

SEX OFFENDERS - PUBLIC REGISTER

473. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

Does the Premier or his government support the notion that parents should be able to find out whether they have a paedophile living next door to them, or nearby, so that they are able to better protect their children?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. I recognise the concerns that people have about this issue. The state government is obviously of the view that community safety is an absolutely top priority for government. I do not think that our commitment to protecting children can be questioned. We have demonstrated that in a number of ways, including the \$70 million response to the Gordon inquiry, and our tough approach on these issues, no matter where they may be occurring. We have also introduced laws designed to lock away serial paedophiles for life.

The public register is a very difficult and complex issue. We take advice on this issue from the police. We believe that the professionalism of the police and their handling of these matters should provide us with a good guideline. The police advise us that a public paedophile register would be counterproductive, because experience in other jurisdictions shows that offenders tend to disappear if their identities are made public. They go underground and become harder to track. That is the experience all over the world in every jurisdiction in which these registers have been put into place. All sorts of problems are spurred.

Police also warn against the prospect of out-of-control vigilante groups inadvertently targeting innocent parties.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Where is the evidence?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I could not have timed that interjection better if I had scripted it. My friend the Leader of the Opposition is the evidence. Everybody in this chamber will remember what happened when the Leader of the Opposition identified a person in his home town of Manjimup as being a serial rapist. He incorrectly identified a man in his home town as being a serial rapist when he said that the fact that a convicted repeat rapist was residing only 400 metres from a senior high school and a primary school in his electorate was a matter that he thought was of greatest importance. That was one of the worst lapses of judgment that we have ever witnessed in this Parliament - for which I think it would be fair to say that generally the Leader of the Opposition has been forgiven.

The problem with these sorts of registers is that that issue of mistaken identity occurs over and over again. Very recently, a businessman in Albany self-identified as a victim of such mistaken identity, because he bore the same name as a person who had been identified as a rapist or violent offender through newspaper articles. That man in Albany said that he now had a very strong view that publicly naming people, or placing on a register people's names, for this sort of offence would be a mistake, and his own experience was living testimony for him. All over the world we have seen what can go horribly wrong when people are mistakenly identified as offenders of this type. Thanks, if I can put it that way, to the hasty and very poor judgment of our own Leader of the Opposition, we have seen what can happen right here in Western Australia.

Yesterday there was a demonstration by the police at the front of Parliament House. It was a very good demonstration about an industrial matter. A question was raised about our level of respect for the WA Police. This again is another example. I respect the judgment of the professional law enforcement officers of this state who say that such a register would be counterproductive in the worst possible way.