



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard 26 August 1999

HEALTH SERVICES

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament censures the Government for its cover up in regards to its secret agenda to cut back and privatise health services in this State."

This is a deadly serious motion which the coalition, in moving, does not take lightly. People do not like being lied to and they do not like things being done in secret, as this Government has been doing. I certainly would have liked to have been a fly on the wall when the Premier was talking with health unions this week.

Quite simply, the onus is on the Government to table the Cabinet documents that will prove or disprove its story that it was not serious about the radical rationalisation plans for Queensland Health, including plans for the privatisation of services, that the Premier, his Health Minister and Treasurer took to Cabinet under their signatures on 28 June. The problem for the Government's credibility is that the trail of lies told in the past few days, the backflips and conflicting stories between senior Government Ministers means that not all of its excuses could possibly be correct. The other problem for the Government is that a number of the extreme options among the 26 strategic recommendations are already under way in the regions, such as closures of outpatient clinics, closures of beds, and the appointment of new fat-cat zonal managers on \$180,000 salary packages who are telling hospitals to slash and burn. Twenty beds have been closed at Sandgate Eventide, and wards and theatres are to close at the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

It is no wonder that there is a lot of cynicism in the political process. How much greater that cynicism will be if the Government uses its numbers to quash this motion and then send its spin doctors on their merry way, believing it can lie and get away with it. I emphasise the point again that given the Government's conflicting and contradictory stories in the last few days about its intentions with the secret Health Strategy Advisory Project, whose recommendations went to Cabinet under the Premier's signature, it must be censured for its actions and deceit.

As my colleagues and I will outline in the coming debate, many of those radical recommendations are already under way with cutbacks and services at some hospitals around the State and threats to many others. However, the Government has not had the decency to be open and accountable to the people, and the other options that the Government said would not happen have not been rejected, as the Premier initially said. I will outline the sequence of events in the last few days.

The Courier-Mail of Monday, 23 August, in an article relating to the secret hospital review, stated—

"Premier Peter Beattie, who also signed the final Cabinet submission, last night confirmed the plans had been noted but not endorsed. He said he had now rejected outright the plans that were outlined before Cabinet."

In the same article, Health Minister Edmond told a different story. She said that the privatisation of the State's nursing homes was "up for discussion". During the next day, the Government went into damage control and the story changed again.

On the Channel 10 news on Monday, the Premier said, "A lot of aspects of the consultant's report were disappointing and they were disregarded." The Channel 10 reporter said—

"The Premier denied his government planned to sell off state owned nursing homes. He insists the consultant's report is merely an evaluation of the health system."

On Monday, 23 August, the Health Minister issued a statement saying "radical" suggestions had been rejected by her and the Premier. I am happy to table the Health Minister's press release. Well may members question whether the Minister's admission the day before, that the privatisation of the State's nursing homes was up for discussion, was a radical suggestion. It was more than just a suggestion, as was revealed by her staff later in the week.

On Tuesday night the coalition moved a motion against the Government, and the Government used its numbers to defeat the motion. The story that the Government spun became more interesting, and certainly different from earlier in the week. I wish to remark on the coalition's motion. Who would have thought that a Labor Government would vote to defeat a motion that sought to commit the Government to not selling off the State's nursing homes? Who would have thought that a Labor Government would vote against job security for health workers? Who would have thought that a Labor Government would reject a motion that called for the restoration of hospital services that were being cut by the economic rationalists that run the Health Department and Treasury? Yes, it really is the arrogant Goss Government all over again, except this time they think they can lie and get away with it. The Premier has been caught out.

During the debate on Tuesday night, the Premier said, "Cabinet rejected any concept of privatisation options." Members should remember that phrase. In the same debate Health Minister Edmond said, "Other more radical recommendations are clearly not supported."

In a radio interview on 612 4QR on Monday of this week, when asked whether it was privatisation by stealth, Mrs Edmond said—

"Well they know fully well that it was rejected by Cabinet. It was rejected by the Premier and it was rejected by me."

