

Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People — First Report — “Review of the 2007–2008 Annual Report of the Commissioner for Children and Young People”

Resumed from 14 May 2009.

Motion

HON HELEN BULLOCK (Mining and Pastoral) [2.00 pm]: I move —

That the report be noted.

This report is a review of the 2007–08 annual report of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The 2007–08 annual report is the commissioner’s first report, and this report is also the first report of the joint standing committee. Members are probably aware that the commissioner took office in December 2007 and tabled her first annual report to the Parliament in November 2008.

Before I go any further I would like to give members some brief information about the committee’s function given it is a new committee. The function of the joint standing committee is to, firstly, monitor, review and report to Parliament on the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People; secondly, examine other reports of the commissioner; and, thirdly, consult regularly with the commissioner.

In carrying out the committee’s function, the committee held numerous briefings and hearings with the commissioner. The committee noted that the commissioner has adopted a proactive approach and has initiated and undertaken various actions to perform the functions required by the act. This report contains a couple of findings that have led to two recommendations. I will take a few minutes to go through those two findings and recommendations. The first finding is about clause 3, schedule 1 in the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006. In her report, the commissioner expressed concern about this clause. The act seeks to transfer the responsibility for working with children checks to the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The commissioner is concerned that by doing so it might impact on the commissioner’s other functions under the act. The committee recommended that clause 3 be deleted. The second finding is also based on the commissioner’s report. The commissioner recommended that we should develop in Western Australia a mechanism for reporting on how Western Australian children are faring. The commission also suggested that funding for such a report should come from the state government. The committee considered that that would be a good course and fully supported the suggestions made by the commissioner in her first annual report.

Although the commissioner’s report is called an annual report, it is actually a report of only seven months of activity between December 2007 and June 2008. At that stage, the commissioner was trying to establish herself; when people first come to a new job, the first thing they do is familiarise themselves with their duties, so the first report was brief but detailed. The committee’s report on the report is very brief, but also detailed; we reported all that we could, based on the annual report.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: As a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, it is appropriate that I make a couple of brief comments on this report. I acknowledge the comments made by my colleague and fellow committee member Hon Helen Bullock, who has provided to the house a comprehensive briefing on the report. It is probably worth noting that neither of us was on this committee at that time; in fact, it was my predecessor, Hon Barbara Scott, who presented the report and tabled it on 14 May 2009, just before our arrival in the Legislative Council a week or so later. As Hon Helen Bullock has just outlined, this is actually the inaugural report of the joint standing committee. She quite rightly identified that it is a new committee, created by statute, and that it reports on the report provided by the commissioner, as it should, because one of the committee’s key roles is to oversee the exercise of the commissioner’s functions under the act. One of the main roles of the commissioner is to be an advocate for the children of Western Australia, of which I understand there are approximately 500 000. I say “children”; the commissioner’s formal title is Commissioner for Children and Young People. That might prompt some questions in the minds of members as to the difference between a child and a young person. As I understand it, loosely speaking, a child is deemed to be someone under the age of 13 and a young person is aged between 13 and 18—a teenager, if one likes. It is interesting that we define a young person as someone who is under 18 years of age because that is not necessarily consistent in all the legislation in this state. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the commissioner has a role to advocate for children, or minors, as I have heard another member put it today; that is, people under the age of 18. As I mentioned, under its terms of reference, the committee is obligated to examine the annual report of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. As Hon Helen Bullock mentioned, this report covers the first seven months of the appointment of the commissioner, Ms Michelle Scott, who should be acknowledged for the work that she has done since that appointment. It is also worth noting that, regrettably, it has taken some time for us to consider this committee’s report. We tend to take some time in considering these committee reports, as we should do. I anticipate that it probably will not be long before the following year’s report is tabled. It is therefore somewhat ironic that we should be dealing with this report at this time.

I note the committee's findings to which Hon Helen Bullock referred regarding the responsibility for working with children check and also the funding of a report. It is proposed that there be a two-yearly report to track the wellbeing of young people in this state. Members of this house will be aware that the government has provided a fairly self-explanatory response to that. I flag to the chamber that the committee will follow up that response in its oversight capacity and is likely to comment on it in the near future. I commend Hon Helen Bullock's motion and recommend that the report be noted.

Question put and passed.