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Boarding School Registration – Long Overdue

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MR MORRIS (Mornington) (14:57): It is a pleasure to join this debate on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Regulation of Student Accommodation) Bill 2020 which, while it does a number of things, is essentially about the registration of premises, according to the long title, 'at which accommodation services are provided to students enrolled at or attending registered schools', boarding schools.

There are also some minor amendments relating to early childhood teachers and there are some statute law revisions and some consequential amendments to the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005. But of course the meat of the bill really is in part 2, which is the school boarding house premises.

A number of members have gone through the provisions of the bill in quite some detail, and if time permits I will do something similar, but I simply at this point make the observation that the key piece of the bill is the insertion of a new division 1A, 'Registration of school boarding premises', and that effectively sets out the framework.

There are a range of associated provisions with it, all of which appear to me to be more than reasonable. Certainly this afternoon I am speaking in support of the bill and am pleased to do so.

As other members have alluded to, there is a significant backdrop to this bill.

We have sadly become aware probably over the last 20 years—perhaps a bit longer but particularly in the last 10 to 15 years—of the extent of the abuse of children and the extent of the abuse of young people, not only in the state of Victoria but both in the state of Victoria and across the nation and, as far as we know, across the Western world.

We have seen the reports from Ireland, we have seen the reports from the United States and of course we have seen one particularly high-profile case recently, which was eventually quashed. We have seen so many reports of similar events.

So I guess in the aggregate we are now pretty much aware of the appalling facts of the abuse that was allowed to occur. Now, frequently that abuse was sexual in nature, but not always. Sometimes it was physical abuse, sometimes it was psychological abuse. Sometimes it was all three, which of course makes it an even greater offence.

It is hard to estimate the damage that the cumulative effect of that has had on literally thousands of children and thousands of young people in recent years.

Others have also mentioned the Betrayal of Trust report, and I think anyone who was in the 57th Parliament could not help but be staggered, and not staggered in a good way, at the revelations that came out of that report. I still think of the toll it must have taken on members of the committee to simply hear that evidence and to weigh it, and they produced a very, very good report.

I think that report is evidence, if it was ever needed, of the capacity of this Parliament—and sadly it is a capacity that is seldom harnessed—to actually undertake that significant work and to develop pretty far-reaching recommendations for the betterment of the whole community.

I also think if the government was prepared to commission similar inquiries on some of the intractable problems of today and approach them in a similar manner, we might well all be better advanced rather than simply undertaking too often make-work inquiries that are more about burnishing the government of the day, burnishing their political standing, than simply doing the job, as was done in this case.

Four members of that committee remain in the Parliament: Georgie Crozier in the other place of course chaired it, the member for Ferntree Gully, the member for Broadmeadows and the member for Thomastown. Those last two members are sitting in the chamber here this afternoon. And there were two then upper house members, who are no longer in the Parliament, Andrea Coote and David O'Brien. I think the quality of the report is obvious, in that six and a half years on it remains the key work on the subject in Victoria.

Of course we have had the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and I may well come back to that, but the committee report was the first attempt, and I think it was the best attempt, to cover the issue in Victoria.

I wanted to refer just quickly to that report, and I will mention in passing point 3.3.2, which is about boarding in parish schools. On that page, and just above that point, is some evidence that was given about the Morning Star Boys Home in Mount Eliza, which of course was not a boarding school; it was a place of correction run by the Franciscan brothers.

One of the people that was there gave evidence with regard to physical abuse and mentioned there had been sexual abuse as well. If you read those passages, it is hard to reconcile it with a place of correction. This witness was also at Turana and in the adult prison system, and he testified that the treatment meted out at Morning Star was significantly worse. It strikes a chord because I drive past Morning Star, that property, every night on the way home, and to think that that sort of abuse could have occurred there is very disappointing.

But of course the reason I raised the report is because it talks about boarding schools. It talks about the evidence that was taken in Ballarat and Geelong. It talks particularly about St Patrick's school. It largely talks about the Catholic education system, and that is where the evidence came from. As I say, it referred to Geelong as well, and of course the issues were not just confined to the Catholic system. At another school there are well-documented and publicly acknowledged offences that occurred over an extended period, and that is Geelong College.

I had the good fortune to attend that school for almost all of my secondary years—I missed a term, I think—and one of my primary years. What I know now that I did not know at the time was that during those years one or more perpetrators were actively engaged in the

abuse of my fellow students.

Like most of my peers, I was happily oblivious of that activity and remained oblivious of that activity for many years. I was simply the beneficiary of a great education at a terrific school, and my schooldays were, I think, probably—it sounds clichéd—some of the happiest of my life. But now I am aware that unfortunately not everyone shared that positive experience, and that lack of a positive experience occurred not only within the Catholic education system but at schools across the state.

I think one of the good things that we are now aware of, with the revelations and the changes that have come out of it, is that almost the entire current boarding system thought they were under the controls that we are now seeking to apply, so that is a positive outcome.

But I think if my experience says anything, it underlines the insidious nature of the sorts of offences that we are seeking to prevent here and demonstrates why legislation of this type is necessary. I know both St Patrick's and Geelong College have issued significant apologies and the current leadership of each school are doing everything they can to recognise the issue, to acknowledge that it occurred and to advance, and they recognise that they cannot advance until they acknowledge what has gone before.

We need to recognise that we can never undo the harm that was done to so many victims, but as a Parliament we can take steps and we must take steps to ensure that this abuse does not happen to the current generation and does not happen to future generations.

The provisions contained in this legislation, the major part of this bill, do go some way towards ensuring that we can meet that challenge, so I will certainly be supporting the bill.

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