

## Extract from Senate Hansard, 12 September 2006: pp. 50-64

### MATTERS OF URGENCY Child Protection

**The PRESIDENT**—I inform the Senate that I have received the following letter, dated 12 September 2006, from Senator Bartlett:

Dear Mr President,

Pursuant to standing order [75](#), I give notice that today I propose to move:

“That, in the opinion of the Senate, the following is a matter of urgency:

In the light of the repeated failures by our society to protect children from serious abuse and neglect, the need for all political parties to make child protection a national priority and for all governments to urgently determine ways to significantly reduce the totally unacceptable levels of serious child abuse and neglect that is occurring in all sections of the Australian community.”

Yours sincerely,

Senator Bartlett

Australian Democrats Senator for Queensland

Is the proposal supported?

**Senator BARTLETT** (Queensland) (4.03 p.m.)—I move:

That, in the opinion of the Senate, the following is a matter of urgency:

In the light of the repeated failures by our society to protect children from serious abuse and neglect, the need for all political parties to make child protection a national priority and for all governments to urgently determine ways to significantly reduce the totally unacceptable levels of serious child abuse and neglect that is occurring in all sections of the Australian community.

I thank senators for their support for this important topic and what is, I suggest today, a matter of urgency. Last Thursday the Senate passed a motion urging the federal government to prioritise encouragement of uniform laws and strategies on child protection and urging all political parties to support child protection becoming a national priority. That motion, I should emphasise, was eventually passed without dissent.

It is one thing to make statements—I am pleased that that motion was passed; it marked Child Protection Week that occurred last week—but we need to make sure that we are not just making positive-sounding statements, that we are not just prepared to be involved where it is convenient or where it suits, but that we are actually prepared to take responsibility. My concern at the national level is that whilst the federal government has taken some specific actions and provided some funding for specific programs—and I am sure we will hear a bit about some of those over the course of this debate—we need to move from taking action from time to time, to taking responsibility and national leadership on this absolutely crucial issue.

We need to recognise that this is a major crisis nationally and that it affects all parts of the community. There has been a lot of focus, appropriately, on child abuse and neglect issues in some Indigenous communities around Australia. That requires action but we also need to recognise, firstly, that there are failings on the part of individual people or families. We should not blacken the name, reputation or culture of Indigenous peoples around Australia as a result of that; in the same way that we do not blacken the entire Australian culture and every part of our society because of the widespread amount of child abuse and neglect that occurs in the

entire community. We need to be consistent about this and we need to show the same level of outrage and the same level of social responsibility for child abuse and neglect that occurs across the entire community. It must be recognised how widespread this is and that it occurs across all sections of our community.

As part of Child Protection Week there were a lot of reports, I am pleased to say, in the mainstream media, noting a lot of issues that need attention. One of the things that came forward was how significantly people underestimate the level of child abuse in Australia. For example, it was reported in the *Canberra Times* on 6 September that many people interviewed thought there would have been only about 5,000 reports of child abuse in New South Wales last year, when the figure was well over 100,000 and growing.

In the ACT alone, there were more than 8,000 reports of child abuse in the last financial year. These are reports—they are not all established cases—but they amounted to a 400 per cent increase on three years ago. As I said, in New South Wales there were over 100,000 reports in the last financial year and, according to a separate report, that number was going up even further. In the first three months of this year we had over 5,400 reports a week in New South Wales according to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 27 August.

In Western Australia we have had a lot of coverage about a few specific terrible cases but we need to look at the broader picture. According to the *Australian* on 6 September, hundreds of cases of suspected child abuse and neglect in Western Australia are being placed in queues and not followed up for weeks. There are up to 900 cases not allocated to case workers.

In Victoria, according to the *Australian* of 7 September, child protection workers were criticised for failing to investigate properly warnings of sexual abuse, chronic neglect and family violence against up to 20 children who subsequently died. The Hobart *Mercury* of 8 September reported that newborn babies suffering drug withdrawal symptoms were among the record 1,648 cases of suspected child abuse or neglect not being investigated in Tasmania. This figure had grown from 120, less than four years ago. In my own state of Queensland the Chief Justice, Mr de Jersey—as reported in the *Courier-Mail* of 8 September—warned of what he called ‘the sickening level of child abuse in Queensland’, which shows no signs of abating, with more than 920 higher court convictions in the last 16 months alone.

