



Mike Gaffney MLC

Legislative Council

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Electorate: Mersey

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**CHILDREN, YOUNG PERSONS AND THEIR FAMILIES AMENDMENT BILL 2009 (No. 12)**  
Second Reading

**Madam PRESIDENT** - Before calling the honourable member for Mersey to make his inaugural speech, I will remind honourable members it is convention that the honourable member making an inaugural speech is heard in silence, without interjection, and I know the usual courtesy will be extended to the honourable member for Mersey.

[11.59 a.m.]

**Mr GAFFNEY** (Mersey - Inaugural) - Thank you, Madam President, and I also thank the honourable member for Rumney for the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Amendment Bill. It is one that I fully support and the issues are very important to the residents of my electorate of Mersey and indeed to all communities in Tasmania.

Madam President, may I congratulate you on your elevation to the President's position, and I offer you my full support. I would like to thank my fellow members who have warmly welcomed me to this role. I greatly appreciate their offers of assistance.

Since my first sitting day a week or so ago I have been exceptionally heartened as a member of the upper House to witness individual members present their cases with passion and authenticity. I find the art of interjection with positive and supportive comments very commendable and worthwhile. I firmly believe that members of parliament need to uphold values that their position affords and our communities expect, that of dignity and respect. I have also received exceptional support from all parliamentary staff associated with the Legislative Council. I am very grateful for their cooperation, friendliness and professionalism.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and the many generations of Tasmanians who have contributed to this wonderful State. I wish to personally congratulate my predecessor, Norma Jamieson, on her efforts and on behalf of the Mersey constituents wish her the very best in her retirement as the member for Mersey.

My election to this Parliament as a representative of the people of the Mersey electorate, the north-west coast and, ultimately, all Tasmanian people is an honour I take very seriously and with a feeling of great personal pride. It also reinforces the law of our democratic process which affords the opportunity for a small, young, Sprent farm boy to grow up and eventually accept an extremely responsible role as a community, regional and State leader. Whilst I will take a few moments towards the end of my speech to mention in greater depth the extent of family influences I will, as a member of the Tasmanian Parliament, welcome to this Chamber Mel, my wife; my mum and dad, Alice and Kev; my brother Wayne and sister Vicky; my Executive Assistant Bonnie Phillips; and also my local government colleague and friend, Allan Garcia. No doubt they are relatively anxious about my speech and for me, especially my brother and sister as this type of payback opportunity does not come often and it will be recorded in *Hansard*.

*Members laughing.*

**Mr GAFFNEY** - I thought I would be really nervous, like the nervousness you might experience on a first date - the butterflies, the dry throat and certain doubts about one's expected role and capacity to adequately perform.

*Members laughing.*

**Mr GAFFNEY** - I was feeling okay until it was brought to my attention that I would be the first MLC to be filmed making an inaugural speech - great, that made me feel much more relaxed.

*Members laughing.*

**Mr GAFFNEY** - I take some comfort, however, from the people in the Mersey electorate who elected me to represent them. Many have witnessed or are aware of my various leadership roles and the manner in which I approach my public life - with enthusiasm and commitment. As a student, family member, athlete and coach, friend and teacher, volunteer, mayor or president I have approached each of my personal responsibilities and life opportunities with energy and optimism.

Like many Tasmanians, the people of the north-west coast and especially those in my electorate of Mersey are down-to-earth, practical, caring and supportive people who want their representatives to have the capacity to make objective, rational and transparent decisions. Constructive debate, problem-solving and working with each other to manage complex issues are what living in and being part of a dynamic community is all about and my electorate will expect me to represent them with integrity and sensitivity. Many people understand and appreciate the need for a community to have a diversity of opinions and that each person's experience and background will orchestrate a range of ideas and viewpoints which may be in direct contrast to their next-door neighbour. I am a good listener and I look forward to conversing with many people on the myriad issues which will arise.

