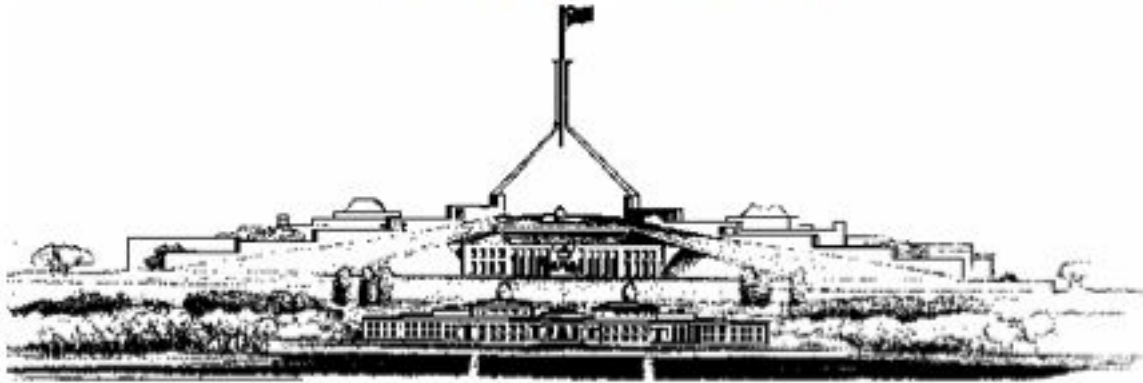




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**SOCIAL SECURITY AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (WELFARE
PAYMENT REFORM) BILL 2007**

**NORTHERN TERRITORY NATIONAL
EMERGENCY RESPONSE BILL 2007**

**FAMILIES, COMMUNITY SERVICES
AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND
OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
(NORTHERN TERRITORY NATIONAL
EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND
OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2007**

**Appropriation (Northern Territory National
Emergency Response) Bill (NO. 1) 2007-2008**

Appropriation (Northern Territory National Emergency Response) Bill (NO. 2) 2007-2008

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 7 August 2007

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 7 August 2007
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Questioner
Speaker Macklin, Jenny, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (1.51 pm)—Six weeks ago when the Prime Minister and the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs announced the details of a federal response to help stop child abuse in the Northern Territory Indigenous communities, Labor gave in-principle bipartisan support. Our in-principle support was given because the chronicle of abuse that Pat Anderson and Rex Wild detailed in their report into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse in the Northern Territory compelled action, as did the litany of reports that preceded *Little children are sacred*. But to lament that action should have been taken sooner does not lessen the imperative to act now; nor is the reality that child abuse occurs in all communities reason to sit on our hands in the face of this report.

Our in-principle support six weeks ago was given in good faith. We were told by the government that they would bring forward practical measures, both a short-term response and long-term solutions, to end the cycle of abuse. For some that article of faith was hard to accept, given the government's previous track record. The manner and style with which the government began this intervention did not help allay these concerns, nor did some elements of the response package, which over a short period of time have changed significantly into the propositions we see before the House today.

Throughout the last six weeks, Labor have articulated a simple test when assessing a government proposal: will it improve the safety and security of our children in a practical way? We have applied that test and, on balance, the opposition will support these bills. There are elements of the bills which we do not fully agree with, and I will be moving a few substantive amendments to reflect our concerns. I certainly hope that the minister will recognise that those amendments are also offered in good faith.

In the last few hours, the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Lingiari, Senator Crossin and I have met face to face with Aboriginal leaders from Central and Northern Australia to hear their views on these bills and the range of measures contained within them. In these matters, open dialogue directly with the Aboriginal people concerned is critical.

Just days ago, I attended the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land and heard the views of Aboriginal leaders. I heard their passion for their people and their land, as well as their resolute determination to always stand up for these two bedrocks of community. In the past few weeks, I have travelled to communities in Central Australia and listened to the stories of the mothers and grandmothers who are raising children. They want to give their children safe, healthy and happy lives. To live and grow, these children must be safe. The mothers and grandmothers who care for them must also be safe. It is a fundamental obligation of government to provide this safety and security.

One of my trips coincided with the arrival of the first medical team to hit the ground in Hermannsburg. It is fair to say that, in the days and weeks immediately after the government's first announcement, before the survey and medical teams arrived, there was a great deal of trepidation and uncertainty in the communities. This apprehension was generated by the nature and style of the announcements and by the lack of a clear and consistent government position on key measures such as the health checks. Trust from the communities must be earned and valued. This is an important element of the first recommendation of the Anderson-Wild report, which notes:

It is critical that both governments commit to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities.

Labor's approach is to move forward with trust in a reciprocal partnership with Indigenous Australia.

But consultation cannot be an end in itself, nor can we allow it to substitute for or stand in the way of action. The first recommendation by Anderson and Wild is that:

Aboriginal child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory be designated as an issue of urgent national significance by both the Australian and Northern Territory governments.

Labor believe that addressing child abuse and neglect in Aboriginal communities is rightly designated as an issue of urgent national significance. We believe that federal, state and territory governments have obligations to take both immediate and sustained action to improve the lives of all children, especially those in Aboriginal communities. Protection of children must be paramount when their vulnerability has been laid bare.

For those who believe in a compassionate, progressive society, is there a more fundamental obligation than ensuring protection of the vulnerable when it is within the powers of government to act? Why have a government with abundance and plenty if these resources cannot be applied to overcoming poverty and disadvantage, providing all with safety, security and freedom from neglect and abuse? The heart of any compassionate and progressive response to need must be to do all in our power to help and provide. There cannot, in my view, be a more responsible course of action.

One month before this intervention, on the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, the Leader of the Opposition outlined Labor's commitment to Indigenous children. He spoke of Labor's commitment to make real and lasting progress in partnership with Indigenous Australians. He spoke of our need for new national bipartisan goals—goals that are achievable, goals that are measurable and goals that fulfil the spirit of the referendum. We need to begin with the next generation of Indigenous children, those being born today.

Forty years after the 1967 referendum, Labor have committed to eliminate the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation, to at least halve the rate of Indigenous infant mortality within a decade, to at least halve the mortality rate of Indigenous children aged under five within a decade and to at least halve the difference in the rate of Indigenous students at years 3, 5 and 7 who fail to meet reading, writing and numeracy benchmarks within 10 years. These long-term goals were underpinned by a \$260 million funding commitment—a plan that is sustained, planned and comprehensive. We all know that rights cannot be enjoyed unless there is safety and security.

In relation to safety and security for children in the Northern Territory, the statistics are telling. Between 2001-02 and 2005-06 there was a 78 per cent increase in the number of notifications of abuse or neglect received by the Northern Territory department of family and children's services, with an average growth in notifications of 14 per cent a year.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 2 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with the resolution agreed to earlier. The debate may be resumed at a later hour and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.