

## Legislative Council

Tuesday, 27 September 2011, Page 3900

### TEENAGE RUNAWAYS

**The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (15:57):** I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the minister representing the Minister for Police questions about police handling of teenage runaways.

Leave granted.

**The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON:** It is with regret that I again need to rise to discuss the case of a runaway teenager, where the parents certainly feel that the police failed to assist their family to be reunited when their 15-year-old son ran away from home. He did so after being grounded for going against what were reasonable parental controls and on the insistence of his girlfriend of the same age, who comes from what can be described only as a dysfunctional background. Early on Easter Sunday morning, the boy arranged to be collected by his girlfriend's stepfather, who then drove the two to the girlfriend's brother's place.

After calling the police, the mother was informed of her son's location. She wanted to see her son, and it was arranged by the police for two officers to meet the mother at the brother's home, several hours drive from where they were living. The police informed the mother that the brother was well known to them, with all that that implies. The girlfriend had previously disclosed that her brother had sexually abused her.

At this point in time, it would have been appropriate for the police to advise the parents that they could access or apply for a child protection restraining order, but that was not done. Instead, the mother was informed that, while she could speak to her son, if she attempted to take him home, she would be arrested and charged with assault—that is, the mother of a 15-year-old boy. Unfortunately, having been told that no law required him to go home, he did not do so.

From thereon, the parents reported that they were treated with suspicion by police, who basically implied that the son must have had a reason to run away from home. The police inaction is traceable to a fiction that is seemingly being created that children at the age of 15 have a right to leave home. This was the standard refrain and something the mother became increasingly frustrated with hearing. Further, the police seemingly presumed that the boy had good reason for doing so, despite making no inquiries at all about the safety or suitability of the family home.

This attitude is not exclusive to police, the school counsellor at Whyalla school and the nursing staff at Whyalla hospital. After the young boy attempted suicide, the mother was contacted and asked for parental consent to medical treatment and then was told that she could not go to the hospital to see her son.

**The PRESIDENT:** I remind the honourable member that matters of interest are tomorrow.

**The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON:** Mr President, this isn't any longer than any other member's question.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think it is, quite a bit.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Families SA are among the myriad others enabling, if not encouraging, this boy's choice to run away from home. Our police can and should be doing more to investigate these situations and working to reunite families where no abuse or neglect has occurred. My questions to the police minister are:

1. Does the minister agree that 15-year-old children do not have a right to leave home and that police were wrong to inform both the mother and her son that there was such a law?
2. As I have asked previously (and had no answer), does the minister concede that this parliament's intent of empowering parents to protect teenage runaways is being undermined by what is clearly police reluctance to acknowledge the existence of parental rights?
3. Have the police and courts been briefed yet on the application and intent of the child harbouring laws passed in this place in 2009?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Public Sector Management, Minister for the Status of Women, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Government Enterprises, Minister for Gambling) (16:00): I thank the member for her most important questions and will refer them to the Minister for Police in another place and bring back a response.

The PRESIDENT: I must remind honourable members that today there have been a couple of long explanations. There has also been a lot of asking for ministers to give opinions in their answers, and that is not on. Most of you have been here long enough now to know standing orders. If you do not, I remind you that you should refresh yourself of them. The Hon. Mr Wortley.