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People Trafficking for Sex Work in Australia

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — This afternoon I want to speak briefly on the inquiry into people trafficking for sex work, the report on which was tabled last month.

The committee received the reference on 13 August 2009 and was asked to inquire into and report back by 30 June on the extent and nature of the trafficking of people from overseas into Victoria for the purposes of sex work; on the interrelationship, if any, between the unlicensed and licensed areas of sex work; on the effect of the current and proposed intergovernmental and international agreements on sex work, and particularly the issue of trafficking for sex work; and finally on the need for policy and legislative reform to combat trafficking for the purposes of sex work in Victoria.

Before I move to the detail of the report, I want to thank my colleagues on the committee: my coalition colleagues the member for Lowan and Mrs Coote in the other place; and from the other side of the house the members for Essendon and Yuroke and Ms Mikakos and Mr Leane in the other place.

I have had the privilege of being deputy chair of the committee for some three and a half years. Perhaps I had led a sheltered life, although I do not think so, but I have certainly found many of the issues and subjects that we have had to deal with over that time not only challenging but in some cases confronting as well.

I want to put on the record my thanks to all the members that I have served with on that committee, including former members. They are the member for Kew; a former member of the house, André Haermeyer; and the Deputy Speaker. I think it is a committee whose members have worked extremely well together. We have had some pretty serious and heavy discussions and heavy and robust debates on many issues, but in the end we have always agreed on a common way forward. There has not needed to be compromise on any side to achieve a common way forward. We have worked through the issues.

I also want to put on record my thanks to the staff of the committee, Sandy Cook, who is the executive officer, Pete Johnston, Dr Cheryl Hercus and Stephanie Amir. It has been a privilege to work with those people.

The committee has a well-deserved reputation for excellence in the reports it presents and of course, as anyone who has served on a parliamentary committee knows, the role the staff play is critical to the quality of the reports. I think this report into people trafficking is no exception.

There were a number of challenges in considering the matters, not least of which is that we had several inquiries running concurrently, but that aside the complexity was considerable. All spheres of government in Australia are involved in this area: local government in the sense of its role in planning regulation and inspection; the Victorian government in terms of the consumer affairs role and the role played by Victoria Police, particularly on the illegal side of the business; and the commonwealth when it comes to immigration controls, international agreements and so on.

The second challenge was the philosophical approach. I know there is universal condemnation in this country for the practice of trafficking for any purposes. There were many witnesses who urged the committee to consider whether sex work should effectively be outlawed again in Victoria. As the report notes, that raises not merely philosophical issues; it also raises practical policy implications. While that was clearly outside the sphere of the terms of reference and it was clearly outside the terms of the discussion, it was nevertheless always present.

There was also a lack of hard data. It is very difficult to get appropriate data, even something as simple as establishing the scale of the operations. Nevertheless, despite all those complexities, I think the committee has put together a very effective set of recommendations. If the government picks them up, it will go some way towards redressing this awful problem.