



## SPEECH

# CRAIG EMERSON

## Member for Rankin

28 May 2007

### Child Abuse

[Dr EMERSON](#) (Rankin) (4.21 p.m.)—I grieve tonight for young children in disadvantaged communities around Australia. This is a blight on our society. It is a matter on which I have spoken a number of times since coming into the parliament in 1998, and I have been involved in a parliamentary group called Parliamentarians Against Child Abuse. Nevertheless, the small efforts that we make in trying to bring this terrible problem into greater public focus do not seem to have had much effect. Not that I think a few politicians talking about these problems of themselves would have a big effect, but I have to report that the figures on child abuse are getting worse. In 1999-2000 the total number of substantiated cases of child abuse was just under 25,000. In 2005-06 it was almost 56,000, more than double in just a very short period. I readily acknowledge that one explanation for that incredible leap in the number of substantiated cases of child abuse is greater community awareness and a more rigorous notification system. It is good that there is a higher level of community awareness of the problem, but the problem is getting worse.

We hear of terrible cases of child abuse, of neglect, of torture and of sexual abuse in this country. Of course, that tends to get a little bit more notoriety in Indigenous communities, but I think that is a bit of a cop-out because this problem is widespread across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. It is all very sanctimonious for us to frown upon what happens in Indigenous communities, and we should, but that is no excuse for what happens in non-Indigenous communities in disadvantaged parts of Australia.

The work of Tony Vinson and others confirms that disadvantage is entrenched in communities around our country. Those communities which were the most disadvantaged 20 years ago remain the most disadvantaged today. We as policy makers and parliamentarians must ask why it is so difficult to break that cycle of despair, of dysfunctionality and of abuse. We have not enjoyed success in doing that.

We in this country have now had about 16 years of sustained economic growth. We live in times of great prosperity—unprecedented prosperity—yet there are so many young children who are growing up in disadvantaged, violent and dysfunctional households. Why is it that people of goodwill—and most parliamentarians are disposed that way—have had so little success? Obviously, it is a problem at the state level. There have been any number of inquiries conducted in various states on child abuse and neglect. But it is also a federal responsibility. I am always heartened when Labor, my party, comes forward with

programs for early childhood development. One of the more recent programs is that of making preschool universally available. That is a very important initiative and I hope that the coalition will join with us in that endeavour.

I recall the incoming Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, announcing that she wanted a compulsory preschool year but, sadly, that announcement did not seem to be followed up by any action. If there is action going on behind the scenes, that is fine. I do not need to know about it at this stage, but I surely hope that there are real efforts going into improving the availability of preschool for all four-year-olds. Estimates suggest that there are about 105,000 four-year-olds who miss out on a preschool education, and it is absolutely clear that the great majority of those are from disadvantaged communities.

There is always debate on the sorts of programs which are effective and those which are less effective, dating back to the Perry preschool program in the United States and the various Headstart programs. But I thought it would be opportune to share one with the parliament today, and that is an initiative of the Blair government called the Nurse Family Partnership program. Under this partnership, from a very early period—and by ‘early’ I mean after about 14 weeks from becoming pregnant—at risk mothers, or expecting mothers, are visited weekly by a midwife or a health visitor from that time of the child being 14 weeks in the womb all the way through until the child turns two.

The idea is to help first time mothers bond with their babies and develop their parenting skills and to provide practical help to quit smoking and drug use, both of which are big risk factors for subsequent disadvantage and health problems in the children. I draw the attention of the parliament to this pilot program because it is the sort of program that I think we ought to be contemplating here in Australia. It is not the first time a measure such as this has been tried. The Nurse Family Partnership program of the Blair government was developed following a similar trial in the United States—

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)**—The member for Blair should know that standing order 94A dismisses him from the parliament for an hour. He is in gross disorder and risks being named.

*The member for Blair then left the chamber*

**Dr EMERSON**—The Nurse Family Partnership showed positive results with improved IQ skills and language development, lower levels of abuse and neglect, improved health for young mothers and improved job prospects. So there seems to be some merit in the United States trials. Three were conducted: in 1977, 1987 and 1994. They have produced strong evidence, consistently showing the scheme led to improved health of mother and baby, fewer childhood injuries and a greater readiness for school so that, hopefully, children can go into that universal preschool year here in Australia.

I quote three figures: a 48 per cent reduction in child abuse and neglect, a 59 per cent reduction in arrests and a 90 per cent reduction in the number of people receiving supervision orders. That is the US experience. In the UK there are just 1,000 babies, and the program costs £7 million. It is a modest start, but one that we should take a very great interest in.

If we think of this purely as a social problem, I guess that is fine; but it is an economic problem too. Indeed the Nobel laureate economist James Heckman started off on other areas of endeavour but came to the conclusion that the most important contribution that policymakers could make, the greatest investment

that they could make, was in the very early years of early childhood development. So it is not so much about building railways and ports, as important as those things are, but rather making a real investment in young people in those very early years. That produces spectacular returns, and importantly they are not just returns for the child or the mother but returns for society as a whole. In fact about 80 per cent of the returns from the Perry preschool program accrued to society as a whole and 20 per cent to those who are direct beneficiaries. Those returns included greater employability, less criminality, less abuse and obviously less incarceration, which is a very expensive approach. So I commend this program, the Blair program, to the parliament tonight. I hope, through the small contribution that I have been able to make here tonight in grieving for the children, that I have done just a little bit more to highlight the terrible problem of child abuse and neglect in this country. Hopefully we can do a little bit more to break that cycle of despair and misery that afflicts so many young people in our country.