



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

Hansard 7 October 2003

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Ombudsman: Baby Kate Report

Hon. J. C. SPENCE (Mount Gravatt—ALP) (Minister for Families and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Disability Services and Minister for Seniors) (10.09 a.m.): On Saturday I announced that the audit process I established in the Department of Families has uncovered a foster family who appear to be misusing the authority and trust the state has placed in them. A senior public servant has now been stood aside while a CMC investigation takes place.

Child abuse in all its forms is repugnant and let there be no doubt about my personal commitment and determination to see Queensland children better protected. I say again today that I will leave no stone unturned. As distressing as these cases are to confront, the hotline and the audit that I established have again revealed faults in the system. Similarly, yesterday's Ombudsman's report, while clearly stating that the actions of family services officers were not responsible for the death of a baby, signalled shortcomings in decision making and practices that need to be improved.

2003 is the watershed in the history of child protection in this state. Never before has a government shown the commitment to tackling the systematic issues surrounding this area and backed the overhaul with funding. We know what the problems are and we have the plan to fix them. Major reform is not just about resourcing; it is about changing a culture, introducing new levels of professionalism, new levels of accountability and new work practices. Our staff and their decisions are under extraordinary scrutiny—the Ombudsman recognises this—and they are facing a continuing program of reform. The Ombudsman's report into baby Kate endorsed the general direction of our reform agenda. Many of the issues raised in the report are being implemented. There are a number of areas that can and will be improved.

This government is committed to rebuilding the system—not playing politics—and we will not walk away from the tough challenges. The initiatives that I have put in place to improve this department have already revealed the faults that have existed in the child protection system in this state for decades. There is no doubt that a lot of mistakes have been made in the past when it comes to child protection. The Forde report gave us a good idea about the seriousness of them. Now we have a Children's Commissioner, the Ombudsman, a Children's Tribunal, the CMC, the Coroner, and the internal mechanisms of a hotline and an audit to ensure that the most vulnerable children in this state have greater protection than they have ever had before. They deserve that protection; it is their right and our responsibility.

At the end of the day, while I do not condone some of the recent examples of inappropriate decision making, we should not broad brush child protection workers. They have a very unenviable task which requires great dedication and we need to acknowledge the difficulty of the work they do and the fact that every day they work to improve the lives of some of Queensland's most vulnerable children.