

Legislative Council

Wednesday, 15 October 2008, Page 311

CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (16:18): I move:

That the Rann government makes known to the Legislative Council—

1. the services provided and the expenditure thus far for those people who, as children, were abused while in the care of the state;
2. exactly what recommendations made by the Hon. E.P. Mullighan QC is the government going to implement;
3. whether or not this government will take on board the recommendations and requests of the members of the 'consumer reference group' to meet the needs of those who have lived their lives with the trauma of being abused whilst in the care of the state; and
4. what steps the government has undertaken to give those victims of abuse justice, redress and closure.

To refresh members' memories, I read a paragraph from the apology made earlier this year by the Hon. Mike Rann and the Leader of the Government in this place (Hon. Paul Holloway), as follows:

This parliament recognises the abuse of some of those who grew up in state care and the impact this has had on their lives. Only those who have been subject to this kind of abuse or neglect will ever be able to fully understand what it means to have experienced these abhorrent acts. For many of these people, governments of any persuasion were not to be trusted. Yet many have overcome this mistrust. You have been listened to and believed and this parliament now commits itself to righting the wrongs of the past. We recognise that the majority of carers have been, and still are, decent, honest people who continue to open their hearts to care for vulnerable children. We thank those South Australians for their compassion and care. We also acknowledge that some have abused the trust placed in them as carers. They have preyed upon our children. We acknowledge those courageous people who opened up their own wounds to ensure that we as a state could know the extent of these abuses. We accept that some children who were placed in the care of the government and church institutions suffered abuse. We accept these children were hurt. We accept that they were hurt through no fault of their own. We acknowledge this truth. We acknowledge that in the past the state has not protected some of its most vulnerable. By this apology we express regret for the pain that has been suffered by so many. To all those who experienced abuse in state care, we are sorry. To those who witnessed these abuses, we are sorry. To those who were not believed, when trying to report those abuses, we are sorry. For the pain shared by loved ones, husbands and wives, partners, brothers and sisters, parents and, importantly, their children, we are sorry. We commit this

parliament to be ever vigilant in its pursuit of those who abuse children. And we commit this parliament to help people overcome this, until now, untold chapter in our state's history.

As I have said, the Hon. Paul Holloway spoke those words in this place on 19 June this year (four months ago), and still the victims of those horrific times wait for word of a plan, for word of when they can begin to leave those times and memories behind and start a life where they know that members of this place, and the other, have truly shared their trauma and acknowledged it on both an emotional and psychological level and let them know that we do understand. To these victims words are cheap and actions will always speak louder. In the words of Martin Hamilton-Smith in the other place on 19 June:

The process of self-examination is always difficult. You can expect to discover things that will astound you, shame you and challenge you.

Retired judge Ted Mullighan pinpointed this when his interim findings included the following observation:

Nothing prepared me for the foul undercurrent of society revealed in evidence to the inquiry—not my life in the community or my work in the law as a practitioner and judge.

If nothing prepared a well-educated and experienced judicial officer for the stories, consider the impact of them on eight, 10 or 12 year old children. Consider the impact on a child who is traumatised by the act of removal from their family and the stark institutional surroundings that replaced it. Consider the impact on a child when he or she is used, abused and then silenced. I doubt whether we can ever fully understand the searing emotional pain that these children felt.

The Premier told the house that the Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry took evidence from 792 people and detailed 826 allegations involving 922 perpetrators. We may wish to consider those numbers for just a moment. They represent a mountain of human heartache.

It would seem that those who belong to South Australia's own stolen generation should not expect too much out of the ordinary as follow-up to the apology made to them in this place, and the other, because in the four months that have passed, and with the promise of \$190 million over the next four years, little will be set aside to ensure that the victims of abuse at the hands of the state will heal in a timely and respectable manner.

The victims are dissatisfied with the services that have been made available thus far, and many now languish after having had to face up and tell their story over and over again during the course of the inquiry. As members of this parliament, surely it is not unreasonable for us to expect more than just consolation for the efforts made by the victims; that merely to say thank you for coming forward is not enough. To say that many have overcome their distrust of government is a far cry from the truth. What many did was to take a risk—a chance, if you like—to make their stories known in the hope that perhaps the cold heart of parliament had changed and that action would be taken to assist them to move on with their lives as best as possible.

