions every moment, 'The 20 years of former Labor government mess in the Territory et cetera', fails to acknowledge that there was a nice little four-year gap in the last few terms with a chaotic CLP government from 2012 to 2016. It was so chaotic that a book was written about it: *Crocs in the Cabinet*. I am waiting for the sequel and look forward to reading that when it comes out.

Crocs in the Cabinet was written, that is how bad the CLP was from 2012 to 2016. Guess what? There is only one common factor from 2016 to now, and that is Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro. That is who is driving this mentality and mantra and dictating how the CLP does its business, dismissing the community and not doing everything it possibly can to make better laws for all Territorians. This divisive leadership is starting to become more obvious across the community.

The CLP's divide-and-conquer mentality will not trick Territorians anymore because it is starting to be called out and pushed back because it is not the way that Territorians want to move forward together. I wonder whether any CLP member is brave enough to point that out to their own team. If they do not, they are all complicit in not making the best laws possible for child protection in the Northern Territory.

The CLP thinks that governing by press release is good enough for Territorians. We see that time and again. I have learned more in the media about what the government is doing, its intentions and how it will progress laws for better or worse, rather than seeing it do the work that is required and expected by Territorians of any government.

I requested a briefing on the review, which Minister Cahill tabled this morning and I thank her for that. I was asked this morning what I think about X, Y and Z, and I said that I will not comment until I see it because, quite frankly, I do not trust the CLP government. I will not make any judgement until I read it. I am still waiting for a briefing from the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, whom

I wrote to about six weeks ago, at the beginning of June. Maybe the Chief Minister is listening and can direct her CEO to give me that briefing now the interim report has been tabled. I look forward to receiving that correspondence.

Our Labor opposition has an important job to do. When it comes to issues that affect all Territorians in such an emotive and practical way like child protection, we want to do our jobs to the best of our ability. Government providing as much information as possible will enable us to check facts, consult, review and provide input from community, experts and organisations. This would mean that responses to reviews can be better scrutinised and constructive input made for the final report of any review in the Northern Territory. There should never be a tick-and-flick exercise for child protection. Our team stands strong on that.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about a lot of the technical aspects of what our Labor opposition agrees and does not agree with. Consideration in detail gives us the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill clause by clause. We look forward to doing our job in that sense and presenting important amendments to reflect the majority of the submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee, which the Member for Daly is a member of.

The Member for Daly was berated by the Member for Goyder. His dismissal and disrespect of a fellow member of parliament is becoming an ugly habit. He downplayed the Member for Daly's concerns. As a committee member, the Member for Daly read, saw, interpreted, questioned, researched and consulted. To be dismissed in that way by the Member for Goyder is a reflection of the leadership in the CLP government. It reflects how the Chief Minister shows her team things should be done, which is not necessarily in a way that is better for all of us.

All our Labor opposition team members echoed the same concerns and sentiment. This is an opportunity for the CLP government to make even stronger reforms to the legislation. From what we heard, amendments and recommendations from the Legislative Scrutiny Committee have been brushed aside. I am happy to be proven wrong if the CLP government has amendments that are based on the committee report. We would gladly welcome that, but we will not know until consideration in detail.

The opportunity to represent not only the Labor opposition and the Arnhem electorate but also the many organisations, councils, health services, child protection staff, foster carers, kinship carers …

Mr HOWE: A point of order, Madam Speaker! I request an extension of time for the member.

Madam SPEAKER: Is an extension required by the member?

Ms UIBO: No. Thank you so much, Member for Drysdale; however, I will start to conclude because I know we have a long night ahead.

We will do our job, but it is not just professional for many of us; it is personal as well. We will do our job because we want the best laws possible for our Territory kids.

Mr HOWE (Drysdale): Madam Speaker, every child matters. I have been vocal on this Bill in the lead-up to today. I believe one of the most morally important questions we face as NT society is: how do we look after our children? Universally, we all want the best for our children, so that piece is not in dispute.

I was a part of the Legislative Scrutiny Committee and involved in the hearings. Following those hearings, I am more strongly in support of the amendments in the Bill. What are those amendments? That has been lost in the debate.

The amendments are that child safety becomes the paramount concern. We heard that members of the opposition and people across the floor agree with that.

We are legislating early intervention. We are putting in the legislation that the department has to make attempts to improve that family and intervene early so that it does not lead to the removal of a child.

We are legislating the child's views in decision-making and their right to separate legal defence. I do not think anyone disagrees with that.

Cultural placement is not only enshrined but also expanded to every child. The government has taken that piece and thinks it is so important that we are expanding it to every child. That has been lost in this debate. We recognise how important culture and family are to every child, so it is enshrined in the legislation and will

now be there for every child of every cultural background in the Northern Territory. It holds the department accountable and, importantly, applies to every child equally. That is an important piece.

When you break down the amendments, you see that they are extremely good amendments that focus on the welfare of our children.

Some concerns raised through the scrutiny committee were valid, including concerns about the historic misuse of child protection powers, which is incredibly relevant in the Northern Territory; the consequences of separating children from family and culture; shortage of housing and therapeutic services; and failures that occur in out-of-home care. All those things are true and are important parts of the conversation, but that is not what this Bill is actually about.

The Bill asks the question: when interests conflict, and there are many interests that go into the wellbeing of a child, what is the paramount concern? We have said that it is the safety of the child. I reinforce that. Arguments were pushed in the committee hearings, but when you push organisations about a child in the Northern Territory who is at risk tonight, the opposing arguments fall apart because everyone accepted that there is a time and place for a child to be removed. When their immediate safety is at risk, a child needs to be made safe. I am in massive support of making it an unequivocal fact that the child will come first and is being placed at the centre of this legislation.

We received 150 submissions, and I thank everyone who submitted; however, parliamentary scrutiny is not about going with whatever most submissions suggest. We are not there to count submissions. We are there to ask questions, test arguments and the evidence being put before us, examine the law and consider the competing rights that exist. That is what I tried to do during those committee hearings.

One of the most powerful arguments is when I bring it back to a child in my electorate and consider this: if a child is at risk tonight of sexual harm, what should the law do? Everyone agrees that the child needs to be safe. The opposing argument drifts away from the individual child in that scenario of harm.

I will make a few rebuttals. The Member for Nightcliff bringing quotes from his political donor, Unions NT, to today's conversation probably missed the mark.

Member for Mulka, I ask you to look at the recordings of the hearings and judge for yourself how I interacted and questioned your family. There was good evidence given on a range of things. When looking at ARDS in your electorate, I asked whether the department uses the kinship structures and maps. It is important evidence for the department to uses to ensure there is better cultural practice. I ask that you watch that hearing in full and make your mind up for yourself.

Opposition Leader, the Children's Commissioner resigned of her own accord, and that is important. I will not make further comment, but it was a voluntary resignation.

What does 'every child matters' actually mean? To me, it means that the law acts, regardless of their race, religion, ethnicity or location. It should not matter if they are in Darwin, Palmerston, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, Katherine, remote communities or very remote communities. We need to set one standard of safety for our children across the Northern Territory. For me, that is what 'every child' means.

The legislation must inform decision-makers what to do when considerations genuinely come into conflict, and this Bill provides clarity that does not exist. That is important for decision-makers.

Context is important. In the Northern Territory when we talk about child protection, a historical context that must be acknowledged is the Stolen Generation. There are members of this parliament who are intimately connected with that. I have constituents who are intimately connected with that. It applies across the Northern Territory. Legislation caused significant harm and took families away based on racial background, so it is a rational response for that memory to be brought up for many people when they hear about child protection. I do not want to disregard the importance of historical child protection Bills and what that means for some Territorians, because it is far reaching to be removed from your family, language and culture. Of course that causes huge harm. No-one is disputing that.

As I said in the hearings, I believe culture is extremely important to every child's wellbeing. Every child has a culture. This is not what the amendment is changing. The amendment recognises that and expands it to all children so that if a decision-maker is looking at my children, they will look at culture for my kids as well.

What do we do with this historical wrong and the rational fear that modern legislation would bring about? It means intervention must be made on an individual basis, so for the individual child and their circumstance, which this Bill does. Intervention must be based on evidence of harm or the likelihood of harm. It cannot simply be done; there must be documented evidence of harm or the very real likelihood that harm will happen. It must be the least intrusive response, consistent for the child, and we see that in not only maintaining the placement principle but also expanding it for every child.

We want to avoid a removal. If a removal has to happen because the child's safety is in jeopardy, or the child is unsafe and is experiencing abuse, we want the first point of care to be other family. After that, we want it to be other community members. After that, we want it to be individuals within the same cultural group as that child. I do not see why any of us are disagreeing with that concept.

I spoke about the documentation. This Bill helps keep the department accountable, and it is subject to court oversight.

We need genuine efforts, which is legislated, so that if the child is removed—we all agree there is a time when a child has to be removed—they need to remain and keep a connection with their language, culture, family and country. That is expanded to all children.

By legislating early intervention, the department must provide early intervention and resources to those families to try to keep them together.

The kinship placement came under heavy attack. For me, that has been one of the most frustrating parts of the commentary and is why I want to speak publicly about this. By enshrining it, we are ensuring it stays and is expanded to every child in the Northern Territory. We recognise that it is not one race of children but all children who benefit from culture, language, knowing their identify and place in the world.

There is not a watering down, as has been claimed. All that is being done is we are saying the safety of the child becomes the paramount concern. When you test that at the individual child level, the counterargument falls apart. Bring it down to a home, that base atomised unit of culture. For the child it can even get down to the individual relationship. We all have a sense of culture within ourselves, but for the child learning about culture in the base unit of the home, what happens when the abuse is coming from within the home? That is the question.

We all reasonably agree that, unfortunately, there comes a time when a child needs to be taken out of their home, despite efforts to keep it together. You are removing them from their base unit of culture, being that immediate family environment, which is where the argument falls down because that individual child needs safety in that moment. If you agree that there is a time and place when you need to remove a child, you are removing them from their base level of culture. The Act should then do everything it can to ensure they are plugged into the broader network that is culture for every child in the Northern Territory. That is what it aims to do.

I understand that some of the response to the Bill in a historical context is rational. I am happy to say, having been a part of the scrutiny committee, that when you test the individual cases, you see that these amendments to the child protection Act are good and will help every child in the Northern Territory.

There is a lot of criticism you can make of the system, and you will not find argument with me on the issues that come about from residential care or that harm will occur in foster care. This Bill does not discredit any of that. All those things can remain true. However, it is asking: what do we do for the child at harm now?

Some of the issues we examined in the scrutiny committee were about housing, poverty and domestic violence. These are real issues, but what about the child tonight? I made a claim; I spoke of the moral bankruptcy of some individuals because when I posed the question, 'What we do about the child who is at harm tonight?', the response that we will invest in more housing and education does not help that child tonight. I cannot look at a child who is undergoing harm and give that as my response. The law has to protect that child, and the other things are still true. That is why I support this Bill. All those other factors will improve outcomes overall, but when I think of facing a child in my electorate who is at harm tonight, I will support this Bill because I want that child to be safe and not to have to undergo continued harm, and know the law will do what it can to protect them.

Mr O'GALLAGHER (Karama): Madam Speaker, this is an important topic, and I understand the concern of everyone in the Assembly.

Although the Bill is for the safety of all children, I have no doubt that given the over-representation of Indigenous children in terms of some of these protections, there has been a strong focus on that. I respect the commentary and expressions of feelings from the crossbench—the Members for Mulka, Gwoja, Arnhem, Daly and Arafura. I understand they are coming from a personal experience, and I respect that.

Having said that, there are other Indigenous leaders who hold a different view, and their view resonates more with me in some ways than some of the views we just heard. The way it was summed up for me was by a media release on Monday from Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price about a joint statement made by government officials criticising this legislation. I will quote from her statement, so I do not get it wrong. It is titled 'NT Child Protection Laws', and states:

> *It is extraordinary that governments presiding over the continued failure of child protection systems across Australia now seek to lecture the Northern Territory about protecting vulnerable Aboriginal children.*
>
> *For decades, governments have defended the same policies, repeated the same slogans and reaffirmed the same principles while Aboriginal children have remained catastrophically overrepresented in abuse, neglect and out-of-home care.*
>
> *Their joint statement demands continued adherence to the existing framework, but offers no serious answer as to why that framework has failed to keep so many children safe.*
>
> *The NT's Every Child Matters Bill does not erase family, kinship, community or culture. It makes clear that these considerations cannot be used to justify leaving a child in danger, returning a child to danger or delaying intervention while adults debate process.*

We all agree with this next bit:

> *A child's safety must come first. That should never have become controversial.*
>
> *For too long, governments and institutions have been more concerned about offending activists, organisations and bureaucracies than confronting the reality facing vulnerable children.*
>
> *They have protected systems from criticism while children have continued to suffer.*
>
> *They have defended ideology while families have buried children.*
>
> *The Northern Territory has endured inquiry after inquiry, review after review and promise after promise, yet too many Aboriginal children remain exposed to violence, abuse, neglect and instability.*
>
> *Safety and cultural connection are not mutually exclusive. Every child deserves both. But culture must never become an excuse for inaction, and no child should be sacrificed to preserve a policy framework that is plainly failing.*
>
> *The jurisdictions signing this statement are entitled to defend the status quo, but they should first explain the outcomes produced under their watch.*
>
> *If the current approach is working, why are so many Aboriginal children still unsafe?*
>
> *That is the question their joint statement avoids, because the answer exposes the failure of the system they are defending.*

That was issued on Monday 20 July 2026.