These are not all failings of government. Some of them are—because some of the cases involve children who have been placed in so-called care on the part of government—but it is a social responsibility. There has been a failing of parents and our society in general, because this serious abuse and neglect are carried out by people in the community. It shows how our approach to date has failed and the fact that we as a society—as well as, I believe, at a national level—have not given this the priority it deserves. It affects tens of thousands of children every year throughout Australia. A harmed child, an abused child, is often harmed for life. That costs all of us as a society. I think all of us need to look at ways to make this a matter of urgency and a matter of national priority. We need to take it on board as a community and we need to recognise that we are failing. Whilst it is appropriate for parents to have the primary say in what happens with their children, we have to look at wider issues.  
(Time expired)

**Senator HUMPHRIES** (Australian Capital Territory) (4.09 p.m.)—I am very pleased to take part in a debate on an issue of extremely great national importance, one which it behoves all of us, including governments across Australia, to take extremely seriously. The abuse of children is a phenomenon which is totally unacceptable in this or in any other society. The vulnerability of children imposes a special obligation on parents, carers and governments, which is to protect and nurture children. The failure to meet that obligation exacts a terrible price in this, as in any other, community—not only in terms of the immediate impact on children from that abuse but on the whole of society, which will bear the cost of that abuse over many years following the ending of the abuse. The cascading social and personal consequences and the problems which multiply from such abuse throughout the life of the abused child are serious and come with a cost which is borne by the entirety of Australian

society. As such, it is extremely important that we take this issue seriously and that we design programs and responses which address the issue as fully as possible.

I understand that my colleague Senator Murray is not taking part in this debate. In a number of key inquiries which the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs has conducted into the status of children in Australian society he was fond of saying that a hurt child equates to a hurt adult. There are a great many hurt adults in our society today whose hurt is traceable to their experience as children.

Of course, it is not possible for governments to be present at all times in the homes of Australians, in schools and in other places where there are children in order to prevent child abuse. To some extent a level of child abuse will be inevitable and unavoidable. What we as governments need to do is to create the circumstances where such abuse is less likely to occur because pressures on Australian families and individuals are mitigated and reduced—pressures which may in turn lead to child abuse—and create services which are comprehensive and accessible so as to prevent the harm of child abuse multiplying and continuing for long periods.

In this respect it is worth observing that state and territory governments in Australia constitutionally have a very important role to play in dealing with instances of child abuse and providing the sorts of services I have just spoken of. I know that is an issue which state and territory governments have taken more seriously in recent years. I do not think it assists us greatly in this debate to talk in terms that might be mistaken for buck passing. No child and no family of a child in this country that is subject to child abuse wants to hear that one government wipes its hands of responsibility and blames another level of government. What is important is that we properly assess the number of such cases that occur in our community, take steps to prevent those cases from recurring and provide full and appropriate services where they do occur.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported in 2005 that the number of notifications of suspected child abuse in Australia had more than doubled in the previous six or so years—from 107,000-odd in 1999-2000 to 252,831 in 2004-05. Of those reported cases, the rate of substantiation of cases of child abuse had also risen substantially—in fact more than doubled—from 24,732 to 46,154. That is partly a reflection of the creation of better reporting avenues and the creation of opportunities for people to come forward and report child abuse than were the case previously. Perhaps we are seeing more child abuse reported. But we cannot dismiss the possibility that more child abuse is occurring in Australia today. We need to make sure that if that is the case, we take serious steps to wind back that alarming statistic.

The Commonwealth's responsibility as to this issue is fairly clear. We need to create a strong and secure environment in which families can operate in this country; that is, we need to give families every opportunity to deal with these problems in a constructive and effective way. We need to take pressure off families so that through factors such as poverty, unemployment, mental illness and a host of other indicators we do not inadvertently create the circumstances whereby Australian families turn to abuse of their children. It is worth reflecting in this debate on the fact that a significant number of cases of child abuse occur within the framework of the family. Indeed, the statistics available through the beyondblue website suggest that 3.3 per cent of perpetrators are natural parents, 2.7 per cent are step-parents, 4.5 per cent are siblings and 18.3 per cent are other relatives of the child. So a significant number of abusers of a child are members of that child's own family. However, it is also worth reflecting on the fact that 47 per cent of abusers are acquaintances of the child and 23.4 per cent are strangers to the child.

This obviously suggests that some measures need to be taken to deal with the causes of the perpetration of such cases of abuse. It also suggests that a significant number of cases of abuse are happening within families, so mechanisms to strengthen the framework of families do need to be considered. The government can point to a number of measures which have been taken in recent years to strengthen the capacity of families to deal with such problems and, in particular, to strengthen the environment in which families find themselves generally. I

believe that the lessening of unemployment in Australia, the strengthening of the social services available to Australian families and the proliferation of programs specifically designed to provide assistance to families are measures which ought to have in the long term a positive effect on the incidence of child abuse. It is very hard to demonstrate a link between those things, but I believe those sorts of measures are entirely appropriate. I will leave it to others in this debate, particularly colleagues on this side of the chamber, to talk about some of those programs, such as the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and Local Answers, which are very important measures that the government has taken to strengthen families in a community context.

