



Speech by

# Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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## DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY

**Mrs MENKENS** (Burdekin—NPA) (12.10 pm): The capacity and capability of the Department of Child Safety to perform its duties under the present government are becoming increasingly questionable as each week we continue to hear of further serious allegations against the department. These are allegations from concerned parents and carers who have had their children snatched away without sufficient reason or explanation and, conversely, allegations of failure to act properly and in time to notifications of serious abuse.

The 2004 CMC report into the abuse of children in foster care raised issues such as failed case assessments and planning, chronic workplace issues, foster care in disarray and a lack in accountability as fundamental problems. Unfortunately, these problems still exist today. The facts as the coalition sees them are very clear and unequivocal. The foremost principle in child safety must be the interests of the child and the environment in which they live. Government has a duty to protect our children through empowering intervention if children are at risk. Responsible parenting must be encouraged by the government, and the government has a duty to provide a supportive environment for families and must acknowledge the significant role a family unit plays in society.

There has been a failure in the past to attract and retain quality staff because the continuing culture of bullying and intimidation within the department has led to very low staff morale. The department has failed to train, mentor and support staff to a level where they can effectively and comprehensively carry out their duties and are able to meet the very stringent requirements placed on them. It has failed to service the needs of its clients in large part because of the chronic staff shortages and poor internal systems. There is a clear lack of communication between areas of the department. This leads to systemic failures of the system and often results in knee-jerk reactions without sufficient investigation or review of complex cases. Inexperienced staff are being forced to make decisions beyond their capacity and training, making sometimes poor decisions that greatly impact on families. There is little or no follow-through to assist families to rebuild after children return from out-of-home care.

Since the last election we have had a new department, a new minister and several budgets, but we are still experiencing a singular failing to make any impact on the levels of child abuse in this state, and the fundamental problems identified in the inquiry's report still exist. In government, the coalition will concentrate on getting the priorities right. We have a clear focus on the three separate areas identified as crucial in combating child abuse, these being early intervention, child protection and ongoing family support systems. The coalition will improve the department's working environment in order to attract good staff by providing staff support systems and will work to rebuild the image of the department to become a preferred place of employment rather than a last resort. A high priority will be to improve communication systems internally and externally throughout the department.

As part of our policy, the coalition will have a focus on positive parenting and place a much higher priority than currently exists on providing ongoing support and positive mentoring of families where children are deemed to be vulnerable. Maternal and family experience will be recognised—as well as formal training with department staff—and will be utilised by appointing family mentors where needed to help at-risk families deal with their own unique circumstances. The coalition will immediately review current

working situations with non-government organisations and encourage further cooperative systems to better utilise existing resources and coordinate efforts rather than duplicate them and will place a much stronger focus on adoption as an option and an opportunity.

Finally, we recognise the critical importance of effective prevention and early intervention services in reducing the risk of abuse, harm or neglect of children and we will fast-track initiatives designed to reduce instances of abuse in the first place. The coalition is determined to provide a better structure and a stronger focus to the Department of Child Safety so that it can concentrate on its core duty of protecting those who cannot protect themselves.