We have seen that a minimal level of action has been taken. There was the provision of minimal counselling services to those who could manage to get themselves to the appointments that were made available only for them to see and hear from the

counsellors themselves how over-worked and over-stressed they, too, were. I have a letter from a person who gave evidence. I make the point that the reason for this motion is to keep us, as members in this and the other house, very much aware of the post-Mullighan inquiry. We have asked people to overcome their post-traumatic stress disorder, to open up these wounds again; and they again feel that basically they are being hung out to dry. This letter states:

I am a single mother of two boys in my early 40s who at the age of 12 years was placed under the guardianship of the minister until the age of 15 years. It was because of my experiences at that time that I came to give evidence to the Mullighan inquiry some two years ago. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you the experience I have had since giving this evidence. I became aware of the inquiry into the sexual assault of children in state care through counselling I had undertaken to try and deal with the impact of the abuse as a child and the impact it had on me as an adult.

Although I was reluctant to tell my story to the commission, I decided that I had a moral obligation to all victims past, present and future to tell of my experience with the view that things would change within the system and help would be given to victims. During the initial contact with the inquiry, I was told that I would be given help and giving evidence would be the first step toward healing. I have no doubt that the words were genuine. People were just unprepared for what would happen when people unlocked the memories of traumatic and devastating events.

I did not sleep for days prior to giving evidence and the weight seemed to be falling off me. Food didn't seem to stay down. When I left the building I was a child abused all over again. The memories I had spent a lifetime suppressing were now playing like a rerun movie. Constantly the shame and self-disgust I had lived with as a child were now my constant companions again, and the help I thought was coming never actually came. I realised after some time that no-one had any idea of what help was needed, and no strategies had been put in place to deal with the end result of the emotional hell victims would now be going through.

It took months for me to actually come face to face with a therapist, and then she was only being paid for 26 weeks. It is now years later and my wonderful therapist still sees me for free. If she could she would tell you that I am intelligent, spirited, passionate and good hearted—that I have a lot to offer society if only I could stop being afraid of it. We both know that it will take years of personal growth to achieve that. Around the same time, I was put onto post-care services, which came as a result of the Mullighan inquiry. As usual, contact came only if I initiated it, and with no outgoing phone line to ring I had to rely on a walk to a public phone box.

The public phone box is nearly one kilometre away and more often than not the phone would not be working. As a sufferer of post-traumatic stress syndrome I can find it overwhelming to leave my house, often having panic attacks when I do. Places such as department stores or office buildings can make me physically ill, and yet the services I get offered usually entail me having to make contact and trying to get appointments days or weeks after needing the help. The damage done to me as a child has formed the basis of who I am as an adult, meaning that I have no sense of situations as others do.

My self-esteem is so low I am unable to function within society without someone physically guiding me, and who is going to do that? My family disowned me years ago. My friends are almost as dysfunctional as I am, and my kids look to me for guidance and yet somehow they are still great kids. They are also my reason for going on in life, because life as I know it is full of pain, self-doubt and emotional extremities that no-one seems to understand so, of course, can't possibly help me. We are a special group of victims with a special set of needs. So in closing I would like to ask you and the other representatives of our government: do they think we are worthwhile people who deserve to be treated with compassion, and will they help us to help ourselves?

It was a brave thing to come forward and put themselves in front of strangers to bare their souls and tell their secrets: secrets that were kept out of fear for so many years. The brave people who came forward had many fears that had to be overcome in order for them to tell their stories of abuse. Many feared retribution, many feared being judged, many feared being shunned and others feared losing their minds completely if they should risk talking about what had been done to them as children.

Those brave enough to participate in the Mullighan inquiry also feared being let down again. They feared being used as a political football and feared reliving the disappointment and anguish of not being believed yet again. It seems that many feel their fears were more than justified. In the words of one victim:

My concern during and after the Mullighan inquiry was that the counselling I received was good as far as it went, very helpful in fact, but it never took into account my experience as a care leaver. The counselling was through Respond SA, but my experience being a care leaver was both like and unlike other people who had experienced child sexual abuse. I would much have preferred being with a counsellor who understood and shared experiences of care leavers, and I would have preferred being with a support group comprised of care leavers as well.

