



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 15 April 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Unmet Need in Disability Services

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (9.55 a.m.), by leave: On Friday, 9 April 1999, State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers with responsibility for disability services met in Canberra to discuss a national solution to the crisis in unmet need for disability services. At that meeting the Commonwealth failed to provide national leadership on this important issue, in spite of the fact that the meeting was called by the Commonwealth Minister, Senator Jocelyn Newman.

State and Territory Ministers have been led astray by the Howard Government. They signed last year's unsatisfactory Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement on the condition and proviso that unmet need would be addressed at a specially convened meeting within 12 months. In other words, the former State coalition Minister, Naomi Wilson, signed the joint agreement on behalf of Queensland without a commitment to unmet need—simply that it would be dealt with on the never-never. That much was true. We were all there waiting on Friday for an offer and it never, never came.

The commitment, made no doubt in good faith by former Federal Minister Warwick Smith, has not been honoured by his successor, Jocelyn Newman. In fact, the Commonwealth refused to enter into meaningful negotiations in relation to funding issues. The word of a coalition Federal Minister amounts to nothing, it would seem.

While I applaud the Commonwealth's leadership on drug reform, honourable members will understand the frustration of families caring for people with a disability. One desperate father put to me, "If my daughter with a disability developed a heroin addiction, we may have a greater chance of attracting the Prime Minister's attention." At the meeting, State and Territory Ministers unanimously agreed that the national report prepared for the meeting provided a conservative but reasonable assessment that \$294m would be needed nationally to deal with the most urgent and critical unmet need in disability services over the next three years.

It's interesting to note that the Commonwealth has not increased its disability funding to the States as fast as the States have increased their contribution. As a result of the Beattie Government's record \$30m commitment of additional funds to disability, Queensland's contribution under the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement has grown by 18% from last year compared with a mere 5% by the Commonwealth. The only clear outcome from the meeting with Senator Newman last Friday was that Ministers would meet again before the end of June 1999, at which time the Commonwealth again claimed that it would put a financial offer on the table.

Queenslanders rightly expect Governments to work together to fix problems of nationwide significance. The Queensland Government stands ready to play its part in finding a national solution to the crisis in disability services. Our bona fides are already on the table, with the addition of \$30m in this year's Budget. However, we cannot negotiate or work in partnership with a Commonwealth Government unwilling or unable to put any offer on the table. In doing so, the Howard Government has completely abrogated its responsibilities to provide national leadership on this very important issue. For the sake of Queenslanders living with a disability and the families who care for them, I look forward to more fruitful discussions at the next meeting.