The inquiries which the Senate Community Affairs References Committee has conducted in recent years into child migrants, children in institutional care and the stolen generation are important steps to understanding the abuse of children in our community. Those are particular slices of community experience which deserve special attention because of the incredibly serious impacts on children in those three contexts. But we do have a broader responsibility, one which revolves around the need to strengthen services and to identify cases, and those are the areas where government programs need to be continually reviewed and strengthened. I believe that we can point to the successful rolling out of programs which have had that very effect.

I for one believe that the community needs to discuss these issues more fully, to bring them out into the open, and to be prepared to consider measures that will provide support to those people in the community working in these areas who may need assistance in getting protection into the places where child abuse is occurring. I commend the programs that I have referred to, but I particularly hope that cooperation between different levels of government is both possible and the order of the day, in order to make sure that we minimise the number of such cases in the future.

[Senator CHRIS EVANS](#) (Western Australia—Leader of the Opposition in the Senate) (4.19 p.m.)—On behalf of the opposition, I indicate that we will be supporting the urgency motion moved by Senator Bartlett. I congratulate him for bringing the issue forward today, because I think it is important that a Commonwealth parliament concentrates on these issues on occasion, and particularly for his call for child protection to be seen as a national priority and to see what the Commonwealth's role in this is.

Can I say at the outset that freedom from violence and freedom from abuse are fundamental human rights. All children have a right to the protection, care and support that will allow them to thrive. All children are entitled to the full protection of the law, and we are all responsible for the safety and protection of children in our community. We are not just responsible for our kids; we are responsible for all kids in our community. All levels of government have a responsibility to ensure that the law is applied and children get the protection they need.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *Child Protection: Australia: 2004-05*, notes that from 1999-2000 to 2004-05 the number of child protection notifications nationally increased, from over 107,000 to more than 250,000, and the number of substantiations increased, from 25,000 to more than 46,000. It may be, as Senator Humphries has pointed out, that the reporting, rather than the incidence, is increasing. But whichever way you view them, these statistics are appalling and they do tell us we have got a major problem. A large amount of abuse and neglect does go unreported, and I think statistics of this magnitude can only highlight what we are dealing with.

In my state of Western Australia, we have had the terribly tragic death of a baby. It has been very much in the public spotlight in recent weeks. It is a terrible tale that has upset everyone—and, quite frankly, on occasions I have skipped a couple of paragraphs in the newspaper because it is so distressing. I think all Australians are shocked and saddened when they hear of cases such as this where family dysfunction and the failure of child protection result in the death of a child.

All abuse has severe consequences. In addition to its physical effects, abuse can impair personal and social development; lead to psychological damage; result in poorer health, education and employment outcomes; lead to alcohol and drug abuse; and lead to a cycle of abuse in the next generation. It is an issue that we have to give greater attention to. Dr Fiona Stanley, from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research in Perth, has noted that rates of abuse are higher among Indigenous and other disadvantaged children than they are among children from more advantaged backgrounds. These factors present a complex, multifaceted challenge which demands complex solutions, not simple solutions, which provide full protection to children and address the causes of abuse and neglect.

Recently, following the shocking stories revealed on *Lateline* by the Northern Territory Crown Prosecutor, Nannette Rogers, there has been a national debate on child abuse and sexual assault in Indigenous communities. Like all children, Indigenous children have the right to be free from violence and abuse and should receive the full protection of the law. In her 2002 Cunningham Lecture, Dr Stanley noted that Indigenous children experience higher rates of abuse, neglect and other areas of disadvantage than their non-Indigenous peers. The high levels of abuse, neglect and disadvantage experienced by Indigenous children are largely a function of poverty, not of race or Aboriginal culture, as some have claimed. Professor Stanley attempted to illustrate the complex web of social and physical factors that influence the broader health and welfare of Indigenous Australians.

Mick Adams, of the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Forum, has argued that the breakdown of the traditional role and status of Aboriginal men has contributed to abuse in their communities and that the poor health status of Indigenous men leads to suffering within Indigenous families and communities. There is no excuse for the abuse of children in Indigenous communities. But there is also a danger that the current debate is falsely painting all Indigenous men as perpetrators. Such dangerous stereotyping should be avoided at all costs. Abuse of children is not just an Indigenous problem; it is a community problem which is more prevalent in underprivileged groups but prevalent throughout society.