The other concern I had was that when I urgently needed counselling at the end of 2007, and contacted post-care services, I was unprepared for the fact that post-care services staff were not trained as counsellors but had to scout around town to find a counsellor who would suit my needs. Eventually I was referred to someone, but the delay was so extensive that I had given up and decided to sort things out for myself. My experience in talking with other care leavers is that some have been unprepared for the tidal waves of emotion that threatened to engulf them as they now begin to unpack the pain that has often been repressed. Sometimes they expressed the need to talk with professionals who understand their experience, but find that professionals are not really equipped.

How can this government say that it is sorry and then provide less than basic support for the people who came forward? We had three years during the Mullighan inquiry to prepare for this. The end result could be no surprise. The outcomes of people coming and talking of these abuses could have come as no surprise and there should have been an interim plan put in place.

When we called for the Mullighan inquiry we should have from day one been implementing trained people that these people could see as soon as they had given

evidence so that there was a contact point and a flow on from this. But, no, here we are now three years and eight months into it and people are still struggling. To find a person is not trained as a counsellor within the post-care services hardly inspired trust or guaranteed the desired outcome of the healing of those victims. Surely this government, after grabbing the headlines of being big enough to apologise for the mistakes of a government department that to this day may well be repeating the terrible mistakes of the past, can at least employ trained and qualified counsellors to front up for the task of dealing with those who live with the pain and suffering caused through decades of inaction and negligence.

I have another story, which should give all members some idea of the ongoing and long-lasting effects for some of these people, because not one of these stories I have here today is isolated, and not one is unique; it is just different people with their different experiences. We have to accept that the Mullighan inquiry was a good thing. To have these secrets brought out needed to be done, but we cannot now think that our job is done. We cannot take our time with what we will do for the victims of child sexual abuse while in state care. They are running out of time. They are desperate people. This is a story from a person who I will call 'J'. He says:

It was one of those days when I didn't want to talk to people. I just wanted to be left alone —

remember, this is post Mullighan—

It was a grey, cold day in the city of churches. I walked down Hindley Street. The place has changed. It has been many years since I said I would ever come here again. All my old squats are gone: new shops are everywhere. All the old hang-outs are long gone — just their shells remain with different faces, but the memories are so strong it feels like the street is still part of my blood. The doorways I used to sleep in, the smells and aromas set off flashbacks and instincts in my brain. I felt like a homing pigeon coming home. I had a lot of good times living here as a kid and many bad times. I was a ward of the state, on the run most of the time, and in those days I was not the only kid hanging out there. Many kids were there: all surviving on the street, living any way they could. They were there through family and systems abuse. We all had our tricks to getting money to survive: begging was one of them. A pie or a pasty was under \$1 then. Some nights the street had kids on every corner begging for food, cigarettes, drugs or money. Many kids sold their souls there as well. The street was a meat market for the predators and pimps.

The things we did to survive! We were so young. We did not know how we were being abused by those who so cunningly took advantage of our situation. We could not even fathom how it would leave scars so deep in us; that the nightmares and memories would last a lifetime. This street had all the seven deadly sins in it. It took many lives in many ways.

Strolling past the big M on the corner of Hindley and Bank streets I turned towards the railway station and an old friend walked past. This blew me away. He was still walking the streets after 30-plus years and going through bins. He was hanging out in town many years before my time in the street. This just saddened me even more. I walked up to him and called his name. I was one of only a few that this person ever spoke to. No-one ever knew his name except me. He turned and looked shocked that someone recognised him. He realised

who I was after a good long stare. The feelings were racing through my mind. I quickly opened my wallet and said to him, ' My friend, the system is still failing you. You can have whatever is in my wallet.' I had two \$50 notes. He took both of them. Immediately after that my eyes hit the ground. I was in tears and I couldn't even look him in the face as I did not want him to see my tears running down my face. I mumbled, 'Take care of yourself , my friend,' and turned towards the railway station.