This morning the story broke that the Premier's and Health Minister's staff had admitted to a very different story. From merely noting the report—a Cabinet submission—at the beginning of the week, the Premier's office has moved on to acknowledge that the options that included privatisation had not been rejected by Cabinet. I repeat, they had not been rejected by Cabinet. Also, they had not been merely noted. That puts the Premier's staff at odds with his claim in the House on Tuesday night that "Cabinet rejected any concept of privatisation options." The staff are also admitting now that the options had not been rejected by Cabinet, but they had been sent to an implementation committee or working group.

Today's Courier-Mail states—

"The State Government staged an embarrassing retreat yesterday on its claims that it had rejected outright secret plans to wind back and privatise elements of the free public hospital system."

The article further stated—

"Mr Beattie's spokesman said the privatisation proposals were still 'on foot' but they would be rejected by Cabinet in future."

Who would believe them? Why take it to Cabinet in the first place?

The article goes on to say that earlier this week Mr Beattie and the Health Minister claimed that the proposals had merely been "noted" by Cabinet, but both offices yesterday admitted that that was not the case. The article stated that less than half of the proposals fell into the noted category and all of those had now been referred to the implementation committee without being rejected by Cabinet. The truth starts to emerge.

This morning, in true fashion, the Health Minister changed her story again. On Sunday the Health Minister told a reporter that privatisation of the State's nursing homes was "up for discussion", and on Monday she said that "radical options" had been rejected and that Cabinet had rejected these options. This morning on 4BC, the same Health Minister was peddling the story that, "I have forgotten half the recommendations." She complained that the Courier-Mail had asked her questions on Sunday while she was at a function and that those questions were about two or three specific proposals that were not being pursued. Mrs Edmond said—

"Recommendations the Courier-Mail has got are an early draft ... a lot of these things didn't make the final submission."

How many times can the Minister change her story? The more she changes her story each day, the guiltier she looks.

Because this is happening in the regions, people can see the proof of the recommendations that the Minister has already signed off on. She might fool some people, but ordinary Queenslanders are awake to her, as are the workers in the health system and the union movement. Today I heard that health union heavyweights met with the Premier yesterday. Perhaps he would like to confirm that that is

correct and tell us whether they felt warm and fuzzy about his secret slash-and-burn review of Queensland Health, which he took to Cabinet under his signature.

The Premier and his Health Minister have never explained why they reviewed the health system in secret and proceeded to implement radical changes without consultation. Members need only look at the Royal Brisbane Hospital, where staff are terrified about the future of their jobs. Before the alternative services are in place, the Minister is closing wards, theatres, outpatient and specialist clinics. Contrary to what the Minister is saying, she is sending people back to their GPs and trying to flick them back into the private sector. This Labor Government is supposed to be open and accountable, but it has been caught out. The AMA has expressed its concerns about the lack of infrastructure and the referral of people back to the private sector, and hospital staff are most concerned that this is happening in a very rapid way.

Let us look at the other recommendations in the report. We have already talked about the fact that zonal managers were recommended. This is a new fat-cat layer, yet the Minister talks about taking administration back to the hospitals in the country. Did she not notice that two of those zonal managers are based in Brisbane? Perhaps she is expanding her idea that Ipswich is part of rural and remote Queensland. I do not think that Herston is a part of rural and remote Queensland, yet one of the zonal managers is based there. The other is based at the PA Hospital.

Let us look at the recommendation that capital works at Maryborough Hospital need to be wound back and the expression in the report, which the Minister signed off on, that it is a nuisance to have more patients than are wanted and how they should go to the private sector. She is scaling back capital works. In Maryborough, the Minister has not got on with the job of redeveloping the hospital. In light of the report, I would be extremely worried to know that the hospital upgrade that the Minister promised has been stalled for the past 12 months. The Minister made serious promises to the hospital and the town, but no work has been undertaken to implement that promise. People in Maryborough fear for their jobs.

At Nambour, 36 beds are supposedly being shifted to Noosa while the hospital is redeveloped. The Minister should tell that to the workers. She is putting office administrators in hospital wards.

Time expired.
