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FAMILY VIOLENCE PROTECTION AMENDMENT (SAFETY NOTICES) BILL 2011

Second reading

Mrs COOTE (Southern Metropolitan) – I have a great deal of pleasure, in some respects, in speaking about the Family Violence Protection Amendment (Safety Notices) Bill 2011 basically because it gives us, as a chamber and as legislators, a chance yet again to alert the community to this very vexed issue of family violence. It also gives me the opportunity to put on the record my praise for the minister for bringing the bill to this stage and identifying these various areas of concern.

The bill repeals the sunset provision for family violence safety notices (FVSNs). It also clarifies the power of the Magistrates Court in relation to the adjournment of intervention order applications brought by way of FVSNs and the power of the Magistrates Court to make intervention orders where the protected person does not consent to the making of the application by police and/or the order by the court.

As has been said by other speakers this afternoon, family violence safety notices were introduced in 2008 and they allow police to impose short-term protective conditions after hours for victims of family violence, pending further hearing by a court. These police-issued FVSNs have a maximum length of 72 hours and must be returned to a court within that time. The provisions were designed to sunset so that FVSNs could be trialled and evaluated.

In his contribution Mr David O'Brien gave a very detailed summary of the implications and ramifications of the bill and a detailed response about why the Baillieu government has brought this bill to the chamber. I commend him for an excellent report, and I encourage anybody who is interested in this area to read his contribution because it will clarify a number of issues for the reader. It is very comprehensive coverage of the issues.

I would like to talk about something in a slightly different way, and I acknowledge the contributions of Ms Darveniza, Ms Hartland, Mr Pakula and other speakers who have spoken about the unacceptable nature of violence anywhere but that of family violence in particular. As Ms Hartland said, violence inflicted on children is totally and utterly unacceptable. I am fortunate to be the parliamentary secretary to Mary Wooldrige, the Minister for Community Services, the Minister for Mental Health and the Minister for Women's Affairs.

The Department of Human Services falls within those portfolio areas, and being the parliamentary secretary has given me a firsthand opportunity to examine a number of the very vexed issues involved with children who are exposed to family violence and also some of the outcomes of it.

The community at large hears about family violence and has an abhorrence of it, but when you read some of the finer details each and every one of us feels an enormous amount of compassion for those children and other people who are implicated in family violence. It is not just the people who have been abused who are affected, it has huge long-term ramifications for the wider community as well. We see this manifest itself in so many different ways – in schooling, in mental health issues, in drug-related issues, and indeed with the presentation to our hospital emergency departments of so many related injuries.

I remind the chamber and the Parliament as a whole that it was the Kennett Liberal government that brought in mandatory reporting of child abuse. It is important to remember that that has been very effective, particularly in relation to child abuse resulting from domestic violence. I commend all the professionals who have reported child abuse, whether it has been sexual or family violence, because it is a very difficult thing to do.

It is important to place some statistics on the record. VicHealth has done some excellent research into these areas and has demonstrated that for women aged between 15 and 44 intimate partner violence is responsible for more ill health and premature death than any other well-known factor, including obesity and smoking. That is a very salutary statistic. It is not something we would normally consider – we would think there would be other, greater risk factors – but that has been proven in the research done by VicHealth.

In Australia a woman is killed almost every week by a current or previous intimate partner. In 2009-10 Victoria Police submitted 35 720 family violence reports, 77 per cent of which were female and 23 per cent of which were male. That last statistic is an important one: there has been a huge increase in the number of violent acts being perpetrated by women. It is starting to be a trend, and we need to be more cognisant of these emerging statistics in the domestic violence area.

In 2009-10 women and children comprised 96 per cent of all sexual offences reported to Victoria Police, and women were at least three times more likely to be the victim of intimate partner violence than men. It is estimated that the cost of violence against women and their children across the Victorian economy was \$3.4 billion in 2009, and without any further action this sum will increase to \$3.9 billion per annum by 2021.

Clearly, therefore, anything we can do as legislators to reverse this trend is important – hence the importance of this bill here today.

