



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

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ADDRESS IN REPLY

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (5.15 p.m.): Today I am pleased to take part in the Address in Reply debate. The last election campaign was the eighth I have gone through, yet it was by far the most enjoyable. It is unusual for me to say that I enjoyed the election campaign, but if you are lucky enough to enjoy something you tend to do very well at it. I was fortunate to have a new area added to my electorate, which meant I had to keep my promise to doorknock all my new constituents. When I did, I was in the sublime position of hearing people talk to me about how little they thought of Mr Borbidge as the Leader of the Opposition and how they found Dr Watson to be a man of no consequence. More often than not people referred to him as 'what's-his-name'. It is sad for me to say that because outside this chamber David is a friend of mine and I have no ill feeling towards him.

However, public servants such as school teachers also said to me that they had no faith in the Liberals stance on public education. They did not want change but rather stability and a strong government. Therefore, they wanted the Beattie Labor government to be returned to power. I made a very quick judgment that Labor would win by 54 seats to 35. I am sorry that I was so far out. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable campaign. Ultimately, to use a Bob Hawke phrase, there is no doubting the collective wisdom of the electorate. Of course, it is much easier to say that when you have been extremely successful in winning an election.

When I was asked to participate in the debate today, I did not know what to talk about. However, this morning I heard the new member for Cunningham, Mr Copeland, come into this House with his first question as a shadow minister. I thought he made an interesting and positive maiden speech. I wish him well as a member of this legislature. However, he has to learn about history. He came in here and tried to score points by saying that one in five level 2 child abuse notifications are being written off without investigation by the department. When I was shadow minister for family services in the 1980s Graham Zerk was the then director of Children's Services. He issued the department's annual report which unequivocally said that his department was so poorly resourced that it could not meet its statutory obligations to protect children. Funding for the family services portfolio in those days was abysmal. The Bjelke-Petersen government would not fund women's refuges because the Premier of the day thought that that would lead to the breakdown of families. Queensland was the only state not doing that. The then government would also not fund youth refuges for the same reason, that is, there was the belief that kids would run away from home just because there was a refuge they could go to.

However, the member for Cunningham came in here and was critical of the fact that this government is not meeting the full recommendations of the Forde inquiry. He should remember what happened when his party was in government. I noted with interest that the Minister for Families, Judy Spence, reminded the honourable member of the woeful history of neglect and underfunding in the area of child protection that occurred when those opposite were in government. It is amazing to think that the Children's Services Act 1965 was the legislation in this area until Anna Bligh became the minister and introduced the Child Protection Bill in 1998. That piece of legislation was decades out of date. For example, children were put in institutions because they committed status offences such as being in the back of a car having a cuddle. It was believed that if they were incorrigible or uncontrollable they would be likely to lapse into a life of vice and crime. Therefore, those kids were locked up in places like the Sir Lesley Wilson youth hostel with young people who had committed serious crimes. As a

result, those relatively innocent youths would learn how to do things from others who were perhaps not so innocent. It is very difficult to accept the criticism, because there is no doubt that Anna Bligh had the foresight to institute the Forde inquiry so that the public would understand the costs of not protecting our children.

There is no doubt that the state has a responsibility to protect all children whose parents cannot or will not provide them with protection. I think the Beattie government has a wonderful history of trying to gradually meet the target of \$100 million in additional recurrent funding. During the last parliament \$25 million was committed in one year. Then \$20 million was committed over the next two years. So we are on the way to doing that. In fact, the child protection budget has been increased by 50 per cent in four years.

I remember when I was on my forced sabbatical leave, between 1986 and 1989, and I conducted the inquiry into homeless children. We received a submission from the department of family services that actually said in black and white that the overwhelming majority of the kids who were out on the street were wards of the state. So we had a government admitting that the homeless really were young people whom the state had a statutory obligation to protect. It may be that under the legislation that was in force at the time the state itself should have been charged with neglecting and abusing young children.