I firmly believe life is about experiencing both the good times and the times which can be stressful and difficult. From a young age we moved from school to school, place to place, job to job and one is exposed to new environments and situations and many friendships are developed through changing circumstances. Whilst travel and time can broaden our horizons, it is unfortunately capable of closing the doors on some very positive, enjoyable and respectful relationships as one loses touch and moves on to another stage of life. However, we should not dwell on the loss of that contact, friend or family member but take heart or strength from the fact that there was a moment when we could interact, share and invest in a relationship. Life is about networking with all types of people and communities and having the capacity to adapt, adopt and learn from others. It is about expanding our personal and communication networks and having the ability to draw on those experiences and thus make more informed judgments and enlightened decisions.

This speaker, whilst fundamentally an optimist and that is how I choose to live my life, is also acutely aware of the realities which exist in our communities, this State and country and, indeed, the global society. There is a need for resilience, community support and care, tolerance, empathy, respect, freedom of speech and acceptance of responsibility. The capacity for the individual to choose a lifestyle without fear of ridicule, embarrassment and discrimination are also very important aspects of a considerate and empowering society.

I have been fortunate to have experienced life as both an exchange student for 12 months with the American Field Service in Laguna Beach, California, and as an exchange teacher in London for a similar period. Whilst I have worked exceptionally hard to develop and extend my teaching skills and thoroughly enjoyed my time at Murray High - now called Mersey Heights - in Queenstown, Bridgewater High, Latrobe High, Devonport High and Reece High, I strongly believe you get as much out of life and work as you are prepared to put into it. I found each of the school communities and towns to be welcoming and warming and able to draw me in, exchanging ideas and values. When it was time to move on I left knowing that I was leaving as a better person, having expanded my personal capacity and insight into the lives of others, and perhaps now and then that others had also gained from my interaction with them.

I am expecting that all members of this Council are still listening intently as it is their job. I am hoping that all members of my family are still awake as otherwise their Christmas presents are on the line. However, the mainstay of this, my inaugural speech, is somewhat predicated by the thoughts that I have just expressed. Indeed, I received sound advice from a number of my learned colleagues to focus on one or two current issues facing the residents of our electorates. The following list illustrates the variety of concerns individuals in my community have already raised and discussed with me and each is important and worthy of note: economy and growth; health services; employment; education; water and sewerage; the environment; industrial relations; discrimination; global warming and climate change; tourism and marketing; transport; crime and safety; business; social inclusion; housing and accommodation; ageing and demographic change; technology; sustainability; the arts; lifestyle; sport and recreation; community fitness; regional cooperation and productivity; waste management; service clubs and leadership; volunteering; and 11 June. Whilst this is by no means a complete list, it does demonstrate the demands placed on individuals, communities and leaders in the twenty-first century and it is imperative for representatives in local, State and Federal governments to have a grounded understanding of the issues and the impact their decisions will have on community members now and in the future.

I have chosen to focus on an issue that I believe to be very important and relevant and one that we all need to address and that is the issue of trust. Whilst it is natural to look to our elected representatives for leadership, it appears there are instances where individuals and communities are left bewildered at the apparent mismanagement or misinterpretation of their trust and expectations. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of any successful and innovative community is the trust and rapport which are fostered through positive action and plans and respectful relationships. Thus the focus of this speech will hopefully provide the importance and high regard I place on trust. It may also provide an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our individual roles as community leaders and to take stock of what is really important.

I understand and appreciate that there are many types of communities. Some are active and vibrant and others dormant and uninspiring. There are also a number of communities within communities, a community of like minds or kindred spirits. In my Mersey electorate there is a range of many very spirited communities - for instance, the arts community, the community of youth, the rural community, the sporting community, the medical community and the elderly community, to name just a few.

Villages, towns and cities can often take on their own persona and have a community focus, a collective of like minds and/or interests which determines a theme for a community. A fishing village takes on a different life to a mining town, or an industrial city has different goals and aspirations to a city which is based primarily on tourism and heritage. Schools, businesses, service groups are all examples of communities within communities; people are either a part of, through association or choice, or perhaps move fluidly through a mix or a number of communities.

