

*Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People — Seventh Report —
“Everybody’s Business: An examination into how the Commissioner for Children and Young People
can enhance WA’s response to child abuse”*

Resumed from 23 June.

Motion

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I move —

That the report be noted.

With a report of this kind, which has taken a couple of years to research and write, it is impossible to give any kind of review in the short time that is allocated to the consideration of committee reports in this place, so I would urge everybody, whether or not they think they have an interest in the subject matter of the report, to read it because it is a subject that will challenge governments in this country and, in fact, all over the world for many decades to come—that is, the challenge involved in keeping children safe in our community. It is a mark of what I have just noted to realise that this subject matter was raised in the house as recently as yesterday in debate on one of the bills that is going through this place.

The genesis of this inquiry was the child sexual abuse cases that went on for a couple of decades at St Andrew’s Hostel in Katanning. The children who were being abused were not in any sense on the radar as children who were at risk in some particular way. I make that point because it was a very noticeable factor that, as we moved around Australia—indeed, the committee also undertook some travel to Europe—to talk to children’s commissioners in other jurisdictions, it took the people with whom we were speaking some considerable time to realise when we described the situation at St Andrew’s that the children who had been abused at St Andrew’s were not in some sense in the care of the state. It is important to understand the fine distinction there. Those children were residing at a hostel for country children attending high school; they were children who could not have gone to high school unless they were provided with some sort of accommodation because their family homes were too far away for them to commute. Although in a very loose and general sense those children were in the care of the state, they were not children in care. There was no sense in which those children had been identified as being at some particular risk. One of the things that the committee spent some considerable time looking at was that the children who may be at most risk in the community are in fact the children who have not alerted the community to that tag. We have now increasingly effective mechanisms for monitoring the wellbeing of children who are in the care of the state. But the children at St Andrew’s found themselves falling between every crack in the system when they tried to report to authorities what was happening to them.

For any member who comes to this report cold and is not familiar with the subject matter or, more particularly, with the genesis of this inquiry, I suggest that they go straight to page 63 and look at paragraphs 4.15 and 4.16, because the crucial point is that when the Blaxell report was tabled, one of the key recommendations of Hon Peter Blaxell was that there should be some kind of central reporting mechanism for children to use when they disclose particularly sexual abuse, but possibly other kinds of abuse. In the case of St Andrew’s, obviously we were looking at sexual abuse. This excited some considerable attention, particularly from people in Parliaments who are concerned about escalating costs or, rather, containing costs. Were we talking about some great big new function for a government agency to become that single reporting point? There was a lot of confusion around it. The government decided to defer consideration of the matter to the statutory review of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act, which was already underway at that time. In fact, I think at the time that Blaxell reported, it was very near completing its inquiries. Hon Michael Mischin, as Attorney General with carriage of that act, added this as a term of reference to the statutory review of the act, so we had to wait for quite a considerable period to hear the government’s response. The government’s response was, on the whole, positive. In broad terms, it was positive. It certainly did not reject the Blaxell finding, but the concern of the committee was that we were in danger of running into long grass in putting something effective in place in practice.

Committee interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

[Continued on page 4714.]

Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm