



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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Hansard 20 August 2003

### **CHILD ABUSE, ROYAL COMMISSION**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (6.46 p.m.): Although I and all who rise to speak to and support this motion tonight wish that it was not necessary to have to participate in this fight to have the government do the right thing, it is very damning that with continual revelations being splashed across the front pages of papers and television screens the government has not had the foresight to initiate a royal commission in the interests of these abused children, not just foster-children as the CMC investigation is covering but all children who have suffered abuse.

This government is selfishly putting itself first at the expense of the state's children. All the Premier's statements about being an honest and accountable government have flown out the window. The Premier should initiate a royal commission himself, but it is obvious the government does not have the courage to bare this issue's questionable history to the Queensland people for fear of what might be revealed. Child abuse is not an easy subject to deal with, nor is it an easy one to resolve. However, it does appear that it is a very easy one to hide. It is so easy to hide because the government numbers in this House will ensure that a royal commission does not take place and that the neglect and past failures of all governments to protect and support those most vulnerable is never revealed. What this government must realise is that the more the facts and figures are disguised or the deeper information is buried the more the public will perceive the government is being deceptive and the harder they will dig.

A local case was raised by a mother and several members of the community—a local doctor, a senior registrar of Queensland Health and the Child and Youth Mental Health Service. Allegedly, they have supplied affidavits outlining their concerns. Affidavits were also procured from two nurses and a highly respected Kingaroy community health nurse. To my knowledge, none of these people has been contacted after raising concerns. Every one of my approaches to the minister and the various departmental heads I was passed to was largely met with the statement 'Due to confidentiality we can't discuss this with you.' I accept that and acknowledge it as essential. But even sending documentation of these concerns raised with me did not, to my knowledge, result in any of these people's affidavits being checked. The question is: why?

It was the innocent face of three-year old Brooke Brennan who was murdered in July being splashed across the front page of all the media that brought home to everyone that something was drastically wrong with the system. The police had assessed the situation as a priority 1 suspected child abuse case. Ten days later, Brooke had been kicked to death.

After the minister had received an internal report that had found that Brooke's case had been handled correctly she said there was an obvious problem and asked the DG to review the regulations and protocols associated with child abuse. However, the Ombudsman reported negatively on the issues surrounding the death of Brooke Brennan and, to my knowledge, the issues raised remain unaddressed.

This minister cannot be blamed for cases that were neglected in the past, but she can be blamed if she does not take measures that will ensure the situation does not continue, and that can only be done by making sure that all practices followed by departmental staff are reviewed, all who were involved are questioned, all grievances are heard and all questionable instances are thoroughly investigated. I acknowledge that the minister stated at the time that the Queensland Families Department would change the way it investigated suspected child abuse as a result of the inquiry into

Brooke's death, but Brooke was only the tip of a very large iceberg of entrenched procedural and systemic problems.

We who are asking for this royal commission do not expect the problems to be resolved overnight, but a royal commission will at the very least highlight all areas in need of attention. We are not expecting miracles; we are just expecting the minister responsible to do her duty and do that duty without fear or favour regardless of who may be cast with the shadow that such cases throw. Every child of whom the department may be notified as a possible subject of abuse or whom the department in the past has held in its care deserves to have their case reviewed. Circumstances change very rapidly and the staff demand required to do such a thorough job is beyond the current staffing levels.

This royal commission is essential not only for those with grievances outside the department but also for the wellbeing of the staff who need to have the cloud that lingers over them lifted. Cost should not be a consideration in preserving the welfare of what is our greatest responsibility: our children. We found money for Lang Park. Why not for these children?