



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

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DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES; CHILD ABUSE

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (6.36 p.m.): I rise to support the opposition's motion with regard to this most important issue. This Beattie Labor government is more interested in protecting ministers than protecting children. The minister, as we have just heard, has tried again to claim that they have acted in a speedy way and in a responsible way. Yet only a few months ago we saw the state budget and there was not one extra child protection officer funded in that budget. I repeat: not one extra child protection officer was funded. When this issue was raised by the opposition—in fact, we put forward our policy position; we pledged an initiative of additional staff in this area—the government bagged us. This minister bagged it. She criticised it. Yet she has not provided for one extra child protection officer in this area.

Then we saw the almighty backflip when they tried to claim that they had really been working on it except they had forgotten about the budget process. Then they announced additional officers. So when this minister says that they have got policies and we do not, I say that the only policy they have with respect to employing additional officers is the one that we had initiated and we had announced. This government has failed to have a process and a system to identify and focus on these issues.

We are looking at two matters here. The first is the ability of this minister and her predecessor, Anna Bligh, acting under the existing rules and their obligations of duty of care as the ministers responsible for protecting children. Then there is the other issue of the rules that need to be identified and changed. We have heard about the child reviews in the Ombudsman's report. This is a policy area that has been set down by the department. But other state governments have legislated in this area. They have legislated for it to be mandatory because the issue of having independent and factual reviews of child deaths is something that requires legislation to support it. It has to move past the policy issues. It is time that we saw a critical analysis of the data in this area. But not only should the coroner, the police and the department undertake the necessary reviews of these deaths and incidents; there must also be systematic review, which has not been provided for by this minister, which has not been provided for by the Premier.

I would also like to make note that the Premier said that he wanted disciplinary action against officers who failed to protect children. That is interesting because he does not talk about taking disciplinary action against his ministers who had failed to act in a timely manner. I would also like to table a policy document from the Royal Australasian College of Physicians—its health and social policy with regard to protecting children. It is everybody's business, particularly with regard to the issue of child death review panels.

I also want to make mention of the fact that this government has a culture of secrecy. It is more interested in how it spins the story than how it fixes the issues. We saw that when the government was embarrassed by the performance measure that showed that 5,500 children were waiting on a waitlist for final assessment after initial notification as to whether there should be support or intervention in their possible child abuse. What was the government's reaction? It scrapped that performance measure! But what did it put in its place? That is a great mystery. We do not have real accountability as to what is happening with the children who are awaiting assessment, who need the necessary support and sometimes intervention. So the government changes the performance measure when it is embarrassed. But it does not put an accountability system in place.

Mr Livingstone interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member for Ipswich West under standing order 123A.

Miss SIMPSON: What about the issue of case workers—those who are on the front line? We have already heard from my colleague that they have not had training made available to them. That issue has been well documented. But when we ask about their caseload and the cases that they are carrying, that is also a measure that the department does not come forward with. To quote another minister in cabinet, 'You cannot manage what you cannot measure.' Is it not convenient when the government throws the measures out the window and fails to manage them?

Tragically, children are being let down. We want to see a better system. We also want to see ministerial responsibility, not just a Premier who talks about disciplining case workers and then fails to tell us what their caseload is, what the resources are at the pointy end of the service and, essentially, how many children are now waiting. Last year we knew that 5,500 were waiting. That measure was scrapped. So how many children do not have that voice—children who are out there in the system, whose stories are being suppressed by the lack of accountability? There needs to be a new approach to this issue. There needs to be an independent, legislated approach to this issue.