The legislation Anna Bligh brought in, the child protection legislation, is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It talks about the four Ps: the participation of children in decision making; the protection of children against discrimination and all forms of neglect and exploitation; the prevention of harm; and the provision of assistance. I do not think there is a magic wand. I think these are very difficult problems. There is a fine line to tread when deciding whether to intervene or whether to allow the parents to deal with the problem. The rights of the child are paramount, but there is that difficult balance.

Next Mr Copeland may be criticising our level of disability services funding. Before the 1995 election the coalition promised the world to the people who were concerned about disability services. When it won government it got caught up in a large debate about deinstitutionalisation, while only about three per cent of the disabled people in our community were in institutions. The then minister, Mr Lingard, talked about giving people choice. That is what he brought the debate down to by not giving the sector any money.

To be frank, the allocation of public funds on behalf of people with disabilities has always been a low priority in this state, largely based on the premise that it is the responsibility and the commitment of families to continue to look after their disabled members. That was the philosophy, and I would blame the Goss government for that. I am not going to rewrite history; we did nothing during the Goss years. But the Beattie government has actually shown that it has heart and the commitment to do something about disability services. It does understand that we need funding for support services—accommodation services, respite care and post-school options.

I remember that in the first year of the coalition government, after the 1996 debacle in Mundingburra, the then government actually asked for expressions of interest for funding for disability services. It received \$36.8 million worth of submissions and it funded \$1 million. So the next year it thought it would get quite clever and did not even ask for submissions, because it did not have any money. So that government promised the world and delivered nothing.

I am proud to say that in opposition I was a member of the family services committee. I was secretary of it. That committee went to a number of states and had a look, particularly at Western Australia. That state has the best funding for disability services in Australia. Its system is decentralised. We actually have the model, with the commission and the funding we are providing, which was being used in Western Australia.

In the first budget of the Beattie government \$33 million extra was allocated, along with \$10 million for mainstreaming children into school. There was nothing in the second year, but in the third year the funding was \$18 million. I think at least \$18 million will be in this year's budget, guaranteed.

I think Mr Copeland ought to look at the dreadful history of neglect in the area of the provision of human services in this state by National Party governments. There are no quick fixes. There is no magic wand. We still have some way to go to meet the level of need, whether it is in providing adequate resources for child protection or in funding disability services.

This week is National Youth Week and I would like to talk about youth and youth employment. For some time I as a citizen have been very concerned about the high level of youth suicide. I have made speeches in this House before and I have asked questions on the subject. In 1997 Mr Borbidge decided to set up a number of community networks across Queensland to deal with the area of youth services. At that time I asked him what the point of doing that was when the only employment service available at that time, the YES service that we had put in place before that, was abandoned. There was a serious lack of drug and detoxification centres and rehabilitation programs and there was a severe

shortage of resources in the mental health, family support and child protection areas. The other concern was that the establishment of a common youth allowance would place an unnecessary burden on families and lead to an increase in dysfunctional relationships.

There is a big debate going on in the federal parliament about a report that was commissioned with regard to youth. A task force was established and reported. Until it was tabled in the parliament the other day by the Labor Party opposition in Canberra, we had been told that the report was hidden. I will outline some of the findings as reported in the *Courier-Mail*. It states—

Centrelink was too rigid in applying activity tests to young people experiencing sexual abuse, family breakdown, drug or mental health problems.

That reflects the idea of punishing the unemployed. It is just a dreadful thing. It goes on—

Job Network was not youth friendly.

Of course it is not. With the new regime we have in place to try to get the unemployed into workplaces, all that the people running these programs are interested in is whether they can make a dollar out of it. If people are job ready, do not have to be trained and can find an employer, then the employment service will try to do something and get them a job. The other comment was—

Work for the Dole failed to link young people with proper training courses.

Of course it does. I do not understand how people can be so hoodwinked by Mr Howard when he comes up with initiatives such as work for the dole and his latest drugs strategy. They are just superficial rubbish. It is about enabling him to say that he is doing something about treating a serious problem, but it is nothing more than an exercise in public relations. I think it is ludicrous.

