



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard 24 August 1999

QUEENSLAND HEALTH

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (5.58 p.m.): I move—

"The Parliament calls on the Beattie Labor Government to disband the Health Department's capital works task force charged with scaling back building projects; that it restore outpatients services already severed and guarantee no further clinics or services will be cut; that it abandons plans to sell off State nursing homes and reduce hospital bed numbers; and that it guarantee job security for all its health workers and fight to retain Queensland's traditional free public health system."

In the International Year of Older Persons, a Labor Government has done the unthinkable and secretly put considerable resources into investigating and implementing plans to privatise public health services and aged care. The callous move to flog off State owned nursing homes was not rejected out of hand by the Premier, as he has claimed. In fact, in astounding circumstances the Premier signed his name, together with the Health Minister and former Treasurer, on the submission that went to Cabinet on 28 June 1999 with a list of 26 strategic health recommendations.

The Premier was given a chance to come clean in question time this morning, to back up his assertions that he had rejected the so-called radical options, as he claimed in his media release of Monday, 23 August 1999. However, he has refused to release the Cabinet documents that show that this is in fact correct. When questioned by the Opposition, the Premier has refused to explain why he signed this document, together with two of his most senior Ministers who took it to Cabinet.

I ask the Parliament and the people of Queensland to consider a simple question: why did the Premier of this State, his Health Minister and the former Treasurer sign a document and take it to Cabinet if they were not committed to the recommendations within? Why did they sign the submission if they were never really serious about the so-called options and suggestions, as they are calling them now? Is Cabinet Beattie style a nice little chitchat where Ministers and the Premier take points of gossip to swap and drink cups of tea?

The Premier is treating the people of Queensland like fools and they do not appreciate it. Not only did he sign that submission and recommendations, but so did the heads of his department, Treasury and the Health Department. At his direction, these senior bureaucrats set up a steering committee to look at ways of reining in the Health Department's costs. That resulted in this submission, which carried his endorsement and that of his Health Minister. The process of implementation is well under way. The Premier has been doing this in secret against his own so-called policies.

Queensland Nurses Union State secretary Gay Hawsworth said in the Courier-Mail of 24 August that the union had known that the secret report was being prepared but had not been approached about participation. She said that she was cynical about the Government's claims to have rejected privatising the public health industry, stating "where there's smoke, there's fire". I agree with Mrs Hawsworth. There have been plenty of smokescreens as well from this Government, but people in the hospital system are already seeing that implementation of these recommendations is well under way.

Bill Ludwig, the State Secretary of the Australian Workers Union, also said that hospital workers he represented—from cleaners to caterers—were at their wits' end following the privatisation review. He said—

"They're sick of wasteful reviews by a top-heavy bureaucracy that seems to have all its priorities wrong."

Hospital workers I have talked to at the Royal Brisbane Hospital have said that it is the Goss Government all over again. This Labor Government is big on bureaucracy and big on causing chaos at the service delivery end by making life so hard for the staff who try so hard. At the Prince Charles Hospital, services were not in place when the community outreach mental health services were chopped before alternative community services were in place at that hospital.

The Minister has had the audacity to tell the Parliament that no services were chopped. Well, the Minister should tell that to the six patients whose services were removed, resulting in their overdosing and resulting in patients ending up back in hospital. If that is not economic rationalism gone mad, I do not know what it is. Those are real people, and the cost to them was more than just financial; it was a real, emotional and personal cost.

The Minister has form on this issue. And in the case of the Prince Charles Hospital, it is not good. Her Government's actions are criminal. Some of the most vulnerable people have already been affected by her moves to rein in budgets at the risk of their health before alternative services were put in place. So how can the people awaiting surgery and other services at the Royal Brisbane Hospital trust her when this lack of access to basic services is already happening? I fear that there will be ambulances bypassing the Royal Brisbane Hospital because they simply will not be able to find a bed at that hospital.

The AMA, the Australian Medical Association, has also raised its concerns about this line that the Minister is pushing about moving the services into other areas at great speed before there is evidence of the services being put in place. The closure of two general wards and two operating theatres at the Royal Brisbane Hospital is another warning sign, it said, that the State's public hospitals do not have the resources to meet budget.

AMAQ president, Dr Beres Wenck, said that the loss of the wards and the 40 outpatient clinics at the Royal Brisbane Hospital was going to affect patients. In a press release of 18 August, Dr Wenck raised concerns over how the loss of services at the Royal Brisbane Hospital would be replaced by hospitals in other geographic areas. She said—

"The need for public hospital services that currently exists in the south-east corner of Queensland is served first and foremost by the Royal Brisbane Hospital, and then by other large hospitals that are also experiencing difficulties in meeting patient demand."

She goes on to say—

"While on paper shifting patients to other areas may appear to address waiting list discrepancies, there is a good possibility that patients could be shifted to hospitals that don't have the level of infrastructure provided by Royal Brisbane Hospital."

Lindsay Pyne, the new central zone manager—who incidentally, for the Minister's information, if she has not noticed, is not based in the country, as the Minister would have had us believe in the Parliament this morning, but is based at the Royal Brisbane Hospital—has already told staff that outpatients clinics will be cut back, some are to go to other hospitals, and other patients will be told to go back to their private doctors. Mr Pyne, whose nickname—most appropriately— is "Slash Pyne", told staff that jobs would inevitably go from the hospital and the changes would be fast.

I remind the Government that this is another one of the recommendations that it allegedly did not endorse and only noted. That was the establishment of the zonal management system, which did not exist before the three fat cats on \$180,000 salaries. As Bill Ludwig noted, the bureaucracy at the top end is getting heavier.

But what is the Government's reaction to the breaking of this scandal about its secret slash-and-burn unit in the Department of Health and the work already under way to implement its recommendations? The Premier's reaction was to go into serious spin doctor mode, personally ringing up journalists at the start of the week and saying that all recommendations had only been noted. Then he changed his story to say that some of the recommendations had, in fact, been endorsed, such as mental health, which does need a considerable funding boost. But he said that he rejected the so-called radical recommendations out of the other 26 strategic recommendations of the Queensland Health Strategy Advisory Project. If that is so, why were two senior Health Department officials pulled off line from their regular jobs to work on this special project to implement the aged care recommendations? And if this is so, the Premier should open the Cabinet bag, show us the documents and stop hiding behind Cabinet secrecy.

How does the Premier also explain that his Health Minister is at odds with the Premier in her public statements? Health Minister Edmond has admitted that privatisation of the State's aged care facilities was up for discussion. Two days ago she was saying that it was up for discussion. It is no wonder that the residents and staff of these homes do not feel comfortable about the Health Minister's so-called assurances about their future within the State system. Mrs Edmond's answer in Parliament this morning was similarly contradictory to the Premier's statements, when she admitted that she would be talking to churches and non-Government organisations about the future of State nursing homes.

There are other major and radical issues in the report's recommendations that this Government has endorsed. The Capital Works Task Force, which is reviewing the capital works program and looking for ways to cut back bed capacity, is already under way. This is another recommendation of this report which went to Cabinet under Mr Beattie's, Mrs Edmond's and former Treasurer Hamill's signature. Yet they ask us to trust them. They ask us to believe that if they take these things to Cabinet, they do not really mean it; it is not really serious. It is no wonder that the health system is in crisis under this Government. It received record funding, but it has not delivered it to the people at the grassroots.

Time expired.
