



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

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SESSIONAL ORDERS, WHISTLEBLOWERS

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) (6.15 p.m.): I am pleased to second the amendment moved by the Premier. In the past two weeks we have seen the opposition trying to make a case that I named a whistleblower and it is trying it again tonight. It is nonsense, as I have outlined to the House on two separate occasions. I am not going to stand here and yet again explain the intent of whistleblower protection, how it can be obtained or the penalties for making a false or misleading statement. The opposition embarrassed itself today by moving this motion in the House. It has embarrassed itself yet again tonight by showing that it does not understand the whistleblower protection legislation and I have to assume that it is ignoring the facts.

The facts are that on 7 October 2003 the acting workplace health and safety representative from the Wacol area office sent an email to me, the subject being drug use/near death incident in DSQ. In this email he made an allegation that on Saturday, 4 October a client in the care of residential care officers from the Wacol area office opened a cupboard and drank down a full bottle of hospital grade disinfectant and that it is believed by other staff at this house that this staff member was in fact stoned after using drugs whilst on the shift where the client was injured. He went on to allege that an ambulance was not called for a period of two and a half hours after the incident.

It is a serious allegation. This officer was not a primary witness to the alleged event. He does not state in his allegation who the witnesses were. This matter has been referred to the CMC by the Director-General of DSQ for investigation, as it should be. If the Leader of the Opposition believed his mantra of positive politics, that is where he would have sent it. Instead, we have the sight of him salivating over a possible headline. Was he worried about whether the allegation was correct? No. Was he interested in establishing the truth? No. Was he in the slightest bit concerned about the reputations and lives that he might smear in the process? No. Was he chasing a cheap headline? Of course he was!

This allegation is under investigation and that investigation has not yet finished. I repeat again what I stated in the parliament on 15 October: no officer has sought or has been granted any whistleblower protection in relation to allegations that a DSQ client consumed disinfectant because an RCO was stoned on drugs. This officer made this particular allegation and released his own details into the public domain through numerous recipients of the email. But let me make these points: by throwing these untested allegations into the public arena, the reputation of every hardworking residential care officer has been smeared.

Through unproven innuendo, every residential care officer has been labelled unprofessional, uncaring and accused of criminal behaviour. If anyone has evidence of inappropriate behaviour, of criminal behaviour, then they have a responsibility to take it to an appropriate body for investigation, and an appropriate body does not include the Leader of the Opposition. By raising these untested allegations in parliament, the opposition has denied every RCO the basic right to defend themselves and given credence to serious allegations that may or may not be true.

The responsible course of action here would have been to ensure that they were sent to an appropriate investigation body. If they are proved to be unfounded, will the Opposition Leader apologise for the smearing of good, hardworking people?

Mr Schwarten: Of course he won't!

Ms SPENCE: I doubt that he would have the decency to do that. The opposition's attack is based on two false premises: firstly, that this person had whistleblower protection for these particular allegations or that whistleblower protection gives people the unfettered right to make continuous allegations against their work colleagues and that is absolute nonsense; secondly, that raising these allegations in parliament somehow replaces the process of investigation and the testing of allegations and that is also nonsense.

The Leader of the Opposition must understand that cheap headlines have a human cost. Raising in the public arena unsubstantiated allegations against residential care officers about the treatment of clients only serves to cause unnecessary distress to families who rely on us to look after their loved ones. I have had the mothers and the fathers of these families ring my office because they do not know which house the member was talking about. They do not know. The member has made them all frightened. I am not going to walk away from having these allegations properly investigated and, if necessary—if they are substantiated—exposed in the public domain. But that should be done after they have been proven.