This year was the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. Much has been said about that, but I, on behalf of Minister Wooldrige, had a very good opportunity to address two particular groups. One of them was the Australia India Society of Victoria. It put on an International Women's Day event, and at that event it decided that marching in the street or banners or publicity in newspapers did not go far enough. Therefore as a group the society took on the responsibility of looking at domestic violence in the Indian community to see what could be done to enhance recognition, prevention and a whole range of other things. I commend the extraordinary work that group has been doing in this area.

Particular praise must go to Dr Gurdip Aurora and to Dr Manjula O'Connor, vice-president of the Australia India Society of Victoria, for recognising this as a very real issue and doing

something about it. They are to be highly commended, and a number of other communities could take some notice of this as well. I know they have been working very cooperatively with the Jewish community, and that is an important step forward as well. Domestic violence is not just related to the broader community, cultural issues are also a major problem.

I might add the Australia India Society of Victoria under the direction of Dr Manjula O'Connor, who is the project coordinator, has a theatre performance on domestic violence. It is a project in the Melbourne Indian community. There were three focus groups involving Indian women from Sunshine, Dandenong/Glen Waverley and Balwyn. They turned the discussions into a modified forum theatre that they called applied theatre, and have performed the theatre piece twice in the Indian community and once in the Wyndham City Council area. The group's next performance is going to be on 27 May – members will have to be quick to get to it – at 3.30p.m. in room 515 at the University of Melbourne. I said that just in case any member wanted to go.

The other group within our community that is doing something very productive against violence, and domestic violence in particular, is our indigenous community. The indigenous community has embraced an approach to family violence that acknowledges it is a big and real issue in their community.

There are certain cultural issues that are absolutely relevant only to indigenous culture. They are about the way in which men are perceived within their culture. There is a whole range of sensitivities about how men approach violence and how their rapport within their families is viewed. It is quite an interesting and in-depth cultural attitude and approach which is slightly different to that found in the wider community. Nevertheless they are addressing there is as a very real issue.

I commend the Indigenous Family Violence strategy, which is a partnership strategy, the forum organisers and the work they have been doing. They have worked with the Department of Human Services in a number of areas. They are linking with the family violence coordination reform unit located in the Office of Women's Policy. The unit has provided an overall coordination and lead on the family violence reform program.

There is also the family violence and sexual assault unit in the children, youth and families division, which coordinates the operational aspects of the Indigenous Family Violence strategy through a statewide network of indigenous family violence regional coordinators. The unit has also been dealing with homelessness and family violence support in the Office of Housing, which coordinates emergency accommodation and services, including managing the national partnership agreement on homelessness which provides an additional two indigenous women's emergency accommodation facilities in Mildura and Morwell.

The work being done is extremely good. It is something that should be acknowledged, because it is looking at the sensitivities of family violence and the indigenous community. The bill we are dealing with today enhances that opportunity and ensures that there is another level of certainty in regard to this aspect.

In the short time I have left I remind members of the chamber of the complexities that relate to indigenous family violence. It is quite different, and it is important that we are cognisant of and understand this. Just as there are certain technicalities within the Indian and Jewish communities, there are certain technicalities in the indigenous community. I think it is important for us to understand what some of these technicalities are.

The development and implementation of the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence strategy involved a three-stage approach. A task force was established to provide the government with advice about how to effectively address family violence within indigenous communities. The second stage was the government response to the recommendations of this task force. The previous government's response was to commit to establishing an Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum. It is our intention, and the intention of the Minister for Local Government, Jeanette Powell, to support this project in an ongoing way.

The minister recognises how important this work is for the future. The third stage involved the development and implementation of the Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families – Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities, which was designed to specifically address family violence in indigenous communities. Once again, Minister Powell is supportive of that.

To conclude, the indigenous community has a good men's shed type of approach which is culturally sensitive and looks into a number of the issues. There is a case worker at the centre of this approach who is able to redirect people specifically to areas that are going to impact on and influence their lives. It may be homelessness services, the police, courts, other families or drug and alcohol services that are involved, but it is a two-way street. The person in the middle of all of this is like a gatekeeper who can redirect people to where that specific information is needed. It is a model that I think could be rolled out into other communities.

I commend all those groups I have spoken about this afternoon. In summary, I support this excellent bill. I think is a great step forward. Hopefully as this Parliament progresses we can have more legislation that helps us all to address the unacceptable issue of family violence.

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