Introduction

The Children Bill 2010 introduces a very controversial and prying children policy from England which aims to track the upbringing of every child in the Isle of Man. The policy is called 'Every Child Matters' and only exists in England. Jersey, Guernsey, Wales, Ulster and Scotland have not adopted this policy.

This Bill comes on the back of the 2006 Commission of Inquiry into the Care of Young People. However, that inquiry did not actually recommend that the Manx Government lift this whole 'Every Child Matters' scheme from England. No research was actually undertaken for this radical new policy which is little more than a political idea put forward by Tony Blair who wanted to be 'Tough on crime - tough on the causes of crime'.

The idea behind the Bill

At the root of this Bill is a lack of trust in parents by Government. What the Manx Government likes about the 'Every Child Matters' policy is that it will give them the power to intervene in the lives of local families if they think children might go off the rails. They have picked up the simple idea that, when social services and the courts look at teenagers and young people in trouble, the warning signs that they were going to be a problem seemed to be all there when they were young children. They think, therefore, that if you record every little concern about a child, they will be able to predict who is going to be a problem, get involved with the family and prevent future trouble.

The problem with this is that lots of children may show little warning signs of being a future problem - but it's only a very small minority who actually do grow up to be a problem adult. There is no research that shows how you can tell one from the other at an early age. However, some local families are thought to have caused problems for several generations and the Children Bill gives the police and social services greater powers to give them a really close look. The problem is that many more parents and children will get caught up in this system than need to be. This is because the Bill does not, and cannot, create working practices which will ensure that parents and kids who do not pose a future problem will be left alone.
Clause 11 of this Bill gives the Government power to set up an 'Information Database' about all parents and children resident in the Isle of Man. The idea behind this is to remove some of the present legal barriers to family privacy so that warning signs about parents and children can be shared across Government Departments. This means that every parent and child will be on the database and that they can put a 'flag' against the name of any child they think may be a future problem. These days, with the present legal culture, there will be pressure to report anything and everything about a child as professional people need to cover their backs. The database will be very large - 18000 children plus their parents, their home address, their doctor and their school. Approximately 1000 children are born in the Isle of Man each year. This means that the database will be constantly changing. It will be impossible to make sure it's always 100% up to date and accurate. Any false information might be seriously damaging to local families. It's not safe to keep everybody's personal information in one place - it only has to be lost once and we are all in trouble.

How will they police our children's upbringing?

Government rightly already has powers to share information about children who they believe may be victims of child abuse. Child abuse extends to sexual, physical and emotional abuse as well as persistent neglect. However, they now want you to give them powers to share concerns on any child who falls into these 5 new problem categories they have created:

- Physical and mental health
- Protection from harm and neglect
- Education, training and recreation
- Contribution to society
- Social and economic situation

These are called the 'Overriding Objectives' and are created by Clause 11 of the Bill. Basically what Government wants you to let them do is re brand traditional family values as the 'Overriding Objectives' and make it the Government's legal responsibility - not the parents - to ensure that they happen for every child.

Who will do the reporting for Government?
Clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill contain new powers to set up local organisations to collect and share information about families and children. These include the 'Multi Agency Teams' (MATS) which are made up of policemen, teachers, social workers and others including people working for charities and other voluntary groups. The idea is for them to encourage the community to report any concerns about parents and children to the MAT's. The MAT's would then decide what help the parents should get for their children - and what action to take against the parents if they refuse the help. Please note that the MAT's are already operating - before Tynwald has had a chance to debate the Bill and approve them.

How will the Bill affect community relations?

People in a small community gossip and it could be very damaging to a family if deeply personal information obtained by the MAT's were to end up being discussed in the community. Those families who really do want help might be a lot more reluctant to come forward if they become unsure that their problems will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Furthermore, as the idea is to generate lots more information about parents and children, it will become a much greater problem finding the needle in the haystack and spotting the truly vulnerable child who actually is being abused.

The Bill does not make children safer

This is very important. Nothing in the Children Bill changes the existing law on Child Protection and there are no proposals to amend the Child Protection Agency Procedures. Also, there is no plan to increase the budget for social workers to deal with all the extra information on parents and children which these new systems will collect. The system is designed to chase the smoke - not the fire.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties have pledged to scrap the information database in England and, instead, just concentrate on the child protection register. Our own child protection register typically has just 30 to 40 children on it. That's where the Manx Government needs to concentrate its attention - any idea of trying to keep track of every single parent and child could end up damaging community relations and breaking up the trust and support of what is actually a very caring and family minded island.
The Children Bill 2010 will affect every family in the Isle of Man. The Positive Action Group will be holding a public meeting to discuss this on 29 March at the Manx Legion Club in Douglas starting at 1930. The talk will be called 'Should THEY tell YOU how to raise your child?' The public consultation closes on April 16. The Government can only pass legislation to track and monitor our children if we let them.

This article draws on research by Prof. Eileen Munro, expert on risk management in child protection, London School of Economics