The day rapidly went from grey to very dark after that. I walked over the River Torrens bridge on King William Road and looked at the toilet block on Jolley's Lane. Many kids hung around there in the old days , trying to find places to sleep late at night. This was a dangerous place to sleep. You were often woken by men playing with themselves, enticing you with money to come with them to their houses and with cold frozen backs most of us went with them.

Well, with all those old memories I really needed something I had given away a long time ago— alcohol. So I quickly found the nearest pub with an auto teller machine and started drinking heavily. I found the need to gamble and sat at a poker machine and started playing. However, losing was more like it.

Sitting beside me were three old fellows ya k king away. I have big ears and don't mind old fellow stories, so I listened to what they were saying. The subject was the Mullighan inquiry and the wards of the state. They were also talking about things that happened to them in the past. Their stories were not too bad. They had homes and families in their day , whereas we did not. Some of their comments were along the lines of, 'They expect us taxpayers to pay for those rotten criminal kids ; I would have snotted my kids if they were like that. They ' re still alive today so they must have been treated all right ; t he joke of it ! ' This subject went for another 10 minutes with them knocking us wards. The last comment was, 'I reckon they are all liars ! '

After this I was boiling. I had to say something to these silly old fools and I had to keep my cool in my intoxicated state. So I stood up proudly and said, 'I am one of th e forgotten Australians you are talking about. You think because of what happened to you we do not deserve compensation . Well, let me tell you something fellows. Your generation denied what was happening to us ; y ou closed your eyes and let it happen and you say you are not to blame as well. You are idiots and you should be ashamed. Until you have walked in our shoes and walked down our paths you know little about us and our lives. You are here in the pubs spending your government pension with obviously not a worry in the world, knocking the disadvantaged and underprivileged.' I went on to tell them, ' I t was in papers many times back then and in your face when you could have done something about it. But what did most of the public do ? They closed their eyes and looked the other way or abused us. Yes, old fellows, you are to blame, too, along with the government . ' That shut them up!

That is the fear that a lot of these people had before they came to give evidence—that they would not be believed, yet again. Obviously, there is a tone in the general public that this will now be a taxpayer burden and people are doubting that this ever happened. As part of the Mullighan inquiry, earlier measures should have been taken to inform the general public of the horrific things that happened, rather than trying to

hide behind an inquiry. People need to know this is happening in South Australia. It was happening then, and it is happening now.

There is a trend that I see repeating itself over and over, and that is that perhaps those in positions of responsibility may truly believe that if you can fake compassion you have got it made. As I have said many times in this place, you simply cannot fool all the people all the time and, over time, the shallow words, the empty eyes and the hard-heartedness comes through, and those who may have been fooled once become wiser eventually. The tendency when one feels they are not being heard is to talk louder and, if the victims have to speak any louder than they already have spoken, I imagine that many will have difficulty holding their head up or meeting their gaze in the future.

We know from the Mullighan report that some of those who perpetrated these crimes against children were not strangers to many who occupy seats in this place and the other. We know that, although it was hard for some to believe that those in positions of trust had betrayed our most vulnerable, many years passed before anything was done. In fact, the layer of denial was so thick that Ki Meekins literally had to shout from the rooftops to be heard, and he did that for many years in an effort to fix the system, to be a leader of a subculture of hurt and damaged people and hopefully prevent the same thing continuing to hurt future generations of children. Ki Meekins now has a following of people who are slowly but surely coming together. They have begun to mobilise, and they are now starting to find their voice. The message to parliament on both sides is simple: enough is enough and near enough is not good enough.

It is not as though we in this state have to develop and implement a plan for redress without a template, because it would be naive to believe that this is the only state that has had to acknowledge that such atrocities against children have occurred. The Queensland government has introduced a redress scheme to provide ex gratia payments to people who experienced abuse or neglect as children in Queensland institutions. Talking about the redress scheme, that government's own document states:

This scheme completes the government's response to recommendation 39 of the 'Ford e Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions'.

How long will it be before we can say we have completed our responsibility? We have met our responsibility, and this is the final response needed. We have heard nothing—no plan. We have had nothing laid before us to say that we are onto this, we are moving forward with this and we are taking pro-active measures to make sure these people are looked after.