The Leader of the Opposition is right; we have to do more, and we have to do better. This Bill is about doing more and doing better. We cannot just sit doing nothing; we are taking real steps. It makes it unambiguous that child safety is first and foremost. That guides us for action. Although legislation might be just words, this will guide action to protect children.

I commend the Bill.

Ms CAHILL (Child Protection)(in reply): Madam Speaker, every child in the Northern Territory deserves the same simple promise: if they are unsafe, the adults responsible for protecting them will act early, wisely and in their best interests. That promise sits at the heart of this Bill.

This debate has rightly generated strong views. Child protection should never be easy. It asks parliament to make decisions about some of the most difficult circumstances any family can face. It asks us to balance the rights of parents, the responsibilities of government and, above all else, the welfare of children. Reasonable people will differ about how that balance should be struck, but there should be no disagreement about the objective: every child deserves to grow up safe, to have stability and the opportunity to belong. That is what this legislation seeks to achieve.

During this debate much has been said about legal principles, statutory drafting and competing interpretations of individual clauses. These matters are important, but before we talk about legislation we should remember who this legislation is for. It is for children who have no control over the circumstances into which they are born and who rely entirely on the adults around them and this parliament to protect them when they cannot protect themselves.

When I introduced this Bill I spoke about two Territory children. I do so again today because they remind us why reform is necessary.

The first child entered care at just one year of age because of neglect. Year after year the goal remained reunification, and year after year, the circumstances that led to removal failed to change. Today that child is 10 years old; their entire childhood has been spent moving through a system that offered uncertainty instead of permanency. Ten years—an entire childhood—were spent waiting for adults to make decisions that never came.

The second child entered care at only three months of age. They formed a secure attachment with a loving carer. Despite little progress towards reunification, it still took five years before long-term certainty was finally achieved. For that child, home already existed; the law simply took years to recognise it.

These are not extraordinary cases; they are the predictable consequence of a system that too often rewards delay instead of decisive action, mistakes uncertainty for caution and can leave children waiting while the adults around them continue debating what should happen next.

No child experiences delay as a legal concept; a child experiences delay as another birthday spent wondering where they belong. Reform is needed because every child gets only one childhood. We cannot give it back once it has passed.

This Bill begins with a simple proposition: removing a child should never be regarded as success. Success is keeping families safe and together wherever that is possible; identifying risks earlier; supporting parents before circumstances deteriorate into crisis; and giving family the opportunity to overcome challenges before a court is ever asked to intervene. That is why one of the most significant reforms in this legislation is the introduction of proactive efforts. Instead of waiting until removal becomes the only remaining option, the law will require earlier engagement with families, earlier support and earlier intervention. That represents an important shift in philosophy. The child protection system should not exist only to respond after harm has occurred; wherever possible, it should work to prevent that harm occurring in the first place.

Throughout this debate we heard claims that this Bill somehow weakens protections for children and alters the existing threshold for removing a child from their family. I reject that proposition. Nothing in this legislation lowers the legal threshold for removing a child from their family. Nothing reduces the court's responsibility to determine whether intervention is necessary. This Bill increases the obligation placed upon government to support families through proactive efforts to strengthen the family unit. Nothing expands the circumstances in which a government may intervene.

Before seeking a protection order the department must demonstrate the proactive efforts undertaken to support the family. It must explain what assistance was offered and why those efforts were unsuccessful. It must identify what alternatives were considered before asking the court to remove a child. That is greater accountability for government, not less protection for families.

This Bill was not developed in isolation. It has been informed by extensive consultation, detailed policy work and thorough parliamentary scrutiny. The Legislative Scrutiny Committee received 150 submissions. It conducted public hearings and heard evidence from Aboriginal organisations, legal services, medical professionals, foster and kinship carers, police, community organisations and child protection experts. I thank every individual and organisation that contributed to that process.

Not every submission supported the Bill; some opposed it entirely and others suggested amendments, but all contributed to a better understanding of the issues. That is how scrutiny should work.

After considering the evidence the committee reached its majority conclusion and recommended that the Assembly pass the Bill. That recommendation matters. It reflects careful consideration of the evidence, not simply competing political arguments. The government has accepted the committee's recommended amendment and has accepted recommendations aimed at helping families better understand their rights and the department's obligations.

Today I will also place important clarifications on the *Parliamentary Record* so that there can be no uncertainty about parliament's intent in enacting these reforms.

This Bill is founded upon a simple belief: children cannot wait for perfect systems. They cannot wait until every housing challenge has been solved and every workforce shortage has disappeared. They cannot wait while governments commission another review describing problems we already understand. Children live their childhood one day at a time, and our responsibility is to ensure the law serves them today, not at some uncertain point in the future, and that is why this Bill is before the Assembly.

No issue has attracted greater attention during this debate than the Aboriginal child placement principle, nor should it. The history of Aboriginal child removal in Australia casts a long shadow. It is a history that cannot be ignored, minimised or forgotten. It continues to shape how Aboriginal families and communities view child protection. Any government that proposes reform in this area has a responsibility to listen with humility and respond with respect.

I have listened carefully and I understand why many Aboriginal organisations, community leaders and advocates have spoken with passion about this Bill. These concerns come from a place of lived experience and historical truth, and they deserve to be acknowledged, but acknowledging history does not relieve parliament of responsibility to confront the failures of the present.

Today too many Aboriginal children are entering care. Too many remain there for years without certainty, experiencing repeated replacements instead of lasting stability. Those outcomes should concern every member of this Assembly. The question before us is not whether Aboriginal children should remain connected to their families, community, language and culture, because of course they should. The real question is whether our current system is delivering those outcomes. The evidence tells us that it is not.

This Bill does not abandon the Aboriginal child placement principle. It strengthens the principles that matter most and continues to recognise that family comes first. It continues to recognise that Aboriginal children should maintain meaningful connections to their family, community, culture, language and country. These principles remain central because they are central to a child's identity and wellbeing. Nothing in this legislation diminishes that.

What this Bill makes clear is equally important: every placement must be safe. Safety and culture are not competing values. For Aboriginal children they belong together, and a child should never be asked to sacrifice one for the other. That has guided the government throughout the development of this legislation.

Some of the strongest criticism directed at this Bill has rested upon the claim that it makes it easier for government to remove Aboriginal children from their families, and that claim is simply incorrect. Let me state this as plainly as I can: the legal threshold for removing a child from their family does not change—not one clause of this Bill lowers that threshold or expands the circumstances in which a child may be removed. Those legal protections remain exactly as they are today.

What changes is the responsibility placed upon government. Before asking a court to remove a child, the department must now demonstrate the proactive efforts it has undertaken to keep that family together. It must show what support has been offered and explain why those efforts did not succeed. It must account for the alternatives that were considered before seeking intervention. That is not a reduction in accountability; it is an increase. It places a greater burden on government before it seeks the most serious order available under the Act.

Another issue has been raised repeatedly throughout this debate. The Bill removes the words 'any Aboriginal person' from the placement hierarchy. Some have suggested that this represents a weakening of the Aboriginal child placement principle. I do not accept that. Every child deserves to be placed with a person who is safe, capable and can meet their needs. This has always been true, and it remains true. Aboriginal children deserve both cultural connection and personal safety. The government rejects the notion that those two objectives are somehow incompatible. Our responsibility is to achieve both.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence received by the Legislative Scrutiny Committee did not concern legislative drafting; it concerned implementation. The Northern Territory has the lowest rate in Australia of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care being placed with Aboriginal kin. That should concern every one of us. It tells us that simply preserving existing legislative wording has not delivered the outcomes we all want to see. The problem is larger than the language of the Act.

Aboriginal organisations spoke about unnecessary bureaucracy. They described lengthy approval processes and identified barriers preventing suitable kinship carers from becoming approved. They are practical problems that require practical solutions. Our government through the Department of Children and Families is already working alongside Aboriginal organisations to reduce those barriers while maintaining rigorous child safety standards. This work will continue. If we genuinely want more Aboriginal children cared for by their own family and community, improving implementation is just as important as improving legislation.

This Bill is not about choosing between safety and culture; it is about recognising that every Aboriginal child deserves both; preserving cultural identity while ensuring children are protected from harm; supporting families earlier; strengthening accountability; and making better decisions for children whose futures depend upon the choices made by adults. Those, again, are not competing objectives; they are complementary responsibilities, and they sit together at the heart of this Bill.

The second major issue raised through the committee's inquiry concerned the broader circumstances confronting Territory families: poverty; housing; remoteness; and access to services. Those issues deserve serious consideration because legislation alone cannot solve them, yet neither can they become an excuse for leaving children trapped in a system that everyone agrees requires reform. That is where I now turn.

Throughout the committee's inquiry many organisations reminded us that child protection legislation does not operate in isolation. Families live with the realities of housing shortages, financial hardship, addiction, domestic and family violence, poor health, unemployment and remoteness. Many parents are asked to engage with services that simply do not exist in their community. These realities are well known to every member of this Assembly, and no responsible government should pretend otherwise.

This Bill does not seek to legislate those challenges away because legislation cannot build houses, train social workers overnight, eliminate poverty or heal generations of trauma. Those challenges demand sustained investment in services, stronger partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and continued support for the dedicated professionals working with Territory families every day.

However, recognising those realities is not an argument against legislative reform. It is an argument for ensuring that the law supports earlier intervention while government continues investing in the services families need. For too long our legislation has encouraged intervention only after circumstances have deteriorated to the point where statutory action becomes necessary. By then, opportunities have often been lost, relationships have broken down and children have experienced trauma that might otherwise have been prevented.

That is why this Bill introduces a proactive efforts framework. It changes the expectations placed upon government. Instead of waiting until families reach crisis, the department will be required to work with parents earlier, identify risks sooner and demonstrate the practical steps taken to help families safely remain together wherever possible. That is not simply a procedural reform; it is a cultural change shifting the focus of the child protection system from responding to failure towards preventing it.

When government ultimately seeks a protection order, it must show the court what it did before reaching that point. The department will need to demonstrate the supports offered, the work undertaken with the family, the alternatives considered and the reasons intervention has become necessary. That is greater accountability to families, the court and, ultimately, the children whose lives are shaped by these decisions.

Some concern has been expressed that families experiencing poverty or homelessness may be unfairly drawn into the child protection system, and I want to address that concern directly. Poverty is not neglect. Homelessness is not neglect. A family should never fear losing a child simply because they are poor or housing is beyond their reach. The assessment required under this legislation remains a holistic assessment of the child's circumstances and safety. Those protections remain unchanged. Families deserve to know that this parliament understands the difference between social disadvantage and parental neglect.

Another significant reform concerns permanency. One of the clearest messages I have heard from young people who have grown up in care is that uncertainty can be as damaging as instability itself. Children measure time differently from adults. A year is not an administrative period; for a five-year-old it is one-fifth

of their life. Every extension of a temporary order is another year spent wondering where they belong. Our current system too often allows children to remain on successive short-term orders while adults continue searching for certainty that never arrives. This Bill says that we can do better.

The evidence shows that when reunification succeeds, it is most likely to occur within the first two years after a child enters care. That is where the department's greatest efforts should be directed. Parents should receive intensive support during that critical period. Every reasonable opportunity for safe reunification should be pursued, but where those efforts have not succeeded children should not be left in indefinite legal limbo. At some point the system must stop asking children to wait. This Bill requires that difficult decisions be made earlier, not because we value reunification less but because we value childhood more.

Importantly, those reforms do not close the door on parents who later overcome the challenges that led to intervention. The Act will continue to allow protection orders to be buried or revoked where circumstances have genuinely changed. Hope and opportunity remain; what changes is the expectation that government must actively pursue permanency rather than allowing uncertainty to become the default.

The Bill introduces family responsibility agreements and family responsibility orders. Some have characterised these reforms as punitive. That is not their purpose. Their purpose is to provide families with support before statutory child protection becomes necessary. Family responsibility agreements are voluntary; they encourage parents to engage with services and assistance at the earliest possible stage. Family responsibility orders provide a structured response where voluntary engagement has not occurred. They do not transfer parental responsibility, nor do they remove children from their families. They exist to prevent those outcomes wherever it is safe to do so.

