

Legislative Council

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CLASSIFICATION (PUBLICATIONS, FILMS AND COMPUTER GAMES) (PARENTAL GUIDANCE) AMENDMENT BILL

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (20:48):

I rise to indicate my support for the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) (Parental Guidance) Amendment Bill 2010, introduced into this place by the Hon. Michelle Lensink. This bill seeks to utilise existing consumer advice provisions in the classification act to provide parents purchasing tween or teen magazines with some guidance on the magazine's content and appropriateness for the child's age. As was highlighted at a briefing held yesterday morning—and I thank the honourable member for organising that—this bill comes before us as a result of a concerted campaign by the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia in the build-up to the March state election.

Members interjecting:

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Is that different from what I said?

Members interjecting:

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: I will correct that—YWCA, instead of YACSA. However, concerns about the sexualisation of children, particularly young girls, have rightly in my opinion long been held by parents, educators and professionals. Despite not having developed the cognitive, emotional or social tools to deal with exposure to adult and sexualised material, our children are literally bombarded with sexualised images and references and encouraged by media and advertisers to mimic adult behaviour and embrace adult ideals.

It is important that our children have a good sense of self, but they are losing the will and skills to enjoy and continue their growth through childhood to adolescence and are expected to bypass this special time in their lives and become adults long before they are capable of its comprehension. This period has been described by Dr Michael Carr-Gregg as the latency period.

We know that the seeds of body image disorders in teenagers are sown in childhood, during the formative years in which children begin to develop their understanding of status and develop their ideal body image. That research has shown that girls from the age of six desire a thinner ideal body and have an awareness of dieting to achieve this. Research has shown that this does not bode well for their adolescence, when body image concerns heighten and lead to low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders not just during adolescence but into adulthood.

Other members have drawn attention to the positive aspects of teen and tween magazines, such as articles on bullying, particularly cyber bullying, and fitness. While these are positive lessons and commendable, one cannot ignore that these magazines rely upon, if not exist entirely for, the advertising dollar. Advertisers see such magazines as an opportunity to target impressionable young girls and, unfortunately, like most advertising in the modern era, most of the adverts draw upon existing body image or attempt to create new body image or status insecurities.

With the sole intention of moving product, young girls are told that what makes them liked by their peers is the way they look and that they should look like the models wearing their

product. They are told that looking sexy is empowering and that that look is only a product or two away. Additionally, most of the articles (if you can call them that) reinforce the unhealthy messages of these adverts, with the focus on denigrating or promoting the appearance of celebrities, provide tutorials on how to be more attractive (presumably to the opposite sex), including which clothes to buy and accessories to have, etc., and on coupling relationships.

This is then reinforced by peer group pressure, with Ms Rita Princi commenting at yesterday's briefing that some of her clients, who are young girls, have been teased for dressing differently from the ideals sold by these magazines, with some being teased for not having the magazines themselves targeted by this bill.

While it is easy to target our outrage at examples of overtly sexualised images and references in tween and teen magazines, the point needs to be made that such magazines are only a small part of the problem. From TV commercials and programs to Bratz dolls, bimbo celebrities and sexualised music videos and lyrics, the sorry reality is that, in our modern society, young girls are provided with few healthy female role models.

While this parliament must do all it can to restrict sexualised material being available to, and more importantly targeted at, young people, particularly young children, unfortunately, due to the federal classification scheme, we are very limited in our ability to independently exercise control over the classifications of teen and tween magazines and other material targeted at children. Working within these parameters, the bill before us instead seeks to utilise and, I guess, guide existing consumer advice provisions in the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995.

Consumer advice needs to be distinguished from classification. Classification is the formal categorisation of material into the relevant categories of classification listed in section 15 of the act, those being unrestricted, category 1, category 2 or refused classification (in the case of publications), whereas consumer advice is intended to supplement this rigid categorisation with advice or warnings for consumers.

There is no requirement for a publisher to submit an otherwise unrestricted classification publication to the South Australian Classification Council or the Attorney-General for assessment as to whether it requires consumer advice. Instead, and presumably as the honourable member intends, the Attorney-General or the council, having received a complaint about a publication, may under section 24A of the act call in a publication for reclassification and, despite knowing full well that its classification status will not change from unrestricted, decide as part of that process that it should carry consumer advice.

The decision as to whether a publication must carry a consumer advice marking is entirely at the discretion of either the Attorney-General or the classification council and, while the bill envisages guidelines, none presently exists. While the amendments to section 21 of the act, which provide for consumer advice warnings of a PG or M marking, would appear to be operative provisions, the ability of the minister to require consumer advice, whether it be using these well-known classification markings or some other warning, already exists in the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995.

I have had little time to research this bill since the briefing yesterday, so I am unaware of how often, if at all, the South Australian Attorney-General or the South Australian Classification Council exercises the power under section 21 and requires the publication to carry a consumer advice. The Labor member responding on behalf of the government may be able to answer that question for me.

I indicate to the council that I will be moving a minor amendment (I apologise to honourable members for the short notice) which will allow the Attorney-General, when making a notice under section 21, to also make a declaration under section 19A requiring all or a specific number of subsequent editions of that publication to also carry that consumer advice. My reading of section 19A in the act, particularly the term 'classification granted', is that it presently restricts declarations to the formal classifications listed in section 15 and cannot be applied to consumer advice; hence, it would be necessary for the Attorney-General to issue a notice for each subsequent edition.

While theoretically possible, in practice this would be unworkable and would create the difficulty for the publisher to add the consumer advice after it had been released, unless they had of their own volition brought it to the attention of the Attorney-General or council prior to its release, and that would be highly unlikely. Instead, my amendment will make clear that 'declaration' under section 19A can relate to consumer advice.

With that said, I support the bill as it at least seeks to address, within the limited capabilities of this parliament, the ever-growing concern about the sexualisation of our children. As stated, we should do all we can to push back against those who, for commercial gain, exploit our children, and hopefully in doing so reclaim that precious period in a child's life: their childhood.