It seems to be a habit in South Australia to procrastinate and be reluctant to follow. What do we think is so different about the needs of South Australian victims from those in Queensland or any other state for that matter? If there is a template for how to begin to meet those needs, then surely we are duty bound to follow. If there is a template already in place then surely we have no reason to procrastinate, unless of course there is a mindset that our abused are less in need or deserve less, and I am sure that neither the Premier nor the Leader of the Government in this council entertain for one second the thought that our victims do not deserve whatever it takes to make up for the years of living the nightmare they have lived.

We all appreciate that such things take time, but we should also appreciate and understand the urgency of putting a plan in place to at least begin; and providing services with (as alleged) unqualified staff in the roles of counsellors is far from adequate. In fact, to some it may appear to be quite macabre in nature.

Professor Freda Briggs has been a champion to many people in this state who have found themselves betrayed by the government of the day, elected to serve and protect their rights. Members of the Consumer Reference Group—a curious name for a victim group, to say the least—have asked for a one stop shop; a place where they can receive the counselling and healing they believe they need. They want to be able to go to a place that provides the physical, psychological, emotional and perhaps even spiritual support they need. They want a healing centre—perhaps a Freda Briggs Centre—that can be promoted to the many victims who came forward and those who may not have come forward but who are in dire need of assistance. I have been told by some that financial remuneration itself will not suffice. In fact, for many who receive a large sum of money in recompense, it could surely be their undoing because of their drug problems and lifestyle.

We cannot hold back on this. We cannot scrimp and save at the expense of the victims of this abuse any longer. Surely we agree that they have already paid a heavy price for being born to parents who were unable to care for them or who simply came to the state for support, only to have their children removed and exposed to a far greater risk than if they had remained with their family.

For those victims, the Consumer Reference Group is requesting what they refer to as a gold card. This card would be provided to victims of abuse and it would be used to pay for the services they need—very similar, in fact, to the cards given to ex-servicemen who receive health care and other services to treat injuries and trauma received while serving this country in times of war. No-one could argue that the people who would be entitled to such a gold card have not fought a war. They have fought for their very lives when least able to defend themselves. They are heroes in my mind for the fact that they still draw breath, because the reality is that many gave up and suicided because they simply could not live with the pain any longer.

We apologised and, of course, we did not do it without media attention. Our Premier, Mr Rann, closely followed our Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, both apologising for the inhumane and unthinkable actions that occurred by governments that put their trust in the wrong people and whose judgment left a lot to be desired, not to mention the absence of morality and humanity. Now, what do we do without media?

I have been given many letters of support for the efforts Mr Ki Meekins has made in trying to obtain justice for the children abused in state care, yet it seems that since the day of apology we have slipped into a state of complacency. Perhaps we are naive enough to think that saying sorry is as good as actually showing we are sorry. I have a press release of the Liberal Party entitled 'Liberals welcome youth runaways recommendation' in which Ms Vickie Chapman has welcomed the recommendation for a secure care proposal contained in the Mullighan report. Yet, where is the persistence? Why are we not pursuing this? Why are we not raising this matter day after day until these recommendations are put in place?

It seems that we have all gone very quiet on pursuing time lines to deliver these recommendations. Our 24-hour news cycle sees us and the general public so bombarded with issues that a story is only good for a short time. The public, it seems,

is able to forget from one day to another the trials and tribulations of our fellow South Australians and we, as politicians, sadly, take advantage of an inability to remain engaged with issues of great importance. This 24-hour cycle allows governments to take their own sweet time to deliver on promises, because in six months, maybe 12 months, or even in a pre-election year, the issue can be pulled out of the box and dusted off, and perhaps there will be another media frenzy to be had.

I acknowledge with reluctance and sadness that this is just how politics is played but, for an issue such as this, surely an exception could be made. With a matter as serious as victims of abuse at the hands of government—children being abused—surely we can skip the politics and get to the solutions, spend the money and give the victims what they need. I have no doubt that discussions have occurred within the Labor Party on what to do, when to do it and so forth, and I acknowledge that it will be no small task to put in place what is needed. What I hope is that the government is listening to what the victims have to say and that what it intends to do is in line with what is being expressed.