That approach reflects the evidence provided by the Northern Territory Police Association, whose members often see families beginning to experience crisis long before the child protection system can legally respond. Earlier intervention is not about expanding government power; it is about creating lawful opportunities to help families before problems become tragedies.

I acknowledge the concerns raised by organisations supporting victim–survivors of domestic and family violence. These concerns deserve careful consideration. No person experiencing violence should be held responsible for the actions of the person using that violence. This Bill continues to require domestic and family violence risks to be managed through the Territory's established risk assessment framework. That safeguard is essential, and I expect it to be applied consistently in every case.

Finally, this Bill recognises the people who know children best. For too long, carers who have provided day-to-day care have had limited opportunity to place their knowledge directly before the court. This legislation changes that. Where a child has lived with a carer for a significant period, that carer can participate in proceedings affecting the child's future. That is a practical reform. It ensures decisions about children are informed by those who know their daily routines, understand their needs and have earned their trust. When courts make decisions about children's futures, every informed voice matters. Most importantly, the child's voice matters. That is what these reforms seek to protect.

This debate has involved passionate disagreement, and that is entirely appropriate. The welfare of children deserves careful scrutiny and respectful debate, but after months of consultation, detailed parliamentary examination and extensive public discussion, the question before this Assembly is now a simple one: do we leave the system as it is, or do we act to give Territory children the safety, stability and certainty they deserve? That is the choice before us.

Throughout this debate much has been said about consultation. I welcome that discussion because legislation of this significance should never be developed behind closed doors. Over the past 18 months the government has listened to Aboriginal organisations, foster and kinship carers, legal services, medical professionals, police, the judiciary, community organisations, departmental staff and, most importantly, young people who have experienced the child protection system themselves. Their perspectives and experiences differ, but one message emerged with remarkable consistency: the system intervenes too late; children remain in uncertainty for too long; and families often receive meaningful support only after circumstances have reached crisis. That message shaped this Bill.

The Legislative Scrutiny Committee undertook a comprehensive examination of these reforms. As I said, it received 150 submissions, heard evidence from organisations representing a wide range of professional expertise and lived experience, questioned the department in detail and considered competing views. That process has strengthened this legislation.

The government has accepted the committee's recommended amendment to include a note to clarify the CEO's responsibilities when working with families. I give assurance that the department will support families to understand their rights and obligations with regard to proactive efforts, noting that these efforts are beholden on the department to support families to stay together and, in the worst-case scenario when a child has been removed from their family, to achieve reunification.

Most critically, there has been no change to the principles to support Aboriginal children to remain with family, connected to their culture and community. They are, in fact, reinforced and elevated to apply to any and all children who are at risk because every child deserves to be safe, supported and cared for, living in stable homes with family, surrounded by those who love them.

Today I place the government's intentions clearly on the *Parliamentary Record* so that there can be no misunderstanding about the operation of these reforms. That is parliamentary scrutiny working exactly as it should. Whilst the principles detailed in the Every Child Matters Bill are not inalienable rights, as is the case for the current legislation, they will guide policy and regulatory frameworks, with the addition of safety as the primary consideration. When determining what is in the best interests of a child, this Bill gives an unequivocal direction to the department: keep our children safe.

Some have argued that we should delay these reforms and undertake further consultation. I respectfully disagree. There will always be another review that can be commissioned, another report that can be written and another inquiry that can be recommended for further discussion. While governments continue discussing reform, children continue living with the consequences of a system that everyone agrees is not delivering the outcomes they deserve. Delay is not a neutral choice; it has consequences. Every year we postpone reform is another year in which children remain on temporary orders with no certainty about their future; families miss opportunities for earlier support; and children continue waiting for adults to make decisions that should already have been made.

This parliament has debated the issues carefully, the evidence has been heard, the concerns have been considered, the legislation has been scrutinised and the time has now come to decide.

No legislation is perfect; no Act of parliament can eliminate child abuse; and no statute can end poverty, addiction, domestic violence or intergenerational trauma. These challenges require sustained commitment from governments, communities and families alike. However, legislation can establish clearer expectations, improve accountability, ensure earlier intervention, provide children with greater stability and require government to do more before asking a court to separate a child from their family.

That is exactly what this Bill does. It puts children at the centre of every decision. It requires the department to demonstrate what it has done to help families before seeking the most serious intervention available under the law. It promotes earlier support instead of later crisis; values permanency over prolonged uncertainty; strengthens the voice of carers who know their children best; and preserves the importance of family, culture and connection while recognising that every child also has an unquestionable right to safety.

This Bill is not founded on the belief that government always knows best; it is founded on the belief that children deserve better—better support for families, better accountability from government, better decisions made sooner and better opportunities to grow up in homes where they are safe, loved and can thrive. Ultimately, this debate comes down to a simple question: when we know that our child protection system is leaving too many children waiting in uncertainty, that earlier intervention offers a better chance of keeping families safely together and that children experience delay as lost childhoods rather than administrative processes, what is our responsibility as legislators? I believe it is to act, because every child gets only one childhood and one chance to feel safe, experience the security of belonging and build the relationships that will shape the rest of their lives. Those years cannot be recovered once they are lost.

That is why this legislation matters—not because it answers every challenge facing child protection but because it makes meaningful improvements where parliament has the power to act, today. Future generations will not judge this parliament by how many reports we commissioned or how many inquiries we conducted. They will judge us by whether vulnerable children were safer because we had the courage to act when reform was needed. This Bill reflects that responsibility. It reflects the simple principle that has guided these reforms from the beginning: every child matters and deserves the safety, stability and opportunity that this legislation seeks to deliver.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Motion agreed to; Bill read a second time.

Consideration in detail

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I am conscious that we have had a passionate debate. People were sincere in that debate. We are now in consideration in detail, so need to keep our questioning or comments to the clauses under consideration. I will try to give everyone the opportunity to get their views across, but if we can all do it in a respectful manner, that would be great.

I believe you may have a script, and I will try follow that script. There are areas where we will have competing amendments for the same clause which are substantially the same, so essentially only one can be moved. As a general principle, if the government has one and the opposition or an Independent has one, I will probably give precedence to the government's one. If there is one where the opposition has one and an Independent has one, I will give precedence to the opposition. That is a general rule, so there are no surprises.

Clause 1, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 2:

Mr PAECH: When is this legislation expected to commence?

Ms CAHILL: The legislation will commence in stages, with the final date for all implementation to occur by May 2028.

Mr PAECH: When do you anticipate that the first stage would commence?

Ms CAHILL: The first stage should be in place by September this year.

Mr PAECH: How will you ensure that the department meets operational readiness, stakeholder preparedness and implementation requirements before Part 2 commences?

Ms CAHILL: The department is already working on implementation for all parts of the legislation to ensure that everything can be implemented within the timeframe allocated.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 4:

J DAVIS: The clause adds safety, long-term stability and security to the objects of the Act. Section 8, as redrafted by the Bill, already places safety at the top of a ranked hierarchy of best interests consideration. What does adding it again in the objects achieve that section 8 does not already achieve?

Ms CAHILL: The objects come before the principles and state the overarching objects of the Act in its entirety.

J DAVIS: 'Long-term stability and security' does not appear as a defined term anywhere else in this Bill. Can you explain how a decision-maker is meant to weigh it against the interests already listed in section 8?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the court if it ever came into question.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 6:

Mr PAECH: What evidence directly supports the insertion of section 7, as opposed to retaining section 6 from the current Act?

Ms CAHILL: The intention of section 7 is to ensure that there is clarity regarding the manner in which consideration of the principles should be taken into account to avoid any doubt as to the weighting of each of the principles.

Mr PAECH: What consideration was given to inserting accountability mechanisms for section 7 in order to address the imbalance created by subjecting individuals and communities to expectations and obligations while your own government's agencies are not subjected to equivalent enforceable standards or consequences?

Ms CAHILL: I am not sure where you are deriving that assumption from.

Mr PAECH: Would you disagree with that?

Ms CAHILL: That the department and the government are not held to the same level of account; is that what you are asking?

Mr PAECH: I am asking why in section 7 …

Ms CAHILL: Is that section 7 in its entirety or one part of section 7?

Mr PAECH: I am referring to section 7 in its entirety and the imbalance created by subjecting individuals and communities to expectations and obligations. Are you suggesting that the department is subject to the same?

Ms CAHILL: No. In the past there was a randomised application of the principles under the Act. Section 7 ensures that those taking into account what needs to be considered for a child, consider those elements in order of priority, with the most important priority being safety.

Mr PAECH: Section 8(3) has been amended from a higher threshold to a lower threshold by the change in language from 'must be considered' to 'may also be relevant'. What evidence supports the decision to weaken the language and therefore reduce the government's responsibility to take into account specific matters relating to a child's safety in section 8(3)?

Ms CAHILL: It does not reduce the importance of those matters; it says that they may also be taken into consideration if they should be so required.

Mr PAECH: 'Must' implies that something actually must happen; it physically has to happen. Why has the government changed it to 'may also be relevant'?

Ms CAHILL: The section is to provide guidance for the principles, none of which are enforceable under law.

Mr PAECH: Why have you chosen to ignore all the evidence and relegate core elements in determining a child's best interests, such as safe relationships with family and reunification, as a secondary non-mandatory consideration?

Ms CAHILL: As I noted, all the principles in this section are guidance for consideration of matters. In considering what is the best interests of a child, all those elements may be taken into consideration.

Mr PAECH: What evidence exists regarding how the current legislation restricts a child's best interests and their safety from being the paramount consideration?

Ms CAHILL: There has been considerable debate that has provided a number of examples that suggest safety, which was not mentioned in the current legislation, needs to be reinforced as a consideration, given the outcomes for many children. That is why these elements have been structured in this way.

Mr PAECH: Can you provide a real example, based on the data and the evidence that the department would have collected, of how the current legislation is restricting a child's best interests and their safety from being a paramount consideration?

Ms CAHILL: It is important to acknowledge that not every principle will apply to every child in every circumstance. To stringently apply every single principle to every child if that is not relevant to the child is not a practical approach. I would be more than happy to give you the 100 or so cases of evidence of children, which I have examined over the last few months, to demonstrate how these principles have not supported children's ongoing safety and stability.

Mr PAECH: Are you making a commitment to make that information available to me?

Ms CAHILL: I am more than happy to give you that de-identified data.

Mr PAECH: Thank you.

J DAVIS: I think what the Member for Gwoja was asking was not to give examples of how the current legislation is failing, but I will not put words in his mouth; I will ask my own question. What evidence base shows that the changes to the Act will, in fact, make children safer? I am not asking about evidence that the current framework is failing; I think we have all heard that.

Ms CAHILL: The current legislation identifies harm and exploitation as the measures by which a decision might be made as to whether a child is in an environment of safety. It is a very high bar. I can provide evidence of many cases of children who have been exposed to what would be deemed to be an unsafe environment where intervention did not occur because it did not meet the threshold of that principle. That is why safety has been included and elevated as the primary concern.

J DAVIS: Can you show me any provisions in the current Act that position cultural connection above child safety rather than alongside it?

Ms CAHILL: Safety is not mentioned in the current Act.

J DAVIS: To clarify, was safety never mentioned in the current Act?

Ms CAHILL: I am happy to report to you that the first mention of safety in the current Act occurs as a defence for people who might refuse to give evidence in a child protection case. It does not appear in the principles of the Act or the underlying objects of the Act.

J DAVIS: Are there other words or phrases in the current Act that could reasonably be interpreted as carrying the same meaning as safety?

Ms CAHILL: If I thought that we would not be debating the need for safety to be included.

Mr PAECH: The insertion of proposed section 12A(3) will make it mandatory for the government to remove a child from a Territory family. How will this work in practice? Can you talk us through how 'likely risk' will be assessed?

Ms CAHILL: That will occur in the same way it does now. There will be risk assessments done. If the legislation passes and the additional work around family responsibility agreements has been done, there will be sufficient evidence to ensure that those actions are taken appropriately. As is always the case, a child is not removed unless an appropriate case can be made to the court for that to happen, unless, of course, it is an emergency and there is an immediate risk of harm to the child.

Mr PAECH: I want to unpick a bit your reference to 'likely risk' will be assessed.

Ms CAHILL: The decision about whether a child can be removed from a family would require an order from the court. Sufficient evidence to support that there is a significant and likely risk of harm would need to be presented to the court for it to make that order.

Mr PAECH: How will department support for families to mitigate a likely risk differ from what it is required to do under existing legislation?

Ms CAHILL: Work will be done with the family to do everything possible to negate the need for removal of a child. As we have indicated through this debate this evening, there is a threshold to step in much earlier to assist families to reduce the need for a child to be removed, but at the end of the day, if it comes to a significant likely risk of harm and the court decides that is the decision to be made, that is how it will be progressed.

Mr PAECH: How will the department ensure that children who are removed from families can participate in and maintain contact with their families and communities, especially children who have been removed from remote communities?

Ms CAHILL: The current situation and the processes in place to ensure that will not change; they will continue.

