



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Wednesday, 24 August 2005

CHILD SAFETY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (11.48 am): Abused children are on waiting lists to be seen for assessment and thus help intervention, and there are not enough child safety staff to deal with this. This is because of the mismanagement of the Beattie government. There are awful hidden waiting lists of abused children who need assistance, not a top-heavy bureaucracy that does not care for its front-line staff and its front-line carers. There have been the glossy documents patting the Beattie government on the back for what it is doing in the area of child safety, but carers and staff are telling a very different story. Children are under stress. This government wants to talk about federal IR laws and Telstra and will not deal with the mess in its own backyard, such as the failing child safety department and health department. The most vulnerable are suffering.

I want to read into the record a letter from a carer who told me their view of the child safety regime which is totally relevant to the issue we are talking about here today. The carer stated—

During the years we have been connected with the Department as Carers ... in spite of the hype concerning the implementation of the CMC recommendations, a number of Carers as well as ourselves, have noticed a steady decline in the level of (i) efficiency, (ii) transparency, (iii) trust and (iv) carer numbers, in the region.

All of the above, obviously, will have a detrimental effect on the safety and welfare of the children and young people whose care is entrusted to the Department.

I put those comments on the record because, ultimately, legislation will fail unless we look after the carers and the staff who are on the front line, who are there to do the caring of the children, who are there to provide the assessment that is necessary in order to bring about support and in many cases, unfortunately, the need for intervention when children are at great risk.

This bill before the House is the third tranche of legislation in response to the recommendations of the Crime and Misconduct Commission's Protecting Children report. As our shadow minister has already identified, this government was dragged kicking and screaming to have an inquiry into child safety, and it only came about after the Leader of the Opposition released information to the media in 2003 which proved that foster-children had been suffering ongoing abuse with the knowledge of the department of family services over many years. This happened despite the existence of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the provision of specific legislative provisions that seemed to be continually passed over by the minister for families. Like the health debacle, the Premier and the minister resisted the call for a proper inquiry until the evidence produced by the opposition and the media made their position insupportable and they finally had to have an inquiry.

Our concern is that we can have the legislation and we can have the glossy brochures, but we have not yet seen a system that has provided support to those who are on the front line, to those who are actually dealing with the issues, and we still have hidden waiting lists of children who are waiting to be assessed, and staff are concerned about decisions made to downgrade children on those waiting lists and are concerned that their case loads are untenable. It is due to the untenable case loads that, unfortunately, we continue to see a high number of carers and staff leave the system. But we do need experienced people who have the ability to provide timely and appropriate assistance to our children most in need.

I want to pick up on a point that our shadow minister emphasised and that I think is so valid. There is still concern about the lack of monitoring of the department's performance and the reporting back to this

parliament. We as opposition members are still hearing directly from staff and carers on the front line—for example, I received that letter, part of which I read into *Hansard*. We are not seeing real accountability of the government to this parliament as far as performance indicators are concerned and in terms of what is really happening. While we have a lack of accountability, a lack of real change as far as support on the front line is concerned and the continual turmoil with staff who fail to get support from this government, I fear that child safety will continue to be a black hole of distress and turmoil.

There are ways forward but, unfortunately, the way forward so far has been to undermine staff and carers and not to provide an open and accountable system that truly supports children. God help us with the outcome of the health inquiry if its recommendations are handled in a similar way. I endorse the comments of our shadow minister. I call, once again, for some honesty about the waiting lists of these children and the need to lessen the burden of the case loads that staff are facing. This is something we know about not only in my own area of the Sunshine Coast but also throughout Queensland.