I also hope that the government is not delaying for fear that if a plan is put in place some of the estimated 300,000 yet to come forward will do so and then we will see a budget blowout for this particular plan. No matter whether or not they participated in the inquiry, the abuse they suffered is still as real as it is for those who came forward, and the effect it has had on their lives just as devastating. It is hard to believe that the outcome was not expected or the extent of the abuse was underestimated, given the numerous inquiries and papers written about the department of many names. It seems, Mr President—and please forgive my cynicism—that Families SA has had as many name changes as it has had reports and inquiries over the years; and each time the name is changed it has sounded a little more user-friendly, and one only has to ponder the expense that such a name change costs to wonder how much money could have been put directly into fixing the problem in the beginning.

It does seem, though, that perhaps the penny has dropped since the Mullighan inquiry that changing the name does not solve the problem and, eventually, action is needed. I do not envy the new minister (Hon. Jennifer Rankine) and the problems she has inherited—problems that are not unique to any one government, but problems that will take a very long time to overcome. The Hon. Jennifer Rankine may be able to do what others have not—that is, change the culture of a government department that sends a message to families that nothing less than perfect will do.

This is just a little ironic, given the state's own record of parenting, and one would hope that the government will at least give some thought to the fact that children in the care of the minister cannot become 'street fodder' any longer and that perhaps the state has a long way to go before it can be held up as the example of the perfect parent. Until that happens, it may be far more efficient to assist and support parents who want to do better; then assist and support children who are with parents who, because of their choices, cannot do better; and assist and support foster carers to do their job rather than have to work at the bidding of a department that seems ideologically opposed to the concept of family. Of course, in order to effect change, one has to acknowledge that there is a problem in the first place, and this seems to be the biggest hurdle to overcome.

In the words of Richard Nixon on the Watergate scandal, 'It is not the crime that kills you—it's the cover-up.' Perhaps it would do us all good in the future to repeat this phrase as a daily mantra because, eventually, it gets all too hard to deny the truth.

Until I came to this place in 2006, I had seen the devastation that can occur in the lives of people because of government inaction and ideology. The effect of what we do in here is often missed by us and we are therefore able to keep making the same mistakes in the belief that all is well on the Good Ship *Lollypop*.

The abuse of children in state care, and the part played by government employees, foster carers and ministers of the day gone by as well as others, cannot be swept under the carpet and we cannot make the promise that it will never happen again because, in our slowness to act, we are almost slapping victims in the face, kicking them in the guts, and abusing them all over again by providing services that are less than acceptable or difficult to access.

The slowness in developing and implementing a plan is costing people dearly—people who have already paid the ultimate price of betrayal, the ultimate price of being disregarded and thrown onto the rubbish heap. Many of the people of whom I speak were not only betrayed by their pseudo-parent, the state, but they also suffered betrayal by siblings who led them to the dark side, the underbelly of Adelaide. Those who took their small brothers and sisters into this dark world were also victims of abuse who were recruited to recruit.

Some of them today are in prison for other crimes. Some are addicted to drugs and alcohol and some are dead, but their memory lives on with those siblings who, through no fault or choice of their own, were left to carry the legacy that denial leaves behind. It is time for this parliament to ask the questions and get the answers on behalf of those who have shown good faith in us—faith enough to tell their stories and drag up those memories and emotions that have paralysed them for most of their lives.

We have to be their voice in here. We have to make the demands on their behalf because now it has been taken out of their hands. They are now at the mercy of the Premier and the Treasurer to make good on the recommendations of Ted Mullighan to metaphorically bring these children home. It is time for this state, by way of government, to hold out a hand and give them what they need, to nourish their souls with the understanding that what they need is support for a very long time, and to let them know that their presence is not a threat or an inconvenience because we all share the responsibility of knowing that eyes were blind, ears were deaf, and the truth was just too bitter to speak.