Mr PAECH: Why has a reference to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations been removed from section 12C(1)?

Ms CAHILL: What was envisaged in the amendment of that section was to ensure that any family who was deciding who might be their best representative did not feel obliged to include particular people or organisations; it could be something they determine of their own accord.

Mr PAECH: When significant decisions are made about Aboriginal children, why does it appear to be made harder for families to be involved in decision-making or to help identify other family or kinship members who can be carers as set out in proposed section 12C(2)?

Ms CAHILL: There is no intention to make it more difficult for families to participate in that decision-making. To the contrary, it is saying that they should have a wider choice of how they are involved in those decisions.

Mr PAECH: I refer to proposed section 12D, Proactive efforts. What efforts will the department undertake to address the grounds on which a child was removed?

Ms CAHILL: As part of the implementation process of the legislation, that will be clearly articulated. That is an operational matter as to how that will be undertaken. It will be all the considerations that one would expect to take in making sure that you work to keep a family together. There is work currently underway by the department to develop that operational structure.

Mr PAECH: That is being operationalised within the department, but it is described in the legislation as 'addressing the grounds'. What would that consist of? I am not asking for a hypothetical, but an example of what 'addressing the grounds' would typically mean in an operational sense?

Ms CAHILL: For example, if the safety of the child was at imminent risk, and a decision was made—this is a hypothetical—to take the child into care but there was not the ability to remove the parent with the child, if it was a situation of domestic violence, the grounds would then be to try to find somewhere immediately where you could relocate the family as a unit, minus the perpetrator, to make sure they are safe and to keep everybody together.

Mr PAECH: You said it is an operational matter, but what resourcing has been allocated to proposed section 12D—or is that being sorted out internally?

Ms CAHILL: That work is underway internally.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek some guidance. When would you like amendments introduced?

Mr PAECH: I will ask a series of questions, and I too will need guidance from the Deputy Speaker because I, the government and the Member for Johnston have amendments to clause 6.

J DAVIS: While we are speaking about this, I have questions on some of the proposed sections in clause 6 that you are asking questions about. Mr Deputy Speaker, would you prefer me to jump in at the same proposed section?

Mr PAECH: I intend to ask all the questions at the front end and then go to the amendments, noting that the minister has amendments. I seek clarification, Mr Deputy Speaker: how will you work out the precedence or hierarchy of the amendments?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: You may ask all your front-end questions first. Then we will go through the amendments in the order they are listed. We will do that in sequence because some depend on decisions.

Mr PAECH: I did not know how it would work because the minister flagged she wants to move her amendment.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I would also go to the minister for her amendment in the sequence.

Ms CAHILL: So that we do not go backwards and forwards, can we move through each proposed section under each clause at the same time?

Mr PAECH: I will ask all the questions as we go through each of the clauses, not for the entire Bill.

Ms CAHILL: This clause has multiple components, and the Member for Johnston indicated she has questions which I believe relate to proposed sections you have already progressed.

Mr PAECH: Yes, so she can jump in while we are on that.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Then you can ask questions about the amendments themselves. If there are general questions on this clause, please feel free to ask them now.

J DAVIS: I will jump back a bit because I did not get to my feet quickly enough.

Can the new 'opportunity' language for Aboriginal children under proposed section 12C(2) be overridden by the safety provisions?

Ms CAHILL: The ultimate and paramount concern will always be safety, and one would imagine that one would not exclude the other. An opportunity would not override safety.

J DAVIS: Do you accept the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance against a strictly hierarchical best interests framework? This is in relation to proposed sections 8(2) and (3).

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! She was asking for her opinion.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Within CID she is entitled to do that.

J DAVIS: I can rephrase the question if necessary. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child gives guidance against a strictly hierarchical best interests framework, so the question is: on what basis does this proposed section depart from that?

Ms CAHILL: There was an informal application of a hierarchy under the current legislation, and it was felt more appropriate to clearly state what the hierarchy should be to avoid confusion and for future decisions not to be made in the same structure.

J DAVIS: Was it to depart from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance?

Ms CAHILL: To ensure continuity and stability in the application of process.

J DAVIS: That is understood. I am not necessarily putting those two things in opposition; I am just trying to clarify it.

Under proposed section 8(3), what is the practical difference in a decision-maker's obligation between something that may be relevant and something that must be considered?

Ms CAHILL: The changes in that section are to remove the subjective and discretionary interpretation of some of those applications, so it was much clearer for people that they should be applied in the same way, and to give everybody the right opportunity for consideration in those matters that follow through subsection (3).

J DAVIS: Can you give a practical example of how that might play out?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a hypothetical one, no; sorry.

J DAVIS: We are allowed to ask hypotheticals in consideration in detail.

Ms CAHILL: Everything would be determined on a case-by-case basis, so it is an endless proposition.

J DAVIS: We have heard case by case in consideration in detail before. I am interested in what that might mean in a real situation. Can you give any example?

Ms CAHILL: It is a case-by-case situation.

J DAVIS: I am interested in one case.

Ms CAHILL: I have answered that question.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The minister has answered the question. Can we move on, please?

J DAVIS: Sure.

Under proposed section 12B(2), what modelling has been done to predict the rate of Aboriginal children who may be removed from their families after this legislation passes?

Ms CAHILL: I do not think you could model that. If you want an example of how having a system in place that intervenes early impacts the removal of children, earlier we heard that under Circuit Breaker, with more than 700 cases and nearly 300 family responsibility agreements, out of those 700 children only five have been placed into care. It is a small percentage, if you want to use that as a base model. It was not even 1%; it was 0.006%.

J DAVIS: Is that what you are anticipating will happen from …

Ms CAHILL: It would be my delight to be able to tell you that in the future. Again, it is an unknown. Situations change on a daily basis, but we will be working hard to keep that as low as possible.

J DAVIS: Proposed section 12 retains 'right' language for children with disability and proposed section 12C uses 'opportunity' language for Aboriginal children. Can you explain the substantive difference between those two words?

Ms CAHILL: On the principles about Aboriginal children which are layered on top of the universal principle, every child gets the universal principle consideration and Aboriginal children get the additional consideration. Children with disability have significantly different requirements, and they are embedded in other systems such as healthcare.

J DAVIS: Can you explain the legal difference between 'right' and 'opportunity' in the Act, affecting these two groups of children?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the courts.

J DAVIS: Can you explain the intention?

Ms CAHILL: The intention I explained. I responded to the Member for Gwoja's question about that section.

J DAVIS: The inquest into the death of Baby G recommended an active efforts standard. Why does this Bill use the undefined 'proactive efforts' instead of adopting the Coroner's recommended language directly?

Ms CAHILL: With respect, proactive efforts are a bit stronger than active efforts. It says, 'You have to do this'.

J DAVIS: Is there a definition of proactive efforts in the Act?

Ms CAHILL: Proactive efforts has a legal interpretation if it is needed, but it means you get off your bum and do the work.

J DAVIS: What recourse does a family have if the department decides on its own what proactive efforts look like without their input at any stage?

Ms CAHILL: The work that has to be undertaken by the department is always done in consultation with a range of organisations and people. The Foster and Kinship Carers Association NT, for example, has a considerable role to play in assisting the department in these areas, and it will do that. Proactive efforts, by its implication, means that you do everything in your power to make sure that these children stay with their families.

J DAVIS: What recourse does the family have if they feel that has not been the case?

Ms CAHILL: The same recourse as they have today, which is through the courts.

Mr PAECH: Why were no enforcement measures included for proactive efforts as set out in proposed section 12D?

Ms CAHILL: Enforcement efforts on the part of …

Mr PAECH: I am talking about timeframes and those particular measures.

Ms CAHILL: If it was considered that timeframes and enforcement are required, that could be determined by the court as part of the process for the application for the order.

Mr PAECH: How will the Department of Children and Families report on provisions set out in proposed section 12D?

Ms CAHILL: If an order is made, it is responsible to reply to the court that it has adhered to the order and what proactive efforts have been undertaken.

Mr PAECH: Will that be lodged in the child protection system for evaluation and monitoring?

Ms CAHILL: The advice is that it is usually included in an affidavit to the court.

J DAVIS: In response to a question from the Member for Gwoja you said that work is underway to determine resourcing for this Bill. I had a question about what resources have been allocated to implement the proactive efforts. The scrutiny committee heard from the department explicitly that there would be no extra resources committed as a result of this Bill. Can you confirm that?

Ms CAHILL: The work will be undertaken from within. As the Member for Johnston would be aware, there is a review underway of the way in which child protection has been overseen as a result of the Kumanjayi Little Baby case in Alice Springs. That may well guide some of the direction around how this should be done.

J DAVIS: Would that be within existing resources?

Ms CAHILL: There are significant resources within the department that could easily be redeployed and not diminish work being done by the department in any other section.

Mr PAECH: Regarding proposed sections 12D(2) and (3), many of the submissions raised that flexible timeframes are often in the best interests of children and that restricting opportunities for safe reunification will result in more children entering care permanently. What evidence supports the removal of flexibility for the department staff to work with families in order to achieve those safe reunifications?

Ms CAHILL: For proposed section 12D(2)—are you talking about flexibility?

Mr PAECH: Yes, proposed sections 12D(2) and (3) where it says 'in the first 6 months'. Many of the submissions talked about the need to have flexible timeframes for a safe reunification.

Ms CAHILL: The intent of that particular section is to make sure the department does the heavy lifting up-front. One of the consistent messages that came back, and in information provided from the department, was that although the work was done, it often was not documented in such a way that it could be presented to the court. This enshrines in the legislation that you have to do everything in your power to get that family to stay together safely and that the first six months are critical. As we noted in the debate, for young children, a month is a long time and a year is a lifetime. It is critical that work is done earlier to rectify that family or identify a family member who can care for that child.

Mr PAECH: Given that child protection staff are managing an average case load of 22 at any one time, are you confident that a two-year timeframe is feasible for reunification?

Ms CAHILL: It is not anticipated that the child protection caseworkers on the front line would be undertaking this work; they would be supported by another team.

Mr PAECH: Are you comfortable with the two-year timeframe for reunification?

Ms CAHILL: All the work has to be done as early as possible. The current legislation provides that short-term care orders should only be two years. It is within that legislative framework as it currently stands. We are emphasising now that the department has to make sure that it does the work to a degree that supports reunification of that family as early as possible.

Mr PAECH: Proposed section 12D is about the proactive efforts. I noted you said that housing wait times are much longer than two years. How will reunification be possible in a two-year timeframe when the housing wait times are longer? Are there conversations with your colleague about prioritising foster and kinship carers for housing?

Ms CAHILL: There is already a well-formed connection between the Department of Children and Families and the department of Housing so that people who are in crisis situations can be elevated on the list when necessary to get them placed as quickly as possible.

J DAVIS: How was the two-year limit determined? What evidence was used to decide that was the most appropriate timeframe for a hard deadline?

Ms CAHILL: It reflects the timeframe in the current legislation.

J DAVIS: That is understood, but that is not a hard deadline. My question was: how was it determined that is an appropriate hard deadline?

Ms CAHILL: It was determined because the current legislation, which has been in play for a number of years, indicates that is what a short-term care order should look like.

J DAVIS: How many families currently subject to short-term parental responsibility directions would reach the two-year limit under this new section within the next 12 months?

Ms CAHILL: I do not have that information to hand, but I can tell you that anybody in the current situation who we are working through and who have not had the benefit of proactive efforts, should this legislation pass, would not be penalised simply because they are already in a short-term protection order period.

J DAVIS: When you say they would not be penalised, can you explain how that works with a hard two-year deadline?

Ms CAHILL: It is not retrospective legislation. If there is somebody who is currently on a short-term order …

J DAVIS: Would the clock start counting again?

Ms CAHILL: Yes. They would not be subject in their current short-term order. It would occur only if an extension was applied for.

J DAVIS: So that I am clear—this question has been raised with me—the clock will start counting again for families once this Bill is passed …

Ms CAHILL: It would be a new short-term order under the new legislation if it is passed.

J DAVIS: Do you know how many parents currently in the child protection system are on public housing waitlists or rehabilitation service waitlists?

Ms CAHILL: I am sorry; I do not have that information.

J DAVIS: Has the department assessed how these reforms will operate in remote communities where, as we know, there are already severe shortages in housing, disability supports, rehab programs, mental health services and things that families may be required to engage with as part of reunification?

Ms CAHILL: Everything will be done to support reunification, as is currently the case. The critical change with this legislation is that the department is on a timeline saying, 'You have to do the work early', so if something is needed to enable that reunification that is out of the control of the family, the department would be beholden to do the work to assist to make that happen.

J DAVIS: How is the department held accountable for that?

Ms CAHILL: The courts will hold it accountable as they currently do.

J DAVIS: If this comes to the court, will the department or the CEO have to prove that they did everything they can?

Ms CAHILL: Yes, they will have to provide the evidence of the efforts undertaken to support reunification.

