



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 25 August 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Forde Inquiry

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (9.56 a.m.), by leave: Today I am pleased to table the Government's response to the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions. The report of the Forde inquiry marked a watershed in the history of Queensland's child protection system. The inquiry found not only shocking evidence of past physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children in State and church-run institutions; it also found evidence of risk for children currently in our child protection and youth justice systems.

I believe that we all have a duty to embrace this opportunity for change. The Government broadly supports the inquiry's recommendations and will work towards their implementation. I am pleased to say that the reform process has already begun. A major rebuilding program of the State's youth detention system is under way. The Government has completely overhauled Queensland's outdated child protection legislation. A comprehensive review will strengthen the role and independence of the Children's Commission and amendments to the Family Services Act are currently before this Parliament to tighten the screening of staff employed within my portfolio.

Today I am proud to announce the fulfilment of yet another key recommendation—a joint apology by the Queensland Government and the heads of churches to those who suffered harm as children in our institutions. The apology will be formally signed by myself, the Premier and senior representatives of the major churches later this morning. Our joint apology will never undo the harm caused in the past, but it may help those people who have been damaged by their past experiences to start to rebuild their lives.

In order to assist former residents and victims of abuse, the Beattie Government will establish a \$1m trust fund. A board of trustees will be established to administer the fund. The trust will provide funds for services and support over a four-year period. The churches will be asked to contribute to this fund.

The Government's response strikes a balance between repairing the past and securing the future. I want to assure the people concerned that access to the trust fund will in no way jeopardise their ability to pursue claims through negotiation or, if necessary, the courts. Given the historic nature of much of the evidence before the inquiry, the question of limitation periods may be relevant.

The Government supports the inquiry recommendation to increase the independence of the Children's Commission and will transfer the responsibility for the Children's Commission to the Premier's portfolio. In light of the findings of this report, the Government supports the need for external scrutiny of the implementation of the recommendations. An independent monitoring body will be established to oversee the implementation process. The monitoring body will be chaired by Professor Ian O'Connor, the head of the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Queensland. Professor O'Connor will be assisted by a number of other independent appointees, including the head of the Child Protection Council, former residents and children in care, whose first-hand experience of our child protection and youth justice systems will be invaluable. I table the membership of this body for the information of the House.

So that there can be absolute confidence in the independence of the monitoring body, it will be administratively supported through the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. I will be tabling regular reports from the monitoring body in the Parliament on the progress of the implementation process. The Parliament will, therefore, be the ultimate forum of scrutiny for the implementation of these recommendations.

The only recommendation that the Government will not consider implementing is recommendation 14. It recommends that a working party be established to investigate alternative sites for the new youth detention centre planned for Wacol. The Government does not support this view. If we delay the opening of the new centre, we will not be able to urgently close the Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre by the end of the year 2000 as stressed by the inquiry itself in recommendation 13. I am confident that the design and positioning of the new centre will provide a state-of-the-art facility that will promote the rehabilitation of young offenders. The Government's response, therefore, expresses broad support for 41 of the 42 recommendations. Funding of these recommendations is being considered in the Budget process.

I take this opportunity to again express my gratitude to those who gave evidence to the inquiry. The work of so many people has led us to this point and it is impossible to recognise them all. However, I would like to especially acknowledge the unstinting courage and determination of John Manthy, Allan Allaway, Mary Eather and Lewis Blayse to bring the truth to light.

Much has been achieved already, but there remains much to do. I assure the House of my commitment and the commitment of our Government to improve the safety and well-being of children and young people in the care or detention of the State. To do less would betray not only the children of today but also the children of yesterday—whose stories are captured in the Forde inquiry's report—and, most importantly, the children of tomorrow.
