NORTHERN TERRITORY
of AUSTRALIA

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HANSARD EXTRACT

CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

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For current working with children check holders in the Northern Territory this Bill ensures that if an interstate negative notice exists, SAFE NT can reassess and, when necessary, revoke a clearance to prevent unacceptable risk. That is not only reasonable; it is essential.

The existing Act is too narrow. It limits information sharing and creates unnecessary administrative burden, and this Bill fixes these deficiencies. It strengthens child protection safeguards, delivers on the CLP government's commitment to reduce crime and enhances community confidence in the systems designed to protect our youngest and most vulnerable Territorians. Most importantly, it sends a clear message: the safety of children must come first every time and in every jurisdiction.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, I support the Care and Protection of Children Amendment (Worker Screening) Bill. It is heartening to speak on Bills like this which clearly have multi-party support for enacting positive reforms that will ensure children are safer and we have better social outcomes.

My electorate of Fong Lim contains a number of childcare centres, so I speak in support of this Bill, recognising that those childcare centres want better governance and oversight in these businesses. Childcare centres in Stuart Park, Woolner and Berrimah—I could point to a number of them specifically.

The bottom line is that this Bill is not entirely reactive; it is the consequence of things that happened over the last few years which shone a light on the fact that we need to do more to maintain consistency and harmonisation in regulating these spaces and ensuring that only fit and proper persons work in childcare. It is an important area to work in. We struggle to find labour supply, but that cannot be an excuse for letting just anyone work in childcare willy-nilly and/or for us to drop the ball and allow people who should not be in the space to work in the sector.

This Bill delivers on the CLP government's commitment to strengthen child safety and protect vulnerable children. Neither the Member for Port Darwin nor the Member for Katherine, both relevant ministers in this area, are new to being advocates in this space. This is not a case of just pushing through reforms because it is in their wheelhouse; these ministers are genuinely committed to their core on issues related to childcare, learning and child safety.

This government is to be lauded for the efforts it consistently makes to improve child safety and ensure that future generations have a leg up. There are lots of structural deficits in the Northern Territory's socioeconomic set-up, and I speak about them regularly regarding public health, housing, education and infrastructure.

All of those, ultimately, lead people to think that we are trying to provide opportunity for only adults when, in actual fact, at all times we on this side of the House are thinking about opportunity for children, the next generation, and setting up people for positive outcomes and success. Our government got it right in making this a key area of focus. Whether it is school attendance or safety, we made it a front-and-centre concern of government.

Our concern aligns with the national reforms that were agreed in August 2025 by the Standing Council of Attorneys-General at the meeting to ensure consistency in working with children checks. Australians are rightly horrified that this area has been a net with holes in it—a tapestry of arrangements without clarity. It has been easier to circumnavigate the systems in some places than others. No-one Australia-wide wants us lagging in this area.

Key features such as providing mutual recognition of negative working with children clearances across all Australian jurisdictions are important, as is, as a general principle and specific outcome, enhanced information sharing between NT agencies, regulatory bodies and interstate screening authorities. It will ensure that people who are refused the capacity to work in the sector elsewhere are also denied clearance to work in the Northern Territory.

Thankfully, we have not had some of the egregious heinous incidents we know to have occurred, particularly as reported in Victoria over the last year. However, that is all the more reason for us to support the principle of 'banned in one, banned in all', which is what we are seeking to do with this Bill.

There is a significant body of checks in this space already. SAFE NT processed almost 50,000 applications in 2024–25. Five jurisdictions have already recognised interstate negative notices, and the NT will also be legislated to meet the national commitments made on the back of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, particularly the recommendation for a nationally consistent approach to working with children clearances.

Operationally, this will have a small but discernible and significant impact. SAFE NT will formally recognise negative notices issued elsewhere. It will access the National Reference System to exchange critical information. That reference system, administered by the ACIC, records adverse decisions nationwide and will ensure consistent child safety decision-making across jurisdictions, which we are all hoping for.

We need to manage inconsistencies. This legislation will help us to do that. Mutual recognition ensures bans apply equally across jurisdictions. Individuals must appeal negative notices through the original jurisdiction.

I take on notice that more could be done in this space, and the NT will continue to work on further reforms to align with Standing Council of Attorneys-General agreements. The aforementioned relevant ministers will continue to work in this space so that we have not just 'one and done' it, but will have an ongoing process to ensure there is ongoing opportunity for young people and older people in the Northern Territory.

The current Act's provisions are narrow and insufficient for national information sharing; that is widely agreed and uncontested. This Bill will strengthen that information-sharing power by reducing the administrative burden and preventing forum shopping.

Forum shopping is one of these ideas that can be a throwaway when we are talking about things in legal nomenclature, but think about what forum shopping constitutes in this kind of space. You cannot have people forum shopping who are unfit for purpose and unsafe to be working in the sector, so it is important that we close loopholes, empower SAFE NT to recognise interstate negative notices and strengthen information sharing and a framework of cross-agency collaboration, which we currently do not have entirely.

Negative interstate notices will terminate NT applications. Current NT working with children clearance holders with interstate negative notices will be reassessed. This will be forward looking and contemporaneous. SAFE NT will revoke clearances when individuals pose unacceptable risks.

Regarding procedural fairness, it is important that we maintain standards of legal tests. Appeals will be made through the jurisdiction that issued the negative notice and if overturned, individuals will be able to reapply for an Ochre Card in the NT.

SAFE NT will be authorised to share and request information relevant to these clearances. That includes criminal history, court orders and identifiers. That does not, as the minister pointed out, abrogate privacy protections under the *Information Act 2002*.

In a nutshell harmonisation, consistency and alignment with the national legal framework are the outcomes of this Bill in pursuit of providing a safer landscape for our youngest constituents. As a general principle, as everyone knows, I am an advocate for aligning with national standards and finding commonality where we can. This is an area where federal, state and territory governments of all stripes have come together to say, sensibly, that we must do something in this space as a matter of urgency, priority and decency. On that basis this Bill strengthens child protection safeguards in the NT prima facie, and I am happy to support it. I am glad that we are moving forward on this at pace, ahead of some other states and territories.

This Bill delivers on the CLP government's commitment to reduce crime, which of course encompasses protecting children and addressing the possibility of crime. Ultimately, it ensures national consistency, closes our legislative loopholes and enhances community safety.

On the basis of all the above, I am happy to commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr PATEL (Casuarina): Madam Speaker, I support the Bill, which delivers on a clear commitment to strengthen child safety and better protect vulnerable children in the Northern Territory. I will speak about it in plain and simple language because the principle behind this Bill is simple: if you are not safe to work with children in one part of Australia, you should not be able to work with children anywhere else in Australia. That is what families expect, and this Bill delivers that.

Before I go further, I commend Minister Cahill for bringing forward this important reform.

The Territory can be proud of this Bill because it shows that we are serious about preventing harm, learning from national experience and getting the basics right for our children's safety.

The Territory is a unique place. We have a mobile workforce. We rely on people coming from interstate to fill important roles in schools. Minister Hersey said that we have 230 new teachers from interstate.