There has been community debate about how we ensure that Indigenous children are free from abuse, assault and neglect and about where ultimate responsibility for this lies. There are clear responsibilities here at both the state and federal levels, and no-one boasts a particularly proud record. The federal government has been told time and again about the nature and extent of the problems. There has been a stream of reports and at least three federal summits. We seem to be trapped in a cycle where every few years a shocking story prompts calls for immediate action, but, as the focus of public attention shifts, the issue disappears and little progress is achieved. This pattern is also present in relation to abuse, assault and neglect of non-Indigenous children. We are seeing it in Western Australia now; we have seen it in New South Wales; and, quite frankly, we have seen it all before.

The culture of blame shifting in relation to child protection is extremely unhelpful. We look to blame rather than to solve. Political point-scoring takes place by those not in government at the time. All this holds us back from focusing on how to get results, how to build systems that protect children and how to encourage broader community responsibility. There needs to be more openness and honesty and less blame so that we can develop stronger systems to better protect Australian children. It is an approach I have certainly tried to take in Indigenous affairs in trying to support this government in tackling violence and abuse in Indigenous communities. But I do not think it is helped if people seek to sensationalise issues or to make political capital out of really tragic cases. We have got to focus on the causes and on assisting Aboriginal people and communities to tackle these problems, not constantly blame or highlight the problems.

Labor supports Senator Bartlett's call. We do think we need national leadership. We do think we all have to contribute. I think it is about us all renewing our commitment and our efforts to do much better as a society than we have done in the past. (*Time expired*)

**Senator SIEWERT** (Western Australia) (4.26 p.m.)—The Greens also support Senator Bartlett's motion. Unfortunately, not all Australian children are raised in safe living

environments. As citizens in a supposedly First World country with many privileges and advantages, we find that the current rate of childhood abuse and neglect is unacceptable. Healthy, positive and supportive environments in early childhood, from birth, are essential for the move into successful adolescence and adulthood.

As Senator Evans pointed out, the child protection report released in January this year notes that the number of child protection notifications in Australia has more than doubled, from around 107,000 in 1999-2000 to over a quarter of a million in 2004-05. As has been pointed out, some of these notifications would have been the result of changes in child protection policies and practices in jurisdictions across Australia and reflect increased public awareness of child abuse. However, that cannot be used as an excuse to say that the situation is okay.

The figures for those children placed in protection or removed from home and put in out of home care indicate a very worrying trend. The number of children in care and under protection orders is increasing. Nationally, the number of children in out-of-home care rose each year from 1996 to 2005, increasing by 70 per cent, from nearly 14,000 in 1996 to nearly 24,000 in 2005. Of these children, four per cent were in residential care, 54 per cent in foster care and 40 per cent in kinship care. The rates of children in out-of-home care in Australia increased from three per cent per thousand in 1997 to 4.9 per cent per thousand in 2005. This is clearly an unacceptable situation. As has also been highlighted by previous speakers, the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was six times that of non-Indigenous children.

In Western Australia the Gordon report of 2002 is well known. I think it is useful to look at the barriers to change that were highlighted then. I do not think many of them have changed. They include: ongoing paternalism in government policy; Aboriginal communities must be involved as architects of the solutions; the lack of services to adequately address violence; inappropriate models; inadequate funding; the lack of coordination between Commonwealth and state bodies; mistrust and uncertainty; historical loss of confidence in the justice systems; the need for restorative and reparative processes to counteract historical wrongs; fear of the police; concern that nothing will be done anyway; concern offenders will be imprisoned and die in jail; lack of knowledge about the law and access to legal systems; and an inability to protect women and children. There is a need to focus on actual service development on the ground rather than reassessing the problem. It is also important to look at the child protection workers and the trauma that they are facing in situations of severe overwork. They are suffering from burnout, are unable to cope with the levels of stress, and face a lack of support and training. Things have not changed very much since that report, and most of those issues would also relate to non-Indigenous communities.

The solutions have also been fairly strongly articulated a number of times. They include: promoting a safe family environment, taking the stresses off family related situations; looking at prevention and a whole-of-community response involving community members in child protection and antiviolence policies; involving community members in program design, implementation and assessment; looking at risk and resilience; looking at early childhood programs; and looking at alternative models that better involve communities in decision making and that are culturally relevant support services—services that respect cultural and familial obligations and ties and actually address the fundamental causes. (*Time expired*)

**Senator ADAMS** (Western Australia) (4.31 p.m.)—I rise today to speak to Senator Bartlett's motion. The protection of children from serious abuse and neglect is paramount in our society. The Australian government has great concerns about the continuing increase in the number of child abuse cases; however, responsibility for improving child protection services rests primarily with each state and territory government. In 2006-07 the Australian government will provide an estimated \$17.5 billion to support families and children. Over \$10 million a year is also provided for a range of early intervention and prevention programs.