I have worked in the Education department for more than 25 years, primarily as a high school teacher, and thoroughly enjoyed the various roles and tasks I accepted within those schools. It did not take long, however, before I realised that I was attracted to the programs that sought to engage students who needed additional care, support and time. It was those students who were often financially, socially or emotionally at risk that I tended to be drawn to. After working with disengaged students, disenchanted parents and at times disillusioned staff, I then accepted a behavioural management role working with a number of K-12 schools in the then Barrington district. Eventually, I was also appointed as a senior education officer with the statewide behaviour management team, which was a very challenging and rewarding experience.

It was as part of this team that I became really interested in not only student but community behaviour, and after completing a graduate certificate from Newcastle university, specialising in emotional disturbances and behaviour management, I was very intrigued with the challenge of reconnecting students into schools as part of a community-building process. Young people

are very special beings, who need to be nurtured, who need to belong, and while at times they need their own space and I have no idea where that is, they also need to be connected to and at least feel as though they are part of a community.

In 1994, I assumed a leadership role within my municipality as an elected member, and having accepted the deputy mayor and mayoral position and responsibility for the past 11 years, I became acutely aware of the need to provide safe and supportive communities. I was, therefore, interested in a number of social-inclusive processes, such as community-based learning, restorative justice and principles of restitution.

I believe one of the most vital factors in successful, trusting and invigorating communities regardless of the size or the socioeconomic status is the quality and the vision of the leaders. The importance of the trust that the community has in its leadership group cannot and should not be undervalued or underestimated. Whilst one does not expect that a leader or a leadership group could possibly agree with every one of the diverse opinions expressed by a community, there does need to be a healthy respect for processes that ensure people can express their opinion and it will be valued. It may not be a view that is agreed upon, however each individual feels as though they have been listened to and will trust their leaders to make an acceptable and justifiable decision. Leaders should not feel they are all-knowing, nor do leaders have to be infallible, however the issue is how do we as leaders build that trust and what steps can we utilise or what attributes do we recognise in successful communities.

I have been part of a number of successful communities or community groups and, like many of us, have also experienced other communities that may not have been achieving to their potential or perhaps may not have survived. Unless individuals and members are prepared to innovate, revitalise, and coordinate succession plans, at times networks become unravelled and the once-supportive and trusting community can become suspicious and eventually antagonistic. It is imperative that leaders at all levels at all times are aware of the feel of the community, to ensure that the community continues to thrive, support and trust in the process.

How do we attain, regain, improve and protect the community's trust in its political leaders? I believe there are four building blocks or foundation stones that are integral to the process. Firstly, there is a need for affirmation of each individual and group, business, club, society or school within our community. People need to feel valued as an integral part of the community regardless of race, gender, religion, language, lifestyle, background or place of birth. An individual's self-worth needs to be respected and each person has the right to be affirmed and supported as part of our inclusive society. Secondly, individuals and groups need to be able to communicate their views, feelings and opinions to others within the community without fear of reprisal. Leaders need to communicate frankly and frequently to allow a constant flow of information and create a greater understanding of the issues confronting that community.

There are many times when decisions are made that will directly impact on individuals and sections of the community. Sensitivity and empathy for those negatively impacted must also be a priority for competent and well-intentioned leaders. Effective communication is essential and all types of communication tools need to be utilised to reach every personal group within our community.

The third building block that is fundamental in successful organisations, clubs or communities is that of cooperation. Tasmanian communities are exceptionally fortunate to have many, many volunteers who are willing to offer their skills and services for the benefit of others. Cooperation is a cornerstone to volunteer community groups and is a vital ingredient in communities who show initiative and a willingness to be involved. Providing outlets within the community for cooperation is also necessary to allow individual groups, clubs and businesses to mix. Christmas parades, spring festivals, shows, musicals and eisteddfods are just a few of the events that create positive opportunities for cooperation.