J DAVIS: If those efforts are deemed inappropriate or having not gone far enough, what …

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the courts.

Mr PAECH: What will happen if the department fails to comply with proposed sections 12E and 12F, which is the responsibility of the Territory government and public authorities?

Ms CAHILL: They are provisions in the existing legislation, only under different numbers. They have just been pushed back a bit further because of the introduction of things like proactive efforts. The same standards that apply to the department now will apply in future.

Mr PAECH: When moving them, was any consideration given to building in a compliance mechanism to ensure the department meets its obligations to keep kids safe?

Ms CAHILL: As it currently is, that would be a matter for the courts.

Mr PAECH: One of the themes that came up in the submissions was people's concerns about its compatibility. Are these amendments consistent with section 10 of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, the Northern Territory *Anti-Discrimination Act*, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the national framework for protecting children? Was this legislation checked for compatibility?

Ms CAHILL: As is the standard process, this Bill was drafted by Parliamentary Counsel an all those considerations were taken into account. I reinforce, as we have been saying throughout this process, that none of the rights of anybody in this situation have been diminished by this reform.

Mr PAECH: Is this legislation compatible with all those?

Ms CAHILL: I answered that question.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 1 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 7 and insert:

7 Principles

(1) The underlying principles of this Act are set out in sections 8 to 12F.

(2) Anyone exercising a power or performing a function under this Act must, as far as practicable, uphold those principles.

(3) However, those principles do not affect the operation of any law in force in the Territory.

The national secretariat known as SNAICC submitted:

> *The proposed amendments would significantly alter the operation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle … and the broader rights framework underpinning child protection decision-making, particularly through clauses amending sections 7, 10, 12B and 12C of the Act.*

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 1 in schedule 67IND to omit proposed section 7(4) in its entirety.

I moved this amendment because we cannot build a child protection system on principles that the government is not bound by. If we pass proposed section 7(4) as currently drafted, we are effectively legislating that the guiding principles of our child protection system are legally inert. That tells vulnerable children and families that their right to participate and their right to cultural connection are nothing more than unenforceable words.

We heard from the Member for Gwoja that SNAICC – National Voice for our Children has explicitly warned the Assembly that this proposed section alters the Aboriginal child placement principle from being a statutory safeguard to a discretionary interpretive framework, reducing accountability.

We also heard through the scrutiny committee process that this is participation without standing. Mikan Aboriginal Corporation, representing Yolngu cultural authority, stated:

> *A child whose participation is denied has no remedy. A family whose cultural connection is disregarded has no remedy.*

The rights of vulnerable children must not be reduced to non-binding suggestions; therefore, I have moved amendment 1 to omit proposed section 7(4).

Ms CAHILL: I clarify that the current framework for the principles in the Bill are identical to the framework for the principles in the existing legislation. The intent, application and enforceability have not changed.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 2 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 8(2) to omit 'in the following order of priority'.

SNAICC, the Office of the Children's Commissioner and NAAJA at the public hearing, as well as the Queensland child protection peak, the National Justice Project, First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence, the Northern Territory Legal Assistance Forum, the University of Technology Sydney, Legal Aid, the Law Society and many more experts submitted that the best interests of a child be the paramount concern in every decision under the Act and that safety is already the primary focus of the legislation. The proposed hierarchy conflicts with international human rights law, and the Bill will likely disproportionately affect families in regional and remote areas, particularly low-income and Aboriginal families.

J DAVIS: I have a similar amendment, but I will not move it. I will speak to this amendment instead.

I support this amendment.

As the Member for Gwoja said, significant concerns about this proposed section were raised throughout the scrutiny process. The amendments in the Bill create a hierarchy of safety. Removing cultural connection from being central in that hierarchy relies on a flawed and dangerous assumption that physical safety and cultural connection are competing priorities. The committee heard repeatedly that pitting safety and culture against each other sends a dangerous message. They are not competing considerations.

Cultural safety is integral to safety. Aboriginal children make up nearly 90% of children in out-of-home care in the Territory. We need to make sure everything is done to look after their safety, including their cultural safety. I am narrowing 'safety' because essentially the Bill's amendments narrow safety. The committee heard repeatedly that this was problematic and people saw it as dangerous and felt it would put their children at risk.

I commend the amendment.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I have advice from the Whips that the Assembly may agree to having one-minute divisions. Most are in favour of that, so we will have one-minute divisions.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I remind those leaving the Chamber that divisions will be only one minute.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 3 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 8(3) to omit 'may also be' and insert 'must be considered if'.

We have been through a series of questions regarding this proposed section, and it is clear that a fulsome answer cannot be given to us about why the language has changed; therefore, I have moved amendment 3.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher

Mr Patel
Mr Yan
Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 3 in schedule 67IND to clause 6.

This amendment inserts into proposed section 8(2):

(j) the need to strengthen, preserve and promote positive relationships between the child and the child's parents, family members and other persons who are significant in the child's life;

(k) in circumstances where the child has been removed from the care of the child's family, all possibilities related to reunifying the child with the child's parents;

(l) the child's right to enjoy the culture and tradition of the child's family and community including the need to maintain ongoing contact with the child's family;

(m) other special characteristics of the child.

This is to make explicit in the Act that those things must be considered.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 4 in schedule 67IND to omit proposed section 8(3).

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher

Mr Patel
Mr Yan
Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 4 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 11(a)(iv) and insert:

(iv) must be given assistance and support in expressing those wishes and views in ways that are age appropriate, trauma informed and culturally safe and that uphold the child's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and

This amendment has been moved in line with the positions that were given by Children's Ground, CREATE Foundation and the First Nations NGO Alliance. They submitted that for Aboriginal children, child participation cannot be separated from the family, community, culture or kin, and the law should be strengthened to ensure children express their views in line with international human rights obligations.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 5 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 12A(3) and insert:

(3) A child may be removed from the child's family only if there is an unacceptable risk of harm to the child.

NAAJA, Jesuit Social Services, the national commission for Aboriginal children, Justice Reform Initiative, NPY Women's Council and a bunch of other important stakeholders made it clear in their submissions that the word 'must' in proposed section 12A(3) has the effect of changing a previous discretion to a requirement and will result in more children being removed permanently.

The proposed wording has the effect of lowering the threshold for removal by changing from 'an unacceptable risk of harm' to 'a significant and likely risk of harm', and this may disproportionately impact families in remote and very remote areas and parents with disabilities.

J DAVIS: We heard from many legal services during the inquiry process that 'significant and likely risk' is not a common legal phrase. It creates an unacceptably low threshold for mandatory child removal and, therefore, creates a situation where children may be at risk.

I support the amendment.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 6 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12A(4) to omit 'supported.' and insert 'supported and the child should eventually be returned to the family.'

In the public hearings the Children's Commissioner and SNAICC outlined that existing legislation is sufficient to give paramount regard to a child's safety when determining safe reunification.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 6 in schedule 67IND to proposed section 12B(2) to reinsert extended family kinship groups and community in the placement hierarchy.

We heard that the Aboriginal child placement principle is not working, but we also heard from many witnesses that the department is not even following it. We know that only 16.7% of Aboriginal children in care in the Northern Territory are placed with kin. It is clearly an implementation failure, not a legislative one. However, the response today as we have seen …

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Can we have some …

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I agree; keep the noise down at the back, please.

J DAVIS: I am sure they are listening carefully to my attempt to make sure this Bill achieves what it is meant to.

We must listen to the young people who grew up in this broken system. I heard the minister say that she had heard from young people. CREATE Foundation's submission to the inquiry stated that one young person said:

> *If these people understood the kinship system, most of us would have been placed with family.*

Another shared the devastating reality of cultural disconnection:

> *I came into care when I was 2 and no one made sure that I was connected to my family and my country.*
>
> *You are taken away from your Country and your family, and you don't have access for years … That broke me.*

When we pass laws like this we need to ensure that kinship networks are central to the way the law will be applied. I have heard that is the Act's intention, so this amendment seeks to make sure that it is reflected in the law.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 7 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12B(3), after 'should', to insert 'be healing focused and trauma informed and'.

The Queensland Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner, Mikan Aboriginal Corporation and others submitted in their evidence to the parliamentary scrutiny committee that along with proposed sections 8 and 123, proposed section 12B will lead to more children entering long-term care. Mainstreaming child placement principles is premature and will cause more harm in the absence of structural reform.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle

Mr Mackay
Mr Maley
Mr O'Gallagher
Mr Patel
Mr Yan
Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 8 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12C(1), after 'groups', insert ', Aboriginal community-controlled organisations'.

Nearly every submission raised concerns about the Bill's amendments to section 12C. AMSANT said that the amendments will likely cause more Aboriginal children to be placed outside of kinship arrangements. ARDS argued that the departmental lacks the cultural competency to adequately implement the framework. More than 72 submissions raised that the amendments will have the effect of removing or substantially weakening the Aboriginal child place principle. This could result in more removals, entrenched systemic discrimination and long-term harm to children. The Aboriginal child placement principle does not conflict with the changes to the best interests principle or safety. Instead, it provides an opportunity for a culturally safe lens for assessing best interests and safety.

Children's Ground, the Children's Commissioner, Mikan Aboriginal Corporation, Families Australia and many other health and child protection experts submitted that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) should be recognised as playing a role in promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal children.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 16
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Gwoja, I believe your amendment is substantially the same as the Member for Johnston's, so we will only run with yours.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 9 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12C(2)(a) to omit 'should be given the opportunity to participate' and insert 'have a right to participate, and to be enabled to participate,'.

CREATE, Jesuit Social Services, the Children's Commissioner, yourtown, First Nations NGO Alliance, Children's Ground, the South Australian Guardian and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians all gave evidence about this. Replacing the 'right' with the 'opportunity' to participate in administrative and judicial processes creates a substantial reduction in procedural protection and participation for families.

This is an important amendment born from the substantial submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee which highlighted the need to make appropriate amendments.

J DAVIS: Words matter in legislation, and there is a difference between 'right' and 'opportunity'.

CREATE told the committee that when it conducted a roundtable with young people who had been in care, they knew exactly what an opportunity to participate looks like in practice, compared with an obligation. They said:

> *We're listened to in a tokenistic way—you take what you want and ignore the rest.*
>
> *There are spaces where my voice matters, and spaces where it doesn't. How am I meant to value myself when I don't know when I'm allowed to be valuable?*

I strongly support this amendment. It will make the Bill consistent. Under the Bill, young people with disabilities have rights, while Aboriginal young people have opportunities. I support it being consistent for all young people.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 10 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12C(2)(b) to omit 'should be given the opportunity' and insert 'have a right'.

This important amendment makes sure that it is not about young people being given the opportunity; it is about every Territory child having a right. Members in this Chamber, particularly the Member for Johnston, talked about the need for Aboriginal children not to have the 'opportunity' but to have the 'right'. This further ensures that Aboriginal children have a right in decisions that affect them.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 11 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12C(2)(c) to omit 'should be allowed to participate' and insert 'must be allowed to participate, and be enabled to participate,'.

It is self-explanatory and follows on from amendments 9 and 10 and removing 'opportunity' and reinstating 'right'.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 12 in schedule 67OPP, after proposed section 12C(2)(c) to insert:

(d) the person making the decision must record what steps were taken to enable the participation mentioned in paragraphs (a) and (c).

It is self-explanatory and was raised during the consultation period.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 13 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed sections 12C(3) and (4) and insert:

(3) An Aboriginal child has the right to be brought up within the child's own family and community and on the child's own country.

(4) An Aboriginal child has a right to be supported to develop and maintain a connection with the child's family, community, culture, traditions, language and country, particularly when the child is placed with a person who is not from the child's community or kinship group.

This amendment has been brought because of the overwhelming submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee. Tiwi Land Council, Jesuit Social Services, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, the National Justice Project and many other stakeholders submitted that the removal or weakening the child placement principle and associated rights and safeguards to maintain connection to family, community, culture, traditions, language and country as a requirement for Aboriginal children must not be supported because it is inappropriate.

Essentially, amendment 13 is reinstating and strengthening the core elements of the child placement principle. We heard members make contributions about the Aboriginal child placement principle. This amendment demonstrates the need to support it. I urge the government to consider this when we take the vote. We have heard from evidence given to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee and stakeholders, up until today out the front of Parliament House, about the importance of connection to language, community, country and family for First Nations children in the Territory. This amendment ensures that connection is embedded and considered for future generations.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 9 in schedule 67IND to proposed section 12D(1) to omit 'proactive efforts' and insert 'timely, practical, thorough and purposeful proactive efforts'.

We asked questions about the definition of 'proactive efforts'. I am moving amendments to proposed section 12D because a legal obligation without a definition is an empty promise to the children we are here to protect. I asked the minister about the difference between the concept of active efforts and proactive efforts, and why active efforts was not used. Active efforts is considered the gold standard in child protection globally. It is generally understood that purposeful, thorough and timely efforts are supported by legislation and policy. Other jurisdictions have legislated this standard. The Coroner explicitly recommended it.