The Australian government's policy focus is on prevention and early intervention strategies, given the research showing children's early experiences set the stage for their later development in many ways. Senator Bartlett states that there is a need for all political parties to make child protection a national priority. I can assure Senator Bartlett that the Howard

government has made this very important issue a priority. There is no doubt that the best outcomes for children will be achieved if the Australian government and the state and territory governments all work together. Child protection is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments; however, there are areas of joint activity such as prevention and early intervention.

The Community and Disability Services Ministers Conference has agreed that a national approach to child protection—focusing specifically on prevention and early intervention, data development and workforce issues—will be progressed. A cross-jurisdictional working group has been established to progress this work. This will build on work already being done jointly by the Australian government and the state and territory governments, which includes the development and implementation of: firstly, the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers, which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care, including Indigenous young people; and, secondly, the national framework for creating safe environments for children, which focuses on a national approach for increasing the safety of children in their dealings with community service organisations.

You might ask what the government is doing on internet safety. Last week was National Child Protection Week. Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, and Senator the Hon. Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs, launched a joint initiative to educate children about the dangers lurking online. Cybersmart Detectives is a joint initiative between the Australian Communications and Media Authority, known as ACMA, and Australian law enforcement agencies. It builds on the Australian government's \$116.6 million package Protecting Australian Families Online, which will provide every Australian family with a free internet filter. The online tool launched nationally last week uses the internet to teach young people key internet safety messages and helps them recognise the danger signs when using online services such as chat rooms. By using Cybersmart Detectives, young people learn about the dangers of giving out personal information on the internet, that they should never meet face to face with someone they have met on the internet without a parent accompanying them and that people in the online environment may not be who they say they are.

National Child Protection Week was an opportunity to remind parents and children about the dangers lurking on the net. I think it is important that parents become more involved and more vigilant in supervising their children online so that, along with the law enforcement agencies, we can crack down on predators and paedophiles, who use increasingly sophisticated means to groom their potential victims. Parents and children can protect themselves online by keeping their personal information private, learning how to save a copy of a conversation in a chat room and blocking people who make them uncomfortable. Children also need to speak up to their parents if they continue to be worried. The internet is just another public place; and just as crimes are committed in our communities they are also committed online. I am proud to be part of this government that remains committed to ensuring all Australians, particularly children and families, can access a safe and secure internet experience.

I would now like to speak about the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which commits \$490 million, between 2004-05 and 2008-09, for early childhood initiatives and resources that can be used to achieve better outcomes for children, their families and communities. The strategy has proven to be extremely popular, especially throughout Western Australian electorates.

There are four streams to this strategy. The first is Communities for Children, where non-government organisations are funded as facilitating partners in 45 community sites around Australia to develop and implement a strategic and sustainable whole-of-community approach to early childhood development. The second, Early Childhood: Invest to Grow, provides funding for early childhood programs for improved outcomes for young children and the development of tools and resource materials for use by families, professionals and communities supporting families and young children. Third, the Local Answers stream helps strengthen disadvantaged communities by funding local, small-scale, time-limited projects that help communities build skills and capacity to identify opportunities and take action for the

benefit of their members. Fourth, Choice and Flexibility in Child Care provides Australian parents with flexible and innovative childcare solutions.

If we can teach adults to be better parents, we can drive down the incidence of abuse and neglect. The website [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) provides expert, impartial information on raising children, from newborns to eight years of age, in an engaging and user-friendly format. The website has been developed by the Raising Children Network, RCN, a consortium made up of three early childhood organisations: the Smart Population Foundation, the Victorian Parenting Centre and the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. This government commissioned the website, providing \$4 million over four years under its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The Raising Children website provides practical tools and up-to-date information on child health, safety—*(Time expired)*

**Senator POLLEY** (Tasmania) (4.39 p.m.)—I rise to speak on Senator Bartlett's matter of urgency relating to the need for all political parties to make child protection a national priority and the even greater need for governments to work together to determine ways to reduce the completely unacceptable level of serious child abuse and neglect that is occurring across the Australian community. As we are all well aware, last week was Child Protection Week, and the Democrats' motion, supported by Labor, calling for a nationwide approach to child protection was not supported by the coalition in its original form.

Child abuse is a scourge in our society that all too often remains hidden, and therefore it is a difficult topic for governments to tackle. Unfortunately, although the number of cases is on the rise and the incidence of abuse and neglect is growing, the subject seems, far too often, to fall into the too-hard basket. Recently I attended a forum on families and homelessness at Levi House in Launceston, which was attended by representatives from local community organisations. There, I was reminded of the many problems that are facing Australian families and the strain that is being placed on families, not just in Tasmanian communities but in communities nationwide. We all know that problems that are ignored do not just go away. What is needed is a national, bipartisan approach to child protection. The cycle Senator Evans alluded to—in which a terrible story of abuse draws calls for immediate action, only for the issue to disappear when the story vanishes from the newspapers—must end now.