I have just mentioned the fourth and final building block - that is, the need for community-building opportunities, be it activities, events and celebrations or support of the local Neighbourhood Watch, RSPCA, children's triathlon or the opening of an art exhibition. Local councils play an extremely important role in supporting service clubs such as Lions, Rotary and Apex as they all generate community events that draw people together - people from all ages and walks of life.

It was pleasing to be involved with the Legislative Council marquee at Agfest and it should be noted that other parliamentary representatives were also trying to provide an opportunity for people to meet and connect with their recognised leaders. For example, the success of Agfest does not just happen by chance. Indeed, the honourable member for Rosevears in his presentation this morning used Agfest to highlight an issue of life education. Agfest is probably the largest, most significant event on the Tasmanian rural calendar and appeals to many, many people. It is testimony to the four community building blocks I have mentioned. Agfest relies on cooperation and communication and provides a perfect environment for young people to improve their self-esteem and feeling of self-worth by assuming extra responsibilities in coordinating such a large community event. Individuals who assume a responsible role in the coordination of such an event are actually reaffirming that they are contributing to society and their efforts, opinions and skills are valued.

Once communities succeed in defining the four building blocks there is already a greater chance for a successful outcome. However, having the blocks in place is fine, but key understandings and personal goals need to be shared and developed by community members and leaders alike.

I believe there are a number of key understandings that are required before a community can trust the decision makers and leaders.

Self-respect – in all we seek to be or do, we must ensure that our young, our elderly, our frail, our strong, have the personal strength to believe that their thoughts, feelings and actions have at the core a value of self-respect. Regardless of what confronts each person we, as elders and leaders, must ensure an environment which promotes self-respect and indeed allows and understands that individuals will make mistakes, will make wrong decisions and, at times, will need guidance and support to retain, regain or repair their self-respect and self-worth.

Caring for others is a fundamental key understanding that allows communities and societies to grow and to be strong. An individual or community group which is self-absorbed and self-focused loses sight of the importance of the need to care for others. It is difficult for some to believe in this key understanding if indeed they have never experienced nor have been the recipient of care by others. Thus, resilience is a much-desired personal trait as individuals face hardships and lonely times. The impact of death and damage on communities is at times obvious. Caring communities face tough times but also show remarkable support and resilience.

Think before reacting - too often, 'knee-jerk' responses or off-handed comments do not help the situation, and indeed can exacerbate issues or problems. Whilst decisions need to be made at all levels and we realise there are numerous scenarios which we need to agree to disagree to, we must ensure that our response is well thought-out and justified, and seeks to address the issues, not to harm, hurt or ridicule an individual or group. There are many times, I believe, when challenges and issues that have had very damaging effects on individuals and communities could have been avoided or negative outcomes minimised if those in charge had thought carefully before reacting. This is a key understanding I try to practise regularly and whilst not always succeeding, I am improving.

It is not all doom and gloom, and nor should it be. The next element or key understanding is to expect the best. I always try to maintain a positive outlook, to expect the best out of each interaction or situation I find myself in. It does not always work, but I firmly believe it is a lot more effective and potentially rewarding than the opposite scenario - that is, expecting the



worst. If we remain optimistic and raise our expectations then there is a chance the relationship might improve and a way forward be reached. Even if that does not occur and the meeting and interaction are difficult and frustrating and at times even depressing, the next day is a new opportunity, a new beginning, and so we expect the best.

The final key to understanding is one that to me is obvious. If we want successful, positive and peaceful communities, it is fundamental that we look for solutions in a peaceful way. We need to decrease the opportunities for violent and harmful responses or reactions. I believe there is no place in Tasmanian communities and our society for the promoting or justifying of any form of violence.

Now we have the four building blocks and we also are aware of the keys for increasing understanding, including personal awareness and acceptance that our community is ready and prepared for conflict.