They have to know now that the pseudo-parent, the state, that they trusted decades ago is no more, that these times are different and things will be better. In 2006, when I came to this place, I was shocked to hear what Mr Ki Meekins had to say. I have seen this man tirelessly take action to bring our secrets out into the open. He has conducted himself with honour and integrity, and I cannot help but think that perhaps there have been some who hoped that he would just give up and go away as so many others have.

His efforts go back many years, and I have a letter that he wrote to the Hon. Trevor Griffin when he was attorney-general at a time that I believe was the beginning of Ki Meekins' public quest. Even in 1999, Mr Meekins showed commonsense in his request, and even his handwriting reflects the fact that he was thoughtful and careful about how to start at the beginning and make changes to our laws that would see an end to the sexual abuse of children being viewed as nothing more than an unlawful act.

I believe that child sexual abuse should have a category of its own with a minimum sentence imposed. It is no secret that there have been many occasions when the courts have been seen to fall a long way short of public expectation when vile acts of abuse against children have been brought before them. Mr Meekins has pursued his quest for justice, and who in this place could argue with him that he would not know better what is an adequate punishment for the soul-destroying pain that so many have endured?

I would like to read out Mr Meekins' letter to the Hon. Trevor Griffin to show on the public record that this man, Mr Meekins, has for a long time held a vision of a bigger picture, a vision of what would be needed for the future to take a very different path to the past. His letter states:

Dear Mr K. Trevor Griffin,

I humbly refer to your letter dated the 26th day of May concerning rape offences against a child.

In particular 'unlawful sexual intercourse' with any person under the age of 12 years. As a victim of rape myself, I take the view that the use of the words 'unlawful sexual intercourse' must be changed to rape in the case of rape against a person under the age of 12 and that a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment be brought against the offender.

I am of the belief that an indemnity exists that stops any chance of a victim of rape seeking justice three years after the atrocity of rape, a heinous crime undeserving of the said politically correct term 'unlawful sexual intercourse'

... (Truth in sentencing) for crimes against children in South Australia as presently it shows me there is an underlying risky disregard for humanity's most precious resource—our children. Society demands a 'true zero tolerance' of any person convicted of rape of a child under the age of 12 years to be given a retailored mandatory sentence of life imprisonment.

I do trust my above concerns as a victim reflect s and ensure s 'rea ddressing current penalties and sentences' undertaken in this government's continual review of our societ ies attitude towards those that choose to prey on children for their own evil gratification.

Yours sincerely,

Ki Meekins.

I acknowledge that it was the Hon. Andrew Evans who first took up the plea of the victims of abuse and who pursued legislative amendments to allow victims of years gone by to make their cases known in order to seek justice. I am sure that all members here are grateful that he was prepared to take the first step in parliament to lend support to victims.

I am also well aware that the former leader of the opposition, Hon. Rob Kerin, also fought long and hard for a royal commission into this situation. I acknowledge that the actions of both these people resulted in the Mullighan inquiry and its recommendations. All that is left to do now is to develop, fund and implement them in order for this parliament to be able to live with the satisfaction and clear conscience that we have met our responsibilities and, in doing so, guaranteed that the victims of

the past, present and future will have somewhere to go and someone to go to at the onset of such abuse, rather than having to wait decades.

The social cost has been devastating, and I do not think that we will ever fully comprehend the number of people who have been affected and the lives that have been destroyed; it is too much for the human psyche really to comprehend. At the same time, I am hopeful that the shame of what has occurred and the stories that have been told serve to make us all aware that we can never be too vigilant, that we can never be too careful and that we can never be too content with things appearing to be all right.

Most of all, we can never be content just to take the word of others that everything is okay, that people are not telling the truth and that they are vexatious, belligerent or whatever other words are used to label them. These are the mistakes we made in the past, and we certainly cannot make them again in the future. We can and should put in place checks and balances and client services that are open and accountable. We can and should put in place policies and procedures that provide protection for families and children. We can and should develop screening mechanisms that will detect anyone—anyone—who has a tendency to prey on children so that they find it impossible to be employed in a position of trust. This requires far more than a police check: it requires a forensically tried and proven method to sniff out these subhumans and prevent them from having access to children. We must do this, regardless of the cost, because our children are our future.