Yesterday during question time we saw the Minister representing the Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Kemp, fail to explain why the government has failed to act on the recommendations of the 2004 Senate Community Affairs References Committee report *Forgotten Australians* and the 2005 Senate Community Affairs References Committee report *Protecting vulnerable children: a national challenge*. Senator Kemp said he would refer the question to Minister Brough, but the time has come for answers, not more questions. The time has come for a unified, whole-of-government approach to stopping child abuse and neglect before it occurs. Both reports by the committee recommended the installation of a national commissioner for children and young people.

Freedom from violence and safety from abuse are the basic rights of all people. Children are only different in that they often do not have the ability to stand up for their rights themselves. They require our protection. It is the responsibility of all levels of government to ensure that the law is upheld and our children are protected from abuse and violence. Recent figures relating to the incidence of abuse are alarming. Suspected cases have doubled in number since 1999-2000. According to Australia's leading national child abuse prevention agency, the NAPCAN Foundation, in 2004, 220,000 reports of child abuse were made—a figure equal to one report for every 25 children in Australia.

Child abuse is arguably Australia's worst social problem. The statistics are frightening. In Australia, a child is abused every 13 minutes. Adam Blakester, Chief Executive of NAPCAN, said in a recent statement:

The appropriate and urgent response required today needs to address the underlying root causes of child abuse, or else the cycle of abuse will only continue. This would form the basis of a National Child Abuse Prevention Strategy, targeting all Australian children.

Unfortunately, we all know that the figures are just the beginning. With every case that is reported, there are countless others that will remain unknown, and the problem will continue to grow. The time for action is now. Child abuse and neglect is not limited to Indigenous communities, although it is recognised that Indigenous victims are over-represented in statistics. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Child protection Australia 2004-05* report found that not only is the number of victims of child abuse increasing but the seriousness of cases continues to worsen, particularly those involving substance abuse, mental health and family violence.

The AIHW report has also revealed an over-representation of sole parent families in confirmed abuse cases. In today's society, the breakdown of the traditional family unit and the higher incidence of sole parent families may be a reason why the incidence of abuse is on the way up. NAPCAN stated that sole parent families are more likely to have low incomes, be financially stressed, be socially isolated or have less support from their immediate family. It also stated that these are all factors that have been associated with child abuse and neglect.

Intergovernmental cooperation is the only way to develop strategies to respond to these sorts of situations. In some cases, abuse occurs due to pressures being placed on parents who may be new to parenting or who may be suffering from their own ailments, including mental health problems or depression. In many cases, abuse can be avoided if appropriate support services are instigated before the situation degenerates. If we do not act and work together now to stop the incidence of abuse and neglect in our communities, the statistics will continue to rise. It is worth remembering that the statistics are not just numbers—behind every statistic there is a young person, a child, who deserves protection.

Labor supports this urgency motion to make child protection a national priority and calls for a whole-of-government approach to develop strategies to reduce the incidence of abuse. Australia's young people are our future, and Labor is prepared to work with the Howard government and other parties to stop the abuse and neglect of Australian children. We need national leadership on this very important issue.

[Senator NASH](#) (New South Wales) (4.46 p.m.)—I do not think there is any doubt that it is an absolute priority for this government to protect children from serious abuse and neglect, and I do not think there is any doubt that there is not a person in this chamber for whom it is not a priority. I certainly take on board Senator Polley's comments about working together with the government to ensure that we get the right outcome. That is the goal. It is not about politics. It is about ensuring that we protect those children right across this nation who are relying on us, not just as parliamentarians but as adults in this community, to ensure that they are safe. They deserve that, and we have a real responsibility to ensure that we deliver that.

This government has a very strong commitment to a national approach. Although the federal government has a significant range of measures in place, it is not just about the federal government. It is about working with the opposition, the states and territories, community groups, parents and organisations right across the country to ensure that we get the right outcomes. The government has committed around \$17 billion to supporting families and children. About \$10 million of that goes each year towards early intervention and prevention.

The government has a real focus on recognising that early intervention and prevention is vitally important in ensuring the safety of our children. We have a range of measures in place, such as the REACH program—Responding Early Assisting Children—which funds 41 services that support children and parents in vulnerable families, those who are experiencing significant transitions or those who are at risk of child abuse, neglect or other crises. We have the Indigenous children program, which emphasises early intervention and prevention and focuses on the delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities and builds and strengthens their resilience and support networks. We have the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, which is provided through the Australian Institute of Family Studies to get information on child protection activities and research out to professionals and organisations in this field. It is important that we note all those programs,

because they are only a part of what the government is doing to ensure that we have the right measures in place to do as much as we possibly can to address this issue.