The minister said that proactive efforts means getting off your bum and doing it. I have no argument with that, but that is a pretty weak basis for a legislative framework that people rely on to make sure their rights are respected. How can a court assess whether the department's efforts were adequate if the legislation does not define what adequate looks like?

In order to try to address this and do what I am sure everyone in this Chamber wants, which is to make sure we are protecting children as much as possible, I have moved this amendment to insert some guidance into the proactive efforts definition.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 10 in schedule 67IND to proposed section 12D(2).

This amendment seeks to achieve the same purpose as the previous amendment I moved—that is, to ensure the definition is clear so that families and children know what the law will do for them.

I commend the amendment.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 14 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 12D(2) to omit ', within 2 years after the removal'.

We heard that the rigid timeframe of two years for reunification and the six-month timeframe for intensive efforts are inappropriate and will be ineffective, noting the intersection between families in the child protection system and other structural issues. We have all heard how strict timeframes do not work. The department needs flexibility when working with families.

There are rigid timeframes of 24 and six months. We all know of people's experience when the waitlist for an alcohol and other drug service was longer than six months. The housing waitlist is five to 10 years. These

rigid timeframes put extreme restrictions on the flexibility for services and the department to work with families to keep them together. Submissions to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee brought up just how important it is to have that flexibility, given that the Territory has a limited number of service providers and there are often extreme waitlists for services and housing.

J DAVIS: I strongly support this amendment.

One of the most significant things we heard through the scrutiny committee process was that putting an arbitrary, firm, two-year deadline on reunification will not work for many of the families who will be affected by this legislation. Stability is undeniably critical for children; no-one is arguing with that. No-one wants children stuck on short-term orders forever, but stability cannot be achieved by imposing an administrative deadline that ignores the reality of life for so many people in the Northern Territory.

We heard so many stories. I shared one earlier of a woman who had been brought to Darwin because of violence and was put in safe housing with her children. Her ex-partner turned up and the children were then removed because they had been exposed to violence. She was removed from that housing and could not be reunified with her children because she did not have housing. She went on a housing waitlist of eight to 10 years, so under this legislation unless she took the matter to court she could never be reunified. That is not a simple thing to do. The Deputy Chief Minister said, 'If you are worried about it, just take it to court', but that is not within most people's access.

If we are trying to make legislation in the best interests of children, let us make sure that we do not put in an arbitrary firm deadline which will have an impact, particularly on families in remote communities who are often forced to navigate incredibly complex, under-resourced systems, including medical and legal systems.

We heard from NPYWC during a committee hearing. Anyone who was there with me would remember the harrowing case study of a woman they called Jane whose child was removed. To satisfy her reunification plan, she had to undergo a range of psychological assessments and medical tests. To access those tests, she had to travel to Darwin, Adelaide and Port Augusta. She was disconnected from her community. She faced administrative nightmares because interstate child protection authorities would not release her clinical records. It all took an incredibly long time and would preclude her from this two-year timeframe, even though the minister said that the clock will start once this Bill is passed, so people will not be penalised for having been held up in the system until this point. It is some small thing people would be happy to hear.

I strongly support this amendment to remove the rigid two-year timeframe. I do not think it is in the interests of our children and will help keep children safer; I think it will result in children being permanently separated from their families when that is not in their best interests.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

The Assembly suspended.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 15 in schedule 67OPP, after proposed section 12D(3) to insert:

(3A) Proactive efforts under subsections (1) to (3) must be timely, practical, thorough and purposeful, culturally appropriate and conducted in partnership with the child and the family, kin and community of the child.

Nearly every submission raised concerns about child protection workforce shortages. They stated that the government should instead support adequate resourcing for services to ensure families can engage with proactive efforts, including culturally safe and local services and housing and services that may not exist, may have a long waitlist, may not be culturally safe or may be hard to access locally.

Aboriginal community-controlled organisations should be included in the proactive efforts requirements. Families in remote areas are likely to be disproportionately affected due to the lack of local services, the lack of local home care placements, travel costs, language barriers and the high mobility of families.

Critically, there are no enforcement mechanisms to ensure adequate services are provided. This enables the CEO and the department to exercise discretion in considering what services are required.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 12 in schedule 67IND, after proposed section 12D(3) to insert:

(3A) The CEO must ensure the proactive efforts are carried out in genuine partnership with the child, the child's parents, the child's family and the child's community.

This is an attempt to ensure that if this Bill passes, everything is done to make sure that children are at the centre of it, and any proactive efforts implemented are done in genuine partnership with the child, their family and their community.

I commend the amendment.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey

	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 16 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 12D(4)(d)(ii).

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Ms CAHILL: I move amendment 1 in schedule 067GOV to proposed section 12D, at the end to insert:

> Note for section 12D
>
> Section 42(4) relates to the CEO's responsibilities when providing services to, and interacting with, families.

This is as per the Legislative Scrutiny Committee's recommendation that a note for section 12D be inserted.

Mr PAECH: The opposition supports the amendment. It is reasonable and practical. It is important to place responsibility and accountability on what the department will do.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 7:

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 18 in schedule 67OPP to clause 7(2) to omit the proposed definition 'family responsibility order'.

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders like Children's Commissioners from around the country, the Law Society of the Northern Territory, the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Legal Assistance Forum submitted that parental responsibility orders will fail to address the underlying systemic issues and will likely have a disproportionate effect on Aboriginal families.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8:

Mr PAECH: Proposed section 32(1) provides that the CEO may make inquiries. Will you require the CEO to identify the specific risk to the child, the family circumstances and the services offered?

Ms CAHILL: It is not a broad power; it enables the CEO to make inquiries to get information when concerns have been raised. It covers the ability for the CEO to make those inquiries irrespective of whether there has been a notification. Potentially, it could be one of those situations that triggers a family responsibility agreement, for example.

Mr PAECH: How will the information that the CEO receives under proposed section 32(1) be evaluated or reported? I am looking at the oversight component.

Ms CAHILL: In the same way that those notifications are currently assessed.

Mr PAECH: There is no change …

Ms CAHILL: To the assessment process, no.

J DAVIS: Proposed section 65D requires the CEO to be satisfied that the facilities and services required under an agreement are reasonably available before entering into it. In a remote community with no on-the-ground service presence, does the family simply not get an agreement? What is the pathway for a family if the facilities and services required for a family responsibility agreement are not reasonably available?

Ms CAHILL: That is an operational matter. The department already facilitates access in situations when immediate access to services and support may not be available.

J DAVIS: In the case we talked about regarding the two-year hard deadline, can someone enter into a family responsibility agreement without those facilities being available?

Ms CAHILL: Family responsibility agreements are broad and created subject to the specific needs of the family involved.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 19 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 32(1)(b) to omit 'or family responsibility order'.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9:

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 20 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 35(1) and insert:

(1) The CEO may initiate an investigation to determine whether a child is in need of protection if the CEO believes on reasonable grounds that the child might be in need of protection (whether or not inquiries about the child have been made under section 32 or 33).

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 11:

Mr PAECH: What evidence supports the decision to lower the threshold to an event of concern as a trigger for intervention in family life? How does this definition differ from existing child protection policies at central intake?

Ms CAHILL: The intention of family responsibility agreements is to support families before we get to the point of a child protection notification. Currently in the Circuit Breaker Program families can be contacted for a range of reasons—one example is children being out on the street—and the team can initiate a discussion about family responsibility agreements in a less prescriptive and formalised manner.

Mr PAECH: How does the event of concern criteria take into account the prevalence of unmet developmental, cognitive disability or mental health-related needs experienced by children who come into contact with the child protection system?

Ms CAHILL: As is the case now in any circumstance when a notification is made—but this would be on a lower level—all those situations are taken into account as part of the assessment process.

Mr PAECH: How does the department differentiate between families where there is genuine neglect and families where it is considered they are under enormous pressure due to looking after a child with complex needs?

Ms CAHILL: Through the assessment process.

Mr PAECH: Will that assessment process remain unchanged?

Ms CAHILL: That is correct.

Mr PAECH: What additional resources are being provided to the department to handle potential increases in reported issues for families with events of concern?

Ms CAHILL: That is an operational matter. That will be enacted by the department.

Mr PAECH: How will the Bill ensure that noncompliance with a family responsibility agreement cannot be the basis for the court to make a family responsibility order unless it is satisfied that the requirements of section 65D(5) were met?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the court.

Mr PAECH: Will the statistics on family responsibility agreements be made public?

Ms CAHILL: We already make public the number of family responsibility agreements entered into, so there would be no reason not to do the same.

Mr PAECH: What is the purpose of proposed section 65E, Referral by police? Why has it been included?

Ms CAHILL: We already have a system in place through Circuit Breaker whereby police make those referrals. It was determined that including it in the legislation provided a strong clear pathway for police to make the referral for assistance when a child may be at risk.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 21 in schedule 67OPP.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe

	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 22 in schedule 67OPP.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 23 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 65D(1)(b) to omit 'or the risk of the event of concern'.

It is a self-explanatory amendment.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 24 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 65D(2).

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 25 in schedule 67OPP, after proposed section 65D(4) to insert …

Mr Maley: There is no need to read it out.

Mr PAECH: I will anyway.

This amendment is important and states:

(4A) When inviting a person to enter into a family responsibility agreement the CEO must:

(a) give the person a written notice containing a list of contact details for local legal service providers; and

(b) allow the person a reasonable opportunity to obtain legal advice in relation to the agreement.

This amendment is essentially about the FRAs and FROs. The agreements and orders should not be applied to families without their knowledge or access to legal support so that they know their obligations.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 26 in schedule 67OPP to proposed section 65D(6) to omit ‘or anti-social’ from the definition ‘event of concern’.

That is because ‘anti-social’ is clearly not defined.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O’Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 27 in schedule 67OPP to omit proposed section 65E.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O’Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12:

Ms CAHILL: I move amendment 2 in schedule 067GOV to omit section 72A(a)(iv) and insert:

(iv) a person nominated by the child or the child’s family who is of significance to the child; and

That is so the involvement with the child is evident. This amendment is to ensure consistency in line with the universal principle when participation in a care plan is considered.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 12, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 13:

Ms CAHILL: I move amendment 3 in schedule 067GOV to clause 13.

The amendment is to again ensure consistency in the legislation that the people involved in the review of a care plan are people who are significant to the child and familiar with the child's situation.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 13, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 14, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 15:

J DAVIS: I do not oppose this clause, but I flag a gap that has been raised with me. Which legal service in the Territory is funded to represent a non-Aboriginal carer with no domestic violence history who wants to exercise party status under this clause?

Ms CAHILL: That is a departmental operational process.

J DAVIS: The legislation is embedding a legal right for carers, but what is the resourcing for that? I have heard from legal services that there are no resources available, and they will be unable to access any of the existing legal services. Is that not a consideration?

Ms CAHILL: The department indicated, just as it currently does, that it will be able to accommodate requests from carers, and this is something that carers have demanded.

J DAVIS: Does that include legal representation?

Ms CAHILL: A right to be a party to a proceeding.

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clause 16:

Mr PAECH: How does this Bill address potential procedural fairness issues arising from proposed sections 102G and 102K relating to notices and significant risks for parents who may be experiencing homelessness or home instability?

Ms CAHILL: It would be no different from the current situation where the law applies, where somebody who is a party to an order is required to participate by the courts. It would be dealt with in the same way.

Mr PAECH: How will the department address issues arising in the service of documents in remote communities, where families might be highly mobile, have limited literacy or face language barriers?

Ms CAHILL: The same way it does now.

Mr PAECH: Can you confirm that family responsibility order applications can be heard in a parent's absence?

Ms CAHILL: That is a matter for the courts.

Mr PAECH: Is there no law to prevent it from happening?

Ms CAHILL: Courts currently hear orders without parents present if they cannot be contacted or identified, so the situation would be as is.

Mr PAECH: How will the department manage risks arising from proposed sections 102C and 102H which enable FROs to be applied to a family without them knowing?

Ms CAHILL: The same way it does do now in any court-ordered situation.

Mr PAECH: Why does proposed section 102C not require the CEO to specify how the requirements of section 65D(5) were satisfied, including what facilities and services were available to the family and how those services could be reasonably accessed?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a contraindication of the whole intent of supporting families to be successful.

Mr PAECH: One of the objectives of the family responsibility order is to increase parental involvement and accountability. How does the Bill ensure this objective is met when families do not even have to be notified when an FRO is put in place?

Ms CAHILL: Everything will be done on a case-by-case basis. An FRO is initiated by the courts, and that would be for the court to decide.

Mr PAECH: Proposed section 102A(b) sets out that an object of a family responsibility order is:

addressing the needs of parents and improving parenting capacity and capability …

How does this object intersect with proposed section 102E(1)(c) whereby the parents may be put at an increased risk because of housing instability or eviction?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the court.