The question that remains in the minds of many is: does the government accept that the child abuse scandal of South Australia was, at best, preventable and, at worst, deserving of earlier acknowledgement and intervention? As I said earlier, merely saying sorry on matters such as this is nowhere near enough.

On 30 September 2004, in reference to victims of sexual abuse, a senior member of this government made this comment in parliament, 'Do you want to listen to loonies and ask questions on their behalf?' Such a comment hardly instils confidence that the government of the day has a great deal of empathy for the atrocities committed against victims of child sex abuse. It should be acknowledged, known and on record that this comment is still alive and well in the minds of many victims and that it has led to a high degree of scepticism as to whether or not the government will do its utmost to make good on its promises.

We should also show to Mr Ted Mullighan the respect that he deserves for conducting an inquiry that must have been physically, emotionally and psychologically draining. I leave this matter in the hands of members of this council to respond to and express the wish that the motion will be voted on in the November sitting of parliament.

Debate adjourned on motion of Hon. J. Gazzola.

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CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (21:10): I thank all the members in this place who have contributed to this motion. I must say that, for the first time in the 2½ years I have been in this place, I have a warm heart knowing that the government has not chosen to hide under the desk about this particular issue and the struggles these victims of abuse in state care are still suffering and the load they are now carrying. I was heartened to hear, as were other members in this place, the Hon. Mr Hunter's response and the fact that the government has put some of the things in place that these people may need to move forward in their lives.

Although the government has done the right thing and has promised to do the right thing, I agree with the comments made by the Hon. Mark Parnell and the Hon. Robert Brokenshire that we have to keep a watchful eye on this. I have been involved in a number of parliamentary inquiries on the other side as a witness. I have seen the great amount of effort that has gone into collecting that evidence and collating it into a report, and the media that is done on those reports, only for those reports never to be seen or heard of again. That cannot happen with this one.

Although the government has done some of the groundwork on this, I ask whether the government is actually listening to the victims and taking into account what they believe and know they need because, intrinsically, every person who has suffered trauma knows what they need in order to heal.

I do not want to be cynical on this night, because I think it is history making that everyone—the cross-benches, the government and the opposition—is in agreement that a move forward is on the way. However, I cannot see the government implementing the things that the people who have come to me, written to me or phoned me have mentioned, such as a universal gold card.

When you hear the victims talking about how that gold card could be implemented and used, their views about what they want from that are really quite sensible. They know that, if a gold card were to be given to some of the people who are involved in this recovery process, those people would have a tendency to abuse it. One of the recommendations made to me by one of the people is that these people need to sign a sort of a contract that, if they receive the gold card and they have been involved in criminal activity or whatever, they have to accept that they will have to change their ways in order to have access to the services of that gold card.

I understand that this is a complex issue, and that this is a simplistic approach, but it shows that those people are trying to do the right thing. They are not standing with their hand out now, demanding endless amounts of support, money or whatever under the illusion that they are the things that will help them to heal. What these people want is the right kind of therapies and the right kind of trained staff. In my speech, I mentioned that the services being offered by Post Care are simply not meeting the needs of these people. We need to make sure that the services that are in place are achieving the desired outcome of healing for the people who are accessing those services.

One of the big things the group wants is their own healing centre, and I think this has been agreed to across the board at various levels. They want a one stop shop. So many of these people cannot leave their home. They are agoraphobics and a lot of them have other phobias as well that would prevent them from keeping appointments with psychologists, in offices and so on. We need to understand the needs of these people

to feel safe. They have a great level of difficulty trusting government; they have a great level of difficulty trusting anybody, and we cannot do this as a one size fits all measure. We need to look at this on a case by case basis. These people need serious case management plans because there are going to be many different people with many different needs.

I hope and pray that the government is going to take that into consideration and is going to consult not only with the reference group that has been formed but another group now that has also come from that that is looking specifically at a way forward for the victims. I thank everybody—I thank the government and the opposition—and I intend to keep this on the agenda. If I am not getting reasonable feedback from the victims of kids abused in state care, you can bet your dollar that there will be another action taken in this place that will not just be a motion. I leave this with the council and I thank members for their contributions.

Motion carried.