



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

Hansard 21 July 1999

CHILD ABUSE; FORDE INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (6.22 p.m.): I second the amendment. There is no member of this Government who was not deeply moved and disturbed by the revelations of wide-ranging degradation, humiliation and physical abuse that far too many children have suffered in Government and non-Government institutions in Queensland. As vulnerable and needy children, they should have been given extra care. Instead, those in positions of authority failed them miserably. There is no excuse for that.

However, the Minister, Anna Bligh, has created an historic opportunity to make amends and to ensure that this failure does not occur again. Mr Beanland and Mr Lingard had the chance to do this and they did not do it. I am very proud that the Minister has had the courage and foresight to address this past failure head-on. I am also very proud to be part of a Government that has fully supported the Minister's efforts to make sure that children in care now and in the future do not endure the torment and violations that children before them have suffered.

I wish also to commend the courage of former residents of institutions who came forward to the Forde inquiry and commend the courage of Mrs Leneen Forde and her colleagues for conducting a harrowing inquiry in a very professional and sensitive manner. In her report, Mrs Forde made a moving plea that the wrongs that she reported on will not be repeated. She stated—

"To understand and learn from the past, we must all accept responsibility for children ... let us resolve to ensure that systems and policies leave no room for abuse, and create a framework for building a better future."

For this goal to be achieved, it is critical that the highest standards of accountability and practice within the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and other institutions providing care to children be continually maintained.

I am sure that Mr Beanland is aware that many strategies recommended by Mrs Forde are already being implemented, with several key reforms well under way before the conclusion of the inquiry. The Child Protection Reform Strategy developed by the department and the new child protection legislation are two very positive and essential reforms. Thirty new front-line workers have been employed in the department, and the \$60m Youth Justice Infrastructure Program is being accelerated. In fact, some of the commentators who have been calling for independence in the implementation of the Forde inquiry recommendations have acknowledged the recent very positive efforts of the department. For example, on 16 July on 4QR, Hetty Johnstone, the founder of the group Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse, said—

"This is not a personal attack on any of the people involved in this, Anna Bligh ... Mr Beattie, Forde, Sullivan, all of which are doing, we believe, a wonderful job. This government has in fact done more for child protection than any other."

A critical ingredient for child protection reform in Queensland is an adequate funding base. The Forde inquiry acknowledged that child welfare in Queensland has for many years been underfunded in comparison to the rest of Australia and that this has adversely affected the department's child welfare performance. Our Government has a difficult task ahead to overcome this longstanding legacy. For

instance, in 1997-98 Queensland spent the lowest of all States on child and family welfare. In fact, it was a mere 47% of the national standard.

I cannot let the misguided funding and policy priorities of the previous coalition Government in relation to young people go unheeded. Do members remember the coalition's \$750,000 advertising campaign in 1997 featuring the "no more kid gloves message"? Mr Beanland and his colleagues were more intent on putting kids behind bars than dealing with their histories of abuse and other factors leading them into crime. Mr Beanland, as a former Minister for Justice, could have spent \$750,000 towards fixing the system rather than putting more kids into a broken system.

We know from Mrs Forde that kids were not being rehabilitated well in the correctional system; many were reoffending. Mr Beanland has the audacity to criticise our Government's performance. He has already failed and fallen on his sword, but he is trying to reinvent himself as the white knight who is now championing the rights of children. The best thing Mr Beanland can do is provide bipartisan support for fixing the problem. We are working cooperatively with the churches and other non-Government organisations. I say: join us in a spirit of cooperation.

The Beattie Government has a 10-year plan for the staged development of juvenile detention centre infrastructure. From my own experience, I know that new facilities alone will not do the job. Improved staff practices, educational and rehabilitation strategies— many other things—are needed. A critical aspect is increased staff levels. Staff levels within the department must be increased so that changes can occur for the better. I trust that the public will gain more confidence in the system as these and further reforms take place. I call on coalition members to support fully the current reform process, rather than continually taking us back.

Time expired.