One organisation I would like to focus on in the area of government working with community organisations is NAPCAN, which was founded in 1987 by Rosemary Sinclair and Christine Stewart. I congratulate them both on their vision, their dedication and their foresight in setting up NAPCAN and recognising the need for an organisation like that. It was created to establish lines of communication between government and organisations, agencies and professionals so that we could have a real focus on this very significant issue. In 2005, NAPCAN released its new strategic plan. It is important to note that because, again, it is not just about governments and what we are doing; it is about working together as a community to ensure that we get the right outcomes.

Last week was National Child Protection Week, and we saw funding of \$250,000 from the government ensure that we raise awareness. Last week a report stated that about one in three people suspected instances of child abuse, but 43 per cent of those did not report those suspicions. I think it is so important to raise community awareness of this issue, and it is through things like National Child Protection Week that awareness will be raised and, hopefully, this very serious issue will be addressed.

Many of the mainstream programs that the government funds contribute to ensuring that we have a real goal of child abuse prevention. It is not just the direct programs—the sorts of things that I mentioned earlier—but the mainstream programs as well, such as health, social security, housing, disability services and family policy. We need to adopt a holistic approach to this. It is not just about specifically targeting child abuse and those very specific measures we put in place; it is about the broader environment that those children are living in. We know that, when families are under stress, that is far more likely, unfortunately, to be a factor in child abuse. It is about issues such as poverty, unemployment, illness and disability, so we need to have a very broad-ranging approach to that, and this government certainly has that.

If we do not address those things then we are not going to be able to address the issue itself. So I believe it is vitally important that we take a very broad view to make sure we encompass all those things. We need to recognise the factors that result in instances of child abuse and do everything we can to minimise those factors. If we do that and combine it with early intervention and prevention, working collectively with all sides of government and the community, then we can make sure we get the right outcomes in this area. The more we assist families to cope, the more they are able to raise their children in a caring environment.

I am a mother of two children. I know that many senators in this place are parents. You cannot help but feel it very deeply when you hear of instances of child abuse—and you do not have to be a parent to feel deep emotion when you hear about instances of child abuse. The onus is on us to work together, to work with the community and to work with the groups. The onus is on us to ensure that we have a plan together which does not get distracted by politics and that we have a very clear path forward to ensure that our children, in this wonderful country of ours, have safe and happy lives.

[Senator MOORE](#) (Queensland) (4.53 p.m.)—Senator Bartlett, I do not think you are going to get a lot of debate around your motion. Listening to anyone who has spoken this afternoon and looking at any review of the literature would show that the words ‘child abuse’ can be linked very clearly to commitment, outrage and anger. Over the years, there have been very many reports, debates and times that all levels of government, politicians, churches and institutions have come together and had the kind of discussion that we have just had in this place. The literature is dripping with statements about how terrible child abuse is and about the need to have reform and cooperative operations to work together to effect change.

One of the very difficult aspects of this discussion is about how you can appropriately balance the need for hope with the overwhelming frustration that in 2006 we are talking in very similar ways to those who spoke in these kinds of debates before. In some ways, I

suppose, there is hope, in that people from all sides in this place can get together and restate that we need to accept that child abuse must be a national priority and that it should not be dismissed or pushed aside by whatever the next national priority is going to be. One of the failures of our system is that we tend to be provoked by sensation—that whatever is the sensation of the moment in the media gets the reaction not just of this place but of the wider community. The message for us—and I am sure it is the message in Senator Bartlett's motion—is that this issue should not be displaced or stimulated by sensation. It is bigger than that, it is more important than that, and there is an opportunity for us to effect real change.

This year, 2006, we have seen a number of national conferences which have been stimulated by the work of a range of people in our community, including those in NAPCAN to whom Senator Nash has just referred. The people who formed that organisation did a wonderful job for us all. And, through the Senate Community Affairs References Committee process, which has already been mentioned, a series of reports was delivered in this place, stimulated very much by the hard work and tenacious efforts of Senator Murray.

By that process, we have come up with significant reports. I refer again to the report *Forgotten Australians*. I think there were 39 recommendations in that August 2004 report, and the supplementary report of March 2005 came forward with another 17 recommendations, not all of which were picked up by the government. Certainly, when the government response came out later, in 2005, there was the almost inevitable response that a great deal of the constitutional responsibilities for the area of child abuse lie with state governments. That was clearly pointed out by the national governmental response. But I think there has been a move forward, beyond that kind of national shaking around over who is mostly responsible. I think that out of that process has come an acceptance that there will be an effort at the national level to coordinate responses that can address the issues that end up in the horror of child abuse.

