



Speech by

RACHEL NOLAN

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

Hansard 2 August 2001

APPROPRIATION BILLS [ESTIMATES COMMITTEE G]

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (4.12 p.m.): I thank those involved in the estimates committee process. During the estimates process I heard an opposition member remark that he did not think a lot came out of the process. Although I could certainly at the time understand what he meant about it being quite time consuming, I was still quite surprised. Having worked in opposition in the Northern Territory, where the conservative government is the most secretive in Australia, where there is no FOI or estimates committee process and where the government does not even bother to answer its questions on notice, I very much appreciate the process that is available to us.

Estimates represent a culture of openness and accountability. They represent the assumption that questions should be answered and that government genuinely belongs to the people. Estimates was implemented by the Goss government in response to the Fitzgerald inquiry and replaced the secrecy which facilitated corruption under the National Party. If the opposition does not get anything out of it, that is a mark of its own inadequacy. The process is there.

In discussing Estimates Committee G I want to focus on Minister Spence's areas, particularly family services, child protection and Disability Services. These are areas which I am interested in because they are fundamental matters of justice and are important to Ipswich because of our historical background with institutions.

I am pleased to see the significant funding boost to child protection this year. In 1998-99 child protection funding was \$80 million per year. The Beattie government has committed an additional \$10 million each year since. There are now more child protection officers than there ever have been before. I know that in Ipswich there are still some concerns over officers' workloads and a degree of community concern exists about responses to complaints. The system is not perfect, but in a policy sense it is being seriously addressed and it is getting fixed. We are addressing the historical neglect and we are building a safety net that simply was not there before.

In Ipswich a lot of child protection is done through the indigenous organisation Kidz Care, which does a tremendous job. It is really important that local indigenous people are an integral part of the welfare process. It is certainly a big turnaround on the historical system. Other NGOs are also getting involved in child protection and welfare, including the Ipswich Community Youth Service and Youth Serving Australia, which are about to offer their journey and mentoring programs to young people in the transition from care.

One of the issues that has come up locally is the relationship between the Families Department and local schools. In the past, there was a problem with the Families' phone system in Ipswich such that schools that wanted to make a report, say, about a child who has come to school with bruises sometimes simply could not get through. This was very frustrating, as teachers and principals do not take the decision to make a report lightly. I took this up with the local Families office, and it should now be fixed.

The relationship between Families and schools is very important and I would like to take the opportunity to suggest to the minister that perhaps it could be formalised, possibly with a child protection officer being given the role of school liaison. In that way schools would have a single contact point and, by keeping in touch, Families would have a good idea of what was happening in local schools and what kinds of issues were affecting local kids.

I wish briefly to mention Disability Services. The improvements in Disability Services and the engagement of the Unmet Needs campaign are aspects of the Beattie government's agenda with which I am most proud to be associated. This year the Disability Services budget increased by 11.6 per cent. My predecessor, David Hamill, never got much credit for it, but he should be acknowledged for making the funding available to make Disability Services a government priority.

For the first time, under this government individuals are being supported with comprehensive care packages. With this budget there are 32 funding packages for the Ipswich south-west region. Recently, I was visited by a woman called Jocelyn Lawrence, who on her own is doing a tremendous and brave job but struggling with the pressure of caring for her daughter, who is in her forties. Mrs Lawrence sought a package to help her manage. There are lots of Mrs Lawrences in the community of Ipswich and I could make her no promises, but I could feel confident at least that this government is doing its best to redress the gap. For the first time, when it comes to people with disabilities we are genuinely making a difference.