Mr PAECH: We know that victim–survivors of family violence are at increased risk of misusing alcohol and other drugs. How will proposed section 102E(1)(c) distinguish between victim–survivor and perpetrator behaviours resulting from family violence?

Ms CAHILL: The orders are matters for the courts' consideration, and they would make that determination.

Mr PAECH: How does the Bill ensure that the courts can be satisfied that each direction of the CEO under proposed section 102E(3) is necessary, proportionate, connected to an identified child safety need and the least intrusive available means?

Ms CAHILL: In the same manner they do now on the application of any order.

Mr PAECH: What evidence supports increased income management provisions correlating with improved parenting or increased child safety?

Ms CAHILL: Again, that would be a matter for the courts.

Mr PAECH: What evidence supports the 12-month limit as a sufficient timeframe to work with parents suffering addiction? What has that been founded on? Is there a methodology? Is there a recommendation from a provider?

Ms CAHILL: It is in relation to the first period of a short-term order.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 13 in schedule 67IND to insert:

102DA Referral of parent to legal service provider

(1) As soon as practicable after making an application under section 102C or 102M, the CEO must refer each parent who is a party to the proceedings to a local legal service provider.

(2) The referral to the legal service provider must include the following:

(a) the name and contact details of the child and the parent of the child;

(b) a copy of the application.

The intent of this is to ensure that natural justice can be served, and when a family is being brought into the legal system they have access to legal representation.

I commend the amendment.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 14 in schedule 67IND to insert:

(aa) a copy of the referral for the parent under section 102DA; and

Similar to the previous amendment, it ensures that families have all the information they need and full access to whatever is happening within the legal system when they are being brought into this regime.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 15 in schedule 67IND to omit proposed sections 102G(3) and (4).

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 6	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 16 in schedule 67IND to proposed section 102G(5) to omit 'If' and insert 'When'.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 17 in schedule 67IND to omit proposed section 102H and insert:

102H Hearing of application

(1) An application for a family responsibility order may not be heard unless the Court is satisfied that each parent who is a party to the proceedings:

(a) has been personally served with a copy of the application and the notice in accordance with section 102G; and

(b) has been referred to a local legal service provider as required under section 102DA and has had a reasonable opportunity to obtain legal advice in relation to the application.

We have already heard about the importance of ensuring that families are informed of what is going on, which means they need to be personally served. The intent of this amendment is to ensure that natural justice is

served, and when families are participating in legal processes they are clear about what is happening, have a copy of the application, know the expectations of them and have had access to legal advice.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 18 in schedule 67IND.

This amendment is similar to the previous amendment. If the applicant under section 102M is the CEO, the application may not be heard unless the court is satisfied—as in the previous amendment—that each parent who is a party has been personally served with a copy of the application, been referred to a local legal service provider and had a reasonable opportunity to obtain legal advice in relation to the application.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Madam SPEAKER: The question is that the clause stand as printed.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis

Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17:

Mr PAECH: Can you provide examples of what evidence will be relied on to demonstrate compliance with the least intrusive means to safeguard the wellbeing of the child requirement set out in proposed section 121(1)(a)?

Ms CAHILL: That would be a matter for the court.

Mr PAECH: How does the Bill prevent the CEO from relying on evidence arising from insufficient proactive efforts as a pathway for protected proceedings in section 121(1)(b)?

Ms CAHILL: The court would have to be satisfied that the appropriate steps have been taken.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 30 in schedule 67OPP.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clause 18, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 19:

Ms CAHILL: I move amendment 4 to clause 19.

This will amend section 123(1)(d) to include a minimum timeframe for long-term orders. There will be a specified period of at least five years; or, if the child will turn 18 years of age within the five years after the order is made, until the child turns 18 years of age. This again goes to the foundation of creating stability for kids who are doing it tough.

Amendment agreed to.

Madam SPEAKER: The question is that clause 19, as amended, be agreed to.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Clause 19, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 20, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 21:

J DAVIS: I move amendment 19 in schedule 67IND.

I will speak about amendments 19 and 20 together, but I will move them separately. They relate to the two-order cap on short-term parental responsibility directions under proposed section 128. As drafted, the Bill strips the court of its discretion by legally mandating that a maximum of two short-term protection orders can be made before the system has to move to a permanent care order.

We have talked about the risks that people have identified it poses to families when there is an arbitrary permanent stopwatch on families who are trapped on government waitlists. We also heard about the potential heavy legislative wait which will result in parents refusing to consent to short-term applications out of fear that they are walking into a permanency trap that might be used against them in court. Legal services said that this could lead to a huge increase in contested hearings which would further clog our already clogged courts and traumatise families.

These amendments seek to preserve judicial discretion to make sure that judges have the power to look at individual cases and make orders that are in the best interests of the child and not trying to meet some arbitrary timeframe.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington

Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 20 in schedule 67IND.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Madam SPEAKER: The question is that clause 21 stand as printed.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Clause 21 agreed to.

Clauses 22 and 23, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Clause 24:

Mr PAECH: This is obviously consequential to FROs. We will not support clause 24.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Clause 24 agreed to.

Clause 25:

Mr PAECH: Why has legal representation for children been limited to just permanent care orders or protection orders with long-term parental responsibility?

Ms CAHILL: Currently, there is no given legislative right for children to have any legal representation; a court may do that. The decision for the representation regarding long-term and permanent care orders is simply because that is the time when the children's voices must be heard, after the crisis situation is over and all the work has been done. The child should have a say and independent legal representation as to what happens to them for the ensuing years.

Mr PAECH: Why was short term excluded? The safety obviously is important for either, so I am trying to understand why it is only long term.

Ms CAHILL: The short-term period is focused on reunification of the child and keeping the family together. That is where all the emphasis is and the work is being done. The child is actively involved in that, but it is not anticipated in that short-term period that there would be significant interaction with the legal system.

Mr PAECH: I move amendment 34 in schedule 67OPP.

Although this amendment is a step in the right direction, this legislation is falling short of required standards. It could have been improved. Feedback from stakeholders is that the success of the provision will rely on sufficient funding for legal representation. There is no requirement for training of child representatives. Most importantly, it should have been extended to the earlier stages of proceedings.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington

Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

J DAVIS: I move amendment 21 in schedule 67IND.

This will remove the urgency exception and replace it with a best interests test that the court can apply. This amendment works to ensure that the court has discretion and can decide whether urgency needs to apply.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clause 25 agreed to.

After clause 25:

J DAVIS: I move amendment 22 in schedule 67IND to insert new clause 25A.

This clause is to establish a formal pathway for alternative dispute resolution and family-led decision-making. The evidence to the committee from many organisations was that properly resourced family-led decision-making dramatically outperforms the current system at finding family for a child, which is a clear safety outcome and is what we have heard that the government wants.

This amendment gives the court a formal power to refer parties to alternative dispute resolution with confidentiality protections modelled on interstate provisions.

I feel strongly about this, and people in this Chamber will know that is the work I used to do, including facilitating these kinds of mediations for people in the situations that this Bill will address. The outcomes when those processes are undertaken properly for children is far superior than being involved in a lengthy, combative, adversarial court process which helps no-one.

The evidence is clear that Aboriginal family-led decision-making works. During the hearings we heard an incredible story about one Aboriginal-led organisation that could identify 200 relatives for a child within two weeks after the department had reported finding no family for two years.

This amendment seeks to embed family-led decision-making. That was recommended by the royal commission and many of the people who gave evidence to the committee.

I will not read out the whole amendment—I could, but I note that people across the Chamber are not looking that engaged. The amendment outlines clearly the architecture for the court to divert matters from adversarial litigation and into culturally grounded family-led dispute resolution.

We have heard many times from the Member for Mulka that family-led, community-led, culturally led, elders-led decision-making processes work to keep everybody safe. It is proven and evidence based, and a pathway to keep children safe.

I commend the amendment.

Mr PAECH: I support the Member for Johnston's amendment. If this government is serious about supporting Aboriginal family-led decision-making, this should have been first and foremost a part of the Bill that went out for consultation and is here today.

The Members for Johnston and Mulka highlighted the importance of Aboriginal family-led decision-making. Alternative dispute resolution—other people know it as mediation—is an incredibly powerful and successful tool. It has been applied in other spaces across the Northern Territory. Whether it is to de-escalate, bring people together after conflict or have hard and difficult conversations amongst family members, it is proven to work. I had the opportunity to be with the Member for Mulka in his electorate where we saw Aboriginal family-led decision-making take place. It has been incredibly valuable. As we heard and the submissions highlighted, Aboriginal family-led decision-making brings people together and can achieve the best results for a child.

What the Member for Johnston proposes is fair and reasonable. It sets a good tone. It is promising for families who might be going through a complex or challenging period in their lives because alternative dispute resolution allows them to have conversations well before it ends up at the punitive draconian end where there is no form of resolution. Alternative dispute resolution (mediation) or family-led decision-making is incredibly valuable. This is a great new clause to add to the Bill because it would ensure that there is meaningful conversation about difficult and challenging conversations, particularly in the child protection space, amongst family members.

The opposition supports this important amendment proposed by the Member for Johnston.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 7	Noes 17
Mr Brown	Ms Boothby
J Davis	Mr Burgoyne
Mr Guyula	Ms Cahill
Mr Paech	Mrs Carlson
Mr Smelt	Mr Charls
Ms Uibo	Mr Edgington
Mr Young	Mrs Finocchiaro
	Mrs Hersey
	Mr Howe
	Mr Kerle
	Mr Mackay
	Mr Maley
	Mr O'Gallagher
	Mr Patel
	Dr Rahman
	Mr Yan
	Mrs Zio

Amendment not agreed to.

Clauses 26 and 27, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Clause 28:

Mr PAECH: The opposition does not support clause 28, so we will vote in opposition to it.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Clause 28 agreed to.

Clause 29:

Mr PAECH: The opposition does not support clause 29, so we will vote in opposition to it.

Clause 29 agreed to.

Clauses 30 to 51, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Schedule:

Mr PAECH: The opposition opposes the Schedule.

Schedule agreed to.

Remainder of the Bill, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is that the Bill be agreed to.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	

Mr Patel
Dr Rahman
Mr Yan
Mrs Zio

Bill agreed to.

Ms CAHILL (Child Protection): Mr Deputy Speaker, I move that the Bill now be read a third time.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Mr Smelt
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Motion agreed to; Bill read a third time.

PAPERS TABLED
Government Responses to Legislative Scrutiny Committee Reports

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, pursuant to Standing Order 201, I report that the following government responses to Legislative Scrutiny Committee reports were deemed tabled on 22 May 2026: Inquiry into the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026; and Inquiry into the Building Legislation Amendment (Fidelity Fund) Bill 2025.

I also report that the following government responses to Legislative Scrutiny Committee reports were deemed tabled on 28 May 2026: Inquiry into the Criminal Procedure Legislation Amendment Bill 2026; Inquiry into the Racing and Wagering Amendment Bill 2026; and Inquiry into the Liquor Legislation Amendment (Fast Track Approvals) Bill 2026.

Auditor-General's Report to the Legislative Assembly No 1: 2026–27

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I table the Auditor-General's Report to the Legislative Assembly No 1: 2026–27.

RESPONSES TO PETITIONS
Petition No 19 – Review of the Safety Conditions for Pedestrians and Cyclists on Bagot Road

The DEPUTY CLERK: The following response from the Minister for Logistics and Infrastructure to Petition Number 19, praying for a review of the safety conditions for pedestrians and cyclists on Bagot Road, has been received and forwarded to the member for distribution to the petitioners.

Dear Mr Keith

Thank you for your letter dated 1 December 2025, providing the terms of Petition No. 19, presented in the Legislative Assembly, regarding a review of safety conditions for pedestrians and cyclists on Bagot Road.

Bagot Road is a key urban arterial corridor that carries high volumes of traffic while also providing important access for pedestrians, cyclists and nearby community facilities. The NT Government recognises the need to balance traffic efficiency with safe access for all road users.

The NT Government acknowledges the concerns raised in the petition, particularly in relation to pedestrian and cyclist safety, and I can advise that several initiatives are being progressed to improve safety outcomes along this corridor.

A significant initiative underway is the upgrade of street lighting between the Stuart Highway overpass and Nightcliff Road, which is expected to be completed by May 2026. This project will improve visibility for all road users, particularly pedestrians and cyclists at night.

The Department of Logistics and Infrastructure is also progressing planning and design work for further safety improvements. These may include potential signalised intersection upgrades, improved pedestrian crossing opportunities, relocation of bus stop infrastructure, and consideration of cycling infrastructure. However, construction of these initiatives will be subject to the availability of future funding.

The NT Government will continue to assess and prioritise safety improvements on Bagot Road, informed by ongoing monitoring, planning and community feedback.

Thank you for bringing this matter to the NT Government's attention.

