



Speech by

Mr SANTO SANTORO

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Hansard 21 July 1999

CHILD ABUSE; FORDE INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr SANTORO (Clayfield—LP) (6.13 p.m.): I am pleased to second the motion moved by the honourable member for Indooroopilly. I challenge anyone who has read even small parts of the Forde report to say that they were not moved, saddened and angered. It is a report that sets out at length the terrible injustices that were inflicted on many helpless, innocent and totally dependent young Queenslanders. The physical and emotional scars suffered by those many children in Queensland institutions have now been exposed to the public, and none of us in this Parliament ever want to see the conditions that led to those terrible injustices reappear.

The Government has said that it will implement all of the 42 recommendations that were made by the commissioners. The Premier has publicly stated, "The bottom line is we cannot move forward unless we reveal the pains and the mistakes of the past and deal with them." The Forde report has revealed many of the pains and mistakes of the past, but the second part of the equation, namely the implementation of the recommendations, is still to occur. Now that a light has been shone into what the member for South Brisbane quite rightly calls a dark and shameful episode of our State's history, we cannot let the matter drop.

I would be the first to say that I am sorry that the Forde inquiry did not go further. Indeed, the honourable member for Indooroopilly has stated that on many occasions. Unlike the Fitzgerald inquiry, it did not go as far as many would have liked in investigating possible breaches of the law and it did not investigate the actions of the then Labor Government which ordered the shredding of the material gained by Heiner into possible child abuse at the John Oxley Detention Centre. Overall, we all owe a debt of gratitude to the commissioners for the report and we must not let

any opportunity go by to remedy the wrongs that they identified.

It was pleasing that the Minister has released a discussion paper on possible changes to the Juvenile Justice Act because, as she said, the inquiry had underlined the need to review that legislation in relation to the management of youth detention centres and guidelines for body searches. However, in moving this motion my colleague the member for Indooroopilly is giving this House, this Government and this Minister the opportunity to put aside the doubts and concerns that so many people have about what is going to happen with the Forde inquiry report and to ensure that there is an independent and systematic approach to implementing the recommendations.

It was none other than the ex-member for Whitsunday, Lorraine Bird, who warned just last month of the dangers of this Government making only a political commitment to the ideals of reform rather than a genuine commitment, and she should know. Lorraine Bird said—

"It's up to people now to ensure that it's implemented. It would be just shameful to let it go now."

"Shameful" would be the word.

The Minister herself said, "The implementation of these recommendations now requires a level of political will and determinism." She also said, "We have been presented with a once in a lifetime chance and I intend to grasp it with both hands."

Acceptance of this motion—and this is the acid test for the Minister, who is smiling—will give the Minister the ability and the privilege to ensure that there is an objective, independent and professional unit in place to drive forward the report's recommendations. No-one ever suggests

that Governments that are elected to govern should throw away their right at the end of the day to make the final decision on implementing recommendations, but on the other hand the people want an accountable Government. They want a Government that does not put matters in the too-hard basket or subject recommendations to factional haggling.

The second limb of the motion is to introduce a system of accountability for decision making by the department that involves children and families. Again this is a sensible and appropriate matter which, having regard to the contents of the Forde report, the Minister and the Government should accept. After the Fitzgerald inquiry finished, a series of bodies were established to implement recommendations or prosecute people. It should not be forgotten that EARC was established so that many of the recommendations of Fitzgerald could be driven forward by an independent team. If it had not been for this independent body, we would not have now a range of administrative law and electoral changes that have transformed our State. Once again, not all of EARC's recommendations were accepted by the Parliament or the Government, but there was an open, independent, professional and accountable process.

The Forde inquiry has touched a raw nerve with the public. No-one wants to see institutions that are charged with looking after children run by people who abuse the trust reposed in them and, in the process, cause ongoing harm to the juveniles whom they were supposed to care for. The Minister and the Premier have said that implementing the Forde recommendations will not be easy, and I agree. Expectations and hopes have been raised, and it will be more than a tragedy if we dash the hopes and raise the fears of those many caring members of the community who want this matter looked at properly.

I believe that the honourable member for Indooroopilly, the shadow Minister, has put forward a very positive and constructive motion that is in the spirit of the recommendations of the Forde inquiry. There is no politics in this motion.

Government members: Ha, ha!

Mr SANTORO: It is all based on the precedent that was set by the Fitzgerald inquiry. Honourable members may laugh, but they are hypocrites for doing so.

Time expired.