I asked a question in the parliament of the then Premier, Mr Borbidge, about the youth employment service being cut down. He responded to the effect that the provision of employment programs was a Commonwealth responsibility and that the decision to withdraw the provision of employment programs represented a refocusing of the then government's activities.

We were told by people opposite that youth training was a Commonwealth responsibility, and what do we get from the federal government? It shuts down Skillshare projects, like the one I ran in Enoggera for 10 years. We were getting 60 per cent to 70 per cent success rates. We were providing programs. In one program I was involved with we got 22 young people from the John Oxley detention centre. They were dangerous kids. We gave them training in areas such as cleaning, retail and welding. In a non-judgmental way the youth were asked to think about what they wanted to do with their lives and to accept the opportunity that was being offered. On the third day of the program three of them committed a break and enter, but in the end, after 22 weeks, 15 of those young people had a job. They had refocused on their lives and accepted the opportunity to do something worth while with their lives. With the present system, young people are being expected to pull out weeds, clear creeks or whatever. They are receiving no training, and money is going down the drain.

Similarly, we have the charade of \$27 million being spent on glossy pamphlets and television advertisements; but they are missing the mark for young people and their parents. Scare tactics will not work with young people. It is unfortunate that if children are smoking cigarettes by late primary school there are strong chances that they will experiment with other drugs, particularly if they have money in their pockets, they do not have enough to do and there is no parental supervision. Parents must have the emotional strength to be able to talk to their children from early primary school onwards. What would \$27 million do in terms of providing community detoxification centres or rehabilitation centres? What would it do in terms of providing accommodation services or teaching parents how to parent and how to cope with these very difficult issues? Instead, we have this superficial mumbo jumbo.

Turning to youth employment, I speak with pride about the Labor government's achievements in the Beattie years. The Beattie government in its first term made a commitment to building up the state's skills base, particularly through apprenticeships and traineeships, and to keep up with what was wanted in industry and the community. We increased the number of traineeships and apprenticeships by 32.6 per cent—96,868—compared with the performance of the previous government. On a monthly basis, 2,331 positions were created per month under the Borbidge government compared with 3,124 under the first Beattie government. As a result of that, we met the goals of the Breaking the Unemployment Cycle inside three years, rather than the four years that we had allowed. So over the next three years the Beattie government will continue with Breaking the Unemployment Cycle to create a further 15,000 jobs for young people. That will mean that, in two terms, we will have created 30,000 jobs for people under 25. That is a wonderful achievement.

I have already spoken about welfare. By far the biggest issue confronting our society is the lack of jobs and the lack of job security. One's welfare depends on what one does, and people are judged by what they do. The dignity that comes from working is paramount to one's welfare. Minister Kemp and others in Canberra—and heaven forbid if ever they gain the Treasury benches again—believe that we do not need to take action to involve ourselves in helping to provide jobs for youth, particularly

disadvantaged youth. Basically, they are saying that those people will end up on the dust heap of society.

I thank the people of the Ashgrove electorate for returning me for the fifth time as their local member. I am flattered by the number of votes that I received in the last election and by how generous people were with their support and comments. I thank my electorate officer, Judy Timms, for being my right arm and for the great job that she does in presenting my second face to my constituents. I also thank John Battams, my campaign director, and the many other people who worked very hard for me.

The day after the election was called, I had 24 people in my office, and we visited 440 houses for electorate visitor votes that day. That shows the strength of commitment that I have from the true believers in the Ashgrove electorate—the true believers, the rank and file, the people who are in the Labor Party because they believe in the common good. They believe that we have a better side and that we can make a difference. They believe that, ultimately, everybody deserves a chance—be it through public goods, as a great equaliser in society, or through Centrelink or government services. Ultimately, everybody deserves their day in the sun. I thank all those members of the Labor Party and, ultimately, the people of Ashgrove for showing such good sense in re-electing me.

Time expired.