Your sincerely

BILL YAN

Petition No 21 – Protect the Wellbeing of All Residents by Addressing Problem Tenancies in the NT

The DEPUTY CLERK: The following response from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development to Petition Number 21, praying for the protection of the wellbeing of all residents by addressing problem tenancies in the Northern Territory, has been received and forwarded to the member for distribution to the petitioners.

Dear Mr Keith

I refer to your letter dated 17 March 2026 forwarding the terms of Petition No. 21, including a copy of the petition as presented to the Legislative Assembly, regarding the wellbeing of residents, community safety, and the management of problem tenancies in public housing.

In February this year, the Northern Territory (NT) Government released the Tenant Accountability Policy Statement. This Policy Statement makes it clear that public housing tenants are responsible for looking after their property, paying their rent, and being good neighbours. Firm and consistent enforcement action will be applied where these responsibilities are not met, including termination of Tenancy Agreements where applicable.

This builds on the NT Government's commitment to reforming the public housing system by restoring fairness, accountability and safety, which is reflected in the NT Crime Reduction Strategy.

Social housing is essential. It provides safe, affordable homes for low-income and vulnerable individuals and families right across the Territory. It helps reduce homelessness, supports economic participation, and ensures access to essential services.

2025 was the year of action, laying down the foundation on clear expectations for social housing tenants. As we move into our second year, the year of Growth, Certainty and Security, we are staying the course, reminding Territorians the CLP Government is here to continue cracking down on crime and focus on the root causes of antisocial behaviour. Territorians have the right to be safe in their own homes and community.

In February 2026, the Tenant Accountability Policy Statement was released setting out clear expectations.

- *clear, non-negotiable tenant behaviour expectations,*

- *enforceable consequences when obligations are not met,*
- *equal enforceable standards for tenant and visitor conduct,*
- *liability for tenant and visitor property damage with enforcement if unpaid, and*
- *consultation on positive incentives for tenants who meet their obligations and demonstrate responsible behaviour.*

Tenants who require assistance are offered access to tenancy support programs aimed at strengthening their capacity to meet housing obligations, including behaviour, rent, property care and cleanliness. Where appropriate, tenants are referred to broader support services such as alcohol and other drug counselling, family support and domestic and family violence services. These services are intended to stabilise tenancies and promote positive community participation.

The vision is clear now, with the implantation of clear guidelines and updated polices to better strengthen frontline capabilities and to support the effective implementation of tenant accountability measures, the Department is enhancing workforce capability through targeted training and operational reforms.

We are getting back to basics. Re-establishing ourselves as landlords to ensure obligations are met in line with the Residential Tenancies Act.

The Department also continues to work closely with the NT Police Force to address antisocial behaviour in and around public housing premises that impacts on community safety. Joint operations involving NT Police and Public Housing Safety Officers are regularly undertaken in identified locations, supported by ongoing proactive patrols to enhance community safety.

The Department have been actively working with NT Police to review and re-draft the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to set clear expectations on information sharing to better equip compliance processes. A strengthened MOU will limit duplication across agencies, confusion around enforcement powers, and operational inefficiencies. Ongoing information sharing remains critical to support the effective operation and ensure the CEO (Housing) can fulfil their landlord responsibilities under the Residential Tenancies Act.

Concurrent to the review of the MOU, there was the introduction of the Police Public Safety Officers (PPSO). The CLP Government continues to deliver on significant law and order reform. The enforcement capability of the PPSO's allow for early intervention, deter emerging disorder, and restore order in public housing areas when required, making sure people who commit crimes or cause antisocial behaviour are to face appropriate consequences.

The Public Housing Reform brings trust, authority and responsibility into clear alignment and ensures community safety is not left to chance.

The NT Government remains committed to balancing appropriate tenant support with strong accountability to ensure that public housing contributes positively to safe, stable, and liveable communities across the Territory.

Yours sincerely

STEVE EDGINGTON

ADJOURNMENT

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I move that the Assembly do now adjourn.

Ms UIBO (Arnhem): Madam Speaker, today I tabled a petition on behalf of 2,421 petitioners in favour of a new hospital for Katherine. I did not create the petition, but I was charged with the important duty of tabling it on behalf of people residing in Katherine township and the whole Big Rivers region and people who visit that region, who support the move for a new hospital.

I have a list of correspondence that I will read into *Hansard*. Whatever I do not get through I will seek to table.

The organisers of the petition wrote to a series of people, who have influence and decision-making, about a new Katherine Hospital. Correspondence was sent to the federal minister for Health, Hon Mark Butler, and the Northern Territory Minister for Health, Hon Steve Edgington MLA. A letter was also sent to the Speaker and the Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. Letters were also sent to the Treasurer and Minister for Logistics and Infrastructure, Hon Bill Yan; the Northern Territory Chief Minister, Lia Finocchiaro MLA; me as the Member for Arnhem; Hon Malarndirri McCarthy, Northern Territory Senator; Senator for the Northern Territory, Jacinta Price; Member for Katherine, Hon Jo-Anne Hersey; federal Member for Lingiari, Marion Scrymgour MP; President of the Australian Medical Association NT, Dr John Zorbas; Department of Treasury and Finance Strategic Healthcare Executive, Mr Chris Hosking; NT Health Acting Chief Executive Officer, Ms Susan Bowden; and Regional Executive Director, Big Rivers Region, Ms Renae Daniel.

To give an understanding of what was being asked, I will read the correspondence that was directly to the …

Dr RAHMAN: A point of order, Madam Speaker! As a matter of process, this is foreshadowing a petition that is yet to be debated and/or sent to the Public Accounts Committee. Is this not foreshadowing debate? Why are we discussing a petition …

Ms Uibo: No, because it has not been decided for debate, so there is no foreshadowing of debate.

Madam SPEAKER: I will respond to the point of order.

Dr RAHMAN: A petition has been lodged. It has not yet been sent to the Public Accounts Committee for determination of whether it will be debated. This is foreshadowing a debate. We could speak on any number of petitions. I have multiple live petitions that have not yet been presented to the Assembly.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Fong Lim, it is not a fait accompli that it will come back to the parliament for debate; therefore, I do not think it is foreshadowing a debate. Although I take your point of order, I do not support the inference you are making.

Please continue, Opposition Leader.

Ms UIBO: This letter was written to Hon Mark Butler MP, the federal Minister for Health and Ageing and Minister for Disability and the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and Hon Steve Edgington, Northern Territory Minister for Health; Mental Health; Alcohol Policy; and Aboriginal Affairs:

> *An invitation has been made for the above Petition to be tabled …*

Which I did today:

> *… on behalf of the people residing in Katherine/Big Rivers Regions to Selena Uibo—Member for Arnhem Northern Territory.*
>
> *In May 2026 a petition within the Katherine Region was raised and has gained more than 2300 signatures, this was not a widespread petition but has also raised a lot of questions and support from a vast array of the community and surrounds. Katherine Town Council has also provided a letter of support.*
>
> *Katherine, Northern Territory, is a vibrant town which serves as a central hub for more than 18,000 people including many from remote Aboriginal Communities and has been underserved for far too long in terms of specialized healthcare facilities located in a flood free zone and available 24/7.*
>
> *There is a serious risk facing Katherine Hospital, being in a flood zone it becomes isolated during floods, and has been evacuated or closed in major events in 1998, 2006 and 2026. Flooding disrupts and prevents critical services, including emergency care, primary care for the vulnerable, and treatment for admitted patients. Continued investment in this flood-prone facility is unsafe and inefficient, and flood-related closures force patient transfers that place not only a strain on patients and families but also poses medical risks during medical emergencies when timely access to care is critical. With Darwin and Palmerston hospitals being over 300 kilometers away … this constantly creates significant challenges for residents on accessing timely and comprehensive medical care and additional pressures are passed onto these hospitals.*

A new hospital would decrease the patient load on existing facilities, reduce travel times for emergency services, and increase overall access to healthcare. It would also allow for the introduction of more specialized medical services which are overdue and extremely lacking.

Within the development is a huge requirement for a fit-for-purpose facility with further advanced medical equipment, hospital care & procedures. More emphasis needs to be placed on advanced in-house medical care such as cardiac care, paediatrics, and oncology, which are currently lacking. In emergencies, precious time is lost as patients are transported to distant facilities, which can mean the difference between life and death. This is an unacceptable risk that can and must be mitigated by establishing a new well-equipped hospital outside of the flood zone in Katherine.

The development of a new hospital not only addresses immediate safe healthcare needs but also provides benefits, such as job creations, promote wellbeing, and reduce the strain on overburdened hospitals … of Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs.

Building a new hospital in Katherine would ensure equitable access to healthcare for all, enhancing the quality of life and health outcomes for thousands of residents and indigenous communities who call the region home. It's a long-term investment that will uplift the communities and ensure the well-being of all its residents.

Why this matters:

- *Katherine is a regional lifeline*
- *Patient safety at risk*
- *A hospital must function during disasters*
- *Extreme weather is increasing*
- *Ongoing repairs & short-term solutions cost more in the long run*

*In 2015 the Katherine Flood Mitigation Advisory Committee also put forward that '*future investment into the current flood prone hospital only delays the relocation to the flood free site within the Second Centre identified in the Katherine Land Use Plan*'.*

These repeated attempts not only prolong the development but absorb much needed funding.

With the Katherine Hospital enduring continuous the effect of flood waters & forcing evacuations and many residents affected by these disasters. The floods have left lasting impacts on the community, with some residents experiencing incredible distress.

This proposal has been discussed for decades but has not yet received a commitment from the territory or federal government. The community is calling for a long-term solution to ensure the safety and the well-being of patients and staff whilst providing an essential service.

As we are all aware, this follow's many floods which have caused devastation time and time again. And time and time again we are placed in the same if not more complex and costly solutions.

The ministers' support for the establishment of a new hospital would be valued.

Madam Speaker, you have spoken a lot about hospital infrastructure for Alice Springs, being the hub for Central Australia; the same is being called for with a new hospital for Katherine, which is the hub for the Big Rivers region.

I will read into *Hansard* some of the words from Mr Jacky Ferrazzi, who sent letters to the federal and Northern Territory ministers for Health:

Dear Minister Edgington,

I am writing to request that the Northern Territory Government take immediate leadership in advancing the long-planned relocation of Katherine District Hospital to the flood-free health precinct site identified in the Katherine Land Use Plan in 2014 … (Chambers Drive extension, Katherine East).

The hospital's current location on the Katherine River floodplain has resulted in repeated service disruptions: full inundation/evacuation in the 1998 flood (peak 20.39 m), the 2006 flood, and twice in March 2026 (the worst flooding in 28 years). These events required patient transfers to Darwin, hospital closures, and the deployment of an AUSMAT field hospital—highlighting the unacceptable risk to patients and staff.

The Katherine Land Use Plan and Katherine East Area Plan already designate a higher-ground site as the future health precinct. This location is flood-immune, strategically positioned for integration with residential growth and emergency services.

As you have previously noted, the Territory cannot fund this project alone. I urge the NT Government to:

1. *Immediately commission (or jointly fund with the Commonwealth) a detailed feasibility study and Quantity Surveyor report for the Katherine East precinct.*

2. *Lead negotiations with the Australian Government for a bilateral National Partnership Agreement under the NHRA, seeking Commonwealth contribution*

3. *Prioritise this project in the next NT Budget and infrastructure planning, including integration with Multi-Purpose Services (MPS) elements where beneficial.*

Relocation will deliver:

1. *Zero future flood risk and service continuity;*

2. *Culturally safe care for the region's high Indigenous population;*

3. *Significant economic benefits and improved Closing the Gap outcomes.*

I was recently one of many patients evacuated from Katherine Hospital to Royal Darwin Hospital due to flooding which greatly affected the region in March 2026. Within a short period all patients & support staff from Katherine were transferred to the Corella Ward of the Darwin Private Hospital. I thank all … involved in the upmost professional care & compassion given during this difficult time.

It was there that I received the devastating call from my stepdaughter that her mother & my wife had passed away at home. Whilst in the centre of the flood and being surrounded by waters, local emergency personal was not deployed to assist her and authorities were sent from Darwin.

I met with the Katherine Mayor—Joanna Holden, petitioned the Katherine Town Council and have gratefully received a letter of support from them.

I … have also sent a request to the Member for Arnhem—Selena Uibo to table a petition which myself & others rallied around Katherine and surrounding areas for support receiving in excess of 2300 signatures.

Thank you for your ongoing advocacy for Territory health services. I look forward to your positive response and collaboration with the Commonwealth to deliver this essential project.

Yours sincerely,

Jacky Ferrazzi

I look forward to seeing what Minister Edgington can deliver to support the people of Katherine and the Big Rivers region. We know that something is needed, and we need planning and support from all levels of government. So far we have support from local government and the federal government. We need the money from the federal government. Let us see the NT Government crack on with it too.

Motion agreed to; the Assembly adjourned.