When conflicts arise within families, neighbourhoods or communities where these structures and common goals are in place, people can search for creative ways of resolving conflict, which in turn encourages people to view conflict as an opportunity for growth and to be open to new solutions. Individuals should take time to discuss the issues and the outcomes and as a community ensure that there is adequate opportunity for reflection.

Individuals who trust in the process and in the leaders are able to accept conflict as part of their community progressing and evolving. Indeed, transforming conflict into positive outcomes reinforces the importance of the time, commitment and effort needed to construct the building blocks.

When one identifies that there is mistrust and an eroding of community confidence, we need to refocus our energy and commitment to revisit and invest time and effort into re-establishing a building block or key understanding to re-establish the trust.

My message is not focused on particular individuals, leaders or political parties, it is about the integrity of the underlying principles which are fundamental to our democratic process. Leaders want communities and regions to be safe and successful, for all people to be connected and valued, and I think most Tasmanians would want our State to be alive, dynamic, inviting and able to realise its potential, to be attractive to many who come to visit, work or play. I want Tasmania to be a place that we can continue to be proud of and where we can support an environment for all Tasmanians to contribute in meaningful and productive ways.

To lose the trust of our communities is quite debilitating and cancerous and whilst political leaders at certain times do resort to attack mode to prove a point, to embarrass, to cast doubt - unfounded or not - Tasmania's decision makers must also appreciate that consistent negativity and misuse of trust is destabilising and undermines the very reason we are chosen as leaders.

I believe that all young boys and girls should want to aspire to be a leader within this State. Trust is not a term that should be foreign or unattainable within leadership spheres, it should indeed be one of the ideals our children, our friends and families and our communities can expect.

One of my goals is to ensure that the people in the Mersey electorate, who I represent and at times may disagree with my opinion, will at the very least be secure that they have confidence and trust in my ability to arrive at a just decision. I hold trust to be a most important asset and I appreciate that by my past, present and future actions will provide leadership stability as the Legislative Council member for Mersey.

In closing, it would be remiss of me not to conclude without further highlighting the influence that Kev, Alice, Wayne, Vic and Mel have had in my life. I am now embarking on a new challenge and a new learning experience for which I believe I am prepared.

Mum and dad, you have provided me with the most wondrous life and opportunities. You are a part of a generation who gave their all to ensure their children have all the love and support they need. You both went without so much so that your children could have the best chances in life and whatever direction we decided to go your support and guidance was always there. But I believe that the most important achievement in your life is the fact that together you have raised and nurtured a family that has enormous love and respect for each other and all members of our extended families. It must be exceptionally fulfilling for you both to have raised two sons and a daughter who are the very best of mates.

However, mum and dad, and Madam President, it is my duty as a member of this august body to inform you - under the protection of this Chamber - how mercilessly victimised I was as a child by my brother and sister.

*Members laughing.*

**Mr GAFFNEY** - The continuous torment I received was unimaginable. Indeed, I felt I was the early prototype of a human stress ball and also, for the record, I chose to rise above it and, for the record, I also learnt to run very quickly at a young age. Not really. We had many memorable moments of laughter and tears and I think I have just added another memory to the list.

Many members in the House will understand the stresses and pressures that elected leaders face on a daily basis and they would also recognise the wonderful support and role that their life partners play as we jump from issue to issue, meeting to meeting, event to event. As Mayor of Latrobe, President of the Local Government Association of Tasmania and now the member for Mersey, at the end of a rough day or on making a tough decision, it is comforting to know that there is always someone who will listen to your point of view and at the same time understand and see your anguish. By the way, this does not equate to Mel agreeing with me either but she will always, always defend me which is something I really cherish about our relationship. I can only say, 'Thanks, Mel', I just could not have travelled this road without you.

I thank you, Madam President, and the honourable members for their time and their indulgence and I look forward to working alongside you all.

I am very supportive of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Amendment Bill and I congratulate all of those involved in the preparation of this document. I move -

That the debate be adjourned.

**Members** - Hear, hear.