There have been two conferences this year. One of them looked specifically at the issues of those people who were victims of institutional abuse. Those issues were covered in the *Forgotten Australians* report. That report talked about kids who were in care who had survived that process, many of whom have gone on to be victims throughout their lives. They actually talked about how they could move forward and address their ongoing concerns. But that also stimulated the issue of the ongoing problems of people in foster care—families that are damaged in many ways and the kids who are the most immediate victims of that kind of process.

We are awaiting with interest the government's responses to those conferences so that once again we can work together to see what the next step should be. Senator Bartlett's goal of making this issue a national priority can be a living reality rather than just another talking point. I hope that, out of the process, this place could perhaps have some kind of ongoing role. It is not enough that we deliver a report, move away from it and not know where to go next; we tick that box. I think there is some hope that this parliament could have an ongoing responsibility to monitor the range of programs that are introduced, how they are going and whether they are working. It could ask: 'Has there been an actual response to the heaps of commitment and rhetorical media-covered statements about how, this time, we are going to work together?' I am hoping that, perhaps through the Senate Community Affairs References Committee process and back through the Senate, we can have regular updates—not just at Senate estimates time—where we talk to, in particular, the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to see how the programs that have been mentioned today are going. But that should be done in a much more coordinated way so that we can do a snapshot of how these processes are working, what advances have been made and what still needs to be done. That would put some action into Senator Bartlett's statement about working well together and making this a real national commitment and priority.

There are very many people who are looking to this place for a response, and I think that we owe our community the respect of saying that we have heard what they have told us and that we accept our responsibility as people who are representing them in parliament. I think we can move together. I think there is a genuine opportunity arising out of the need of the community

and also out of the wonderful commitment of organisations like NAPCAN and the various community agencies around the place that are working in the field on this issue.

We cannot just have another speaking opportunity or media release. This issue demands that there be action, not just another series of pilot projects. I think that 'pilotitis', the condition of giving short-term funding to areas, does more harm than good. This needs strong, systematic change and commitment. It also means bringing the people who most understand these processes into the discussion. Then, maybe, prevention of child abuse as a real national priority will be a reality and not just something that we can talk about in this place to release our frustration.

**Senator BARTLETT** (Queensland) (5.00 p.m.)—I thank all senators for their contributions on this motion. I would like to broadly concur with the statement by the NAPCAN foundation president, Teresa Scott, that child abuse and neglect is Australia's greatest social problem, and it is the responsibility of all Australians to do everything they can to prevent it. That must include government and political parties, of course, but I should emphasise that it is a responsibility for all Australians. It is not something that government can somehow fix without the community coming along with it and showing greater concern for the issue. However, I slightly disagree with Teresa Scott in that I think the continuing gross inequality between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians is our greatest social problem, and it is actually no coincidence that some of the ways that manifests itself are also through child abuse and neglect.

I acknowledge the contributions and the generosity of the contributions from everybody, but, frankly, I am not convinced that this is actually being given the priority it deserves from the federal government. That is not a criticism of them specifically. It is not being given the priority it deserves by state governments and it has not been given the priority it deserves by previous federal governments either.

I also acknowledge the impossible role of welfare workers in the field in this area. They make mistakes from time to time and occasionally they are very grievous mistakes, and they should be continually monitored. But, in many cases, they carry the can for society's failures, and for decades they have been under-resourced by governments. They are in the impossible position of deciding whether to remove a child from a family situation—and having to deal with all of the grief and upheaval that goes with that—or whether to leave the child in a situation where they may be at risk, and having to face all of the criticism if that pans out badly. As well, they have the knowledge that removing them and putting them somewhere else in care is not necessarily always terribly safe for the child either. We need to acknowledge the work of many people at the community level who are trying to navigate through this.

I support the call of Joe Tucci for a national children's commissioner. I think that is absolutely essential. That is a recommendation of the Senate committee report that has not been taken up by this federal government. I think it is absolutely crucial that it is taken up, and the Australian Childhood Foundation has pushed for that for a long period of time. Why can't we have a parliamentary secretary with responsibility for this? We have a parliamentary secretary with responsibility for water. Even though we all know that it is a state issue, it has been seen as an issue of national priority. I think the same sort of thing can be done with this issue, where we actually hold ourselves accountable as a nation and report to cabinet. It does not make it a national priority by just funding some programs now and then. You have consistent follow through, time after time, with the person who has that core responsibility. It is only when the parliament and all political parties agree to take the responsibility that you actually get some action.

Question agreed to.