

CHILDREN IN STATE CARE APOLOGY

19 June 2008

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: I rise on behalf Family First to support the motion and join with other members of this chamber in expressing a sincere 'Sorry' to victims of abuse over many, many years. 'Sorry' is indeed a powerful word. Too much debate in this country is centred on what that word means and what consequences follow from saying it. However, I think every person knows when it is appropriate to say sorry for something that has happened, as does every government and, indeed, every parliament. I am very pleased to see that this parliament has taken the steps that it has taken today.

Family First is profoundly sorry to the victims of the traumatic life-changing experience that was sexual abuse—as well as other abuse—in institutions in South Australia in the past. A dark cloud indeed has fallen upon our state's heritage and history in this regard, and for that, indeed, we are sorry.

I will not labour the point which we have made several times before and which other members have touched on this morning about the Hon. Andrew Evans opening the doorway for this abuse to be uncovered via his bill to remove the statute of limitations for offences occurring prior to 1 December 1982. I think the state will be forever grateful for that initiative.

Family First's sorrow about this issue is heightened by the way in which it flows through to all manner of other social problems that we are seeing today. Indeed, institutions from parliament and government to community organisations, I believe, have lost the trust of people today in many ways. I believe that this abuse plays no small part in that, as those abused become parents or grandparents. Without speaking of the abuse openly, in many cases, they have taught their families to be wary of these institutions and, in some cases, with good reason.

We have serious mental health problems in this state as well, and I wonder how much of that can be traced back to sexual abuse, made worse in many

cases by the double blow of victims being told that they had imagined the abuse or would never be believed. Such trauma would be very difficult to recover from at all. Further, we have a broad range of problems with sexual health and attitudes that I suspect arise, in some part, due to the unwanted, strange and difficult sexual experiences that children have experienced as a result of these events.

I could go on, but I want to move on to pose a few questions for us all to consider soberly. First, it is a fact that Commissioner Mullighan had to turn away a great number of people who wanted to give evidence but who did not meet the terms of reference for this inquiry. In other words, despite the massive cost of the inquiry, there remains at least the same cost again in exploring the sexual abuse that occurred outside the parameters of that inquiry. I might add that this is a cost well worth spending.

Constituents have contacted us criticising the narrow scope of the inquiry. I suppose, to be fair, it is inevitable that some people feel this way, and the government would probably say it needed to have parameters to its inquiry, otherwise it could never actually deliver any findings, and we certainly are sympathetic to that view. Family First is profoundly sorry for all abuse that occurred in this state, whether within or outside the parameters of the Mullighan inquiry.

Another sobering thought is that we now face a looming issue in bringing to justice—that is, policing, prosecuting and imprisoning—in some cases very aged persons who committed these crimes many years ago. There is also a fear, as a number of victims have voiced to us, of cover-ups and other conspiracies as they speculate how 'high up' the abuse goes. This parliament must seriously ask the question of how high up sexual abuse goes and then fearlessly deal with the perpetrators, for any less action is not acceptable. That is a very sobering task indeed but one that Family First—and I am sure many other members of this chamber—is ready to tackle head on.

I want to congratulate the churches in particular that jointly signed the apology. The churches have suffered a great deal of embarrassment and

conviction about the issue of sexual abuse and, in many cases, that is deserved. I congratulate them for the steps they have taken to ensure that this will not be repeated.

Another sobering challenge that is made clear by this situation is the very real need to strengthen families. In most cases, children came to be wards of the state due to family breakdown, and that is how they were able to be victims of abuse in the first place. The stronger we can make marriages, uphold marriage and create these safe social units called families that are the bedrock of a healthy society, the sooner, I believe, we will stem the alarmingly growing number of children coming under the care of the Minister for Families and Communities.

If I may, I would like to conclude on the most important consideration of all, and that is the protection of children. I will quote from the Bible, in Luke chapter 18, verse 16, where Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.' I suspect that, in the past, people of good faith entrusted their children to the servants of the church, innocently believing they were obeying this verse. However, I think the lesson is that there is a deeper principle here. We are in a state of innocence lost. Let us hope that, in response to this tragedy in the state's history, we do a much better job of protecting the children entrusted into our care. I believe that, in doing this, we do more for our state's future than any other economic, environmental, social or other type of measure.

With those words, I indicate Family First's wholehearted support for the motion and reiterate that we are indeed very sorry for the terrible harm that has been done by various institutions to the most vulnerable people in our state.