

WEST PILBARA PLAN

95. Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS to the Minister for Child Protection:

I refer to the minister's West Pilbara plan announced this week. Can the minister assure the house that no children living in Roebourne are currently residing with or in the care of any convicted paedophile or any person charged with child sex offences?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

I thank the member for the question. I made a brief ministerial statement on this issue this morning. I would have done so earlier in the week but I was ill and out of the chamber. I note that the opposition put out a press release to that effect in response to our West Pilbara plan, of which I am proud. I am particularly proud of the response we have had from a number of senior Aboriginal members in the community. One was from a Noongar woman and a respected Noongar leader, acknowledging that we had the right balance in putting proper protections in place and acknowledging the problems that exist through the West Pilbara, including Roebourne, and the need for government to do its work better, particularly in cooperating across a range of different agencies—whether child protection, police, health, education and the like—to not only work more effectively with not-for-profits but also empower the community. There is no better safeguard for child safety or any sort of functioning in a community than the community itself taking ownership of those issues and being proactive. Many in that community want to do just that. We want to work in partnership with the leadership in the Roebourne community, and I plan to go up there next week to continue that work. I would also like to acknowledge the member for Pilbara who spends time—I know he volunteers at times—in Roebourne doing work on the high school and the like.

In regard to the question of whether there could be perpetrators living with victims or having a living arrangement where children might be exposed, I take that matter very seriously. If the opposition has any information that would lead us to think that that was the case, it should come forward with it and not use it as a political football.

Several members interjected.

Ms S.F. McGURK: When looking at this issue, most people appreciate that it is very complex. It is not just a matter of saying in a simplistic way that there are outside perpetrators who come in of whom we need to be aware. In fact, there is a normalisation of sex abuse throughout that community. It sometimes occurs within families; it is sometimes harmful sexual behaviours being exercised by children, so we have to be cautious about how we deal with these issues if we want them to be brought into the light and dealt with in a productive way not only in the criminal sense, but also in the therapeutic sense, particularly for the victims.

To answer the member's question, we are doing everything we can to ensure that children are safe in that community. If there is any risk at all, we act in response to that. Child protection workers will go and investigate. If the child is in the care of the department, we have certain responsibilities under the act. We take that responsibility very seriously, and we do not need to be lectured by the opposition about our responsibilities in that regard. We have responded very thoroughly. I give credit to the police and child protection workers on the ground who, through their cooperation, tenacity and building relationships in that community, have exposed the extent of the child abuse. It has meant that members of the community felt confident in coming forward and talking about those issues. I repeat that if the opposition has any reason to say that children are in an unsafe situation, I urge opposition members to come forward, approach my office—any member here can do that—and we will take that up as a matter of urgency.