



Speech by

## Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Wednesday, 9 August 2006

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### APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL (ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B)

**Mrs MENKENS** (Burdekin—NPA) (3.31 pm): I rise to participate in this debate on the Estimates Committee B report. In relation to Child Safety, whilst the opposition does welcome the increased funding, concerns remain that the operations of the department have not improved proportionately. During the hearings I made reference to the data which indicated that there was considerable disquiet amongst staff regarding progress. Whilst the minister dismissed this criticism as being outdated, it is instructive to compare the criticisms with the statements made by the minister during the same hearings 12 months ago. The minister did confirm that there were at least three occasions when the department failed to respond to 24-hour notifications within the required time frame, although he was able to confirm that these cases were prioritised and responded to within 36 hours.

The opposition continues to have concerns with the time being taken to implement the recommendations of the CMC's protecting children report, with 15 still to be implemented some 2½ years after the report was published, including the highest priority recommendations of the implementation of the integrated computer database and measurement of workloads and appropriate staffing levels. I have noted the minister's absolute assurance that these recommendations will be implemented by January 2007, but the opposition still is concerned about the government's ability to meet that deadline. I also note the minister's undertaking that the integrated client management system is to be fully implemented this year. This system should significantly improve case management, but it is critical that the system is evaluated and stress tested prior to rollout to ensure its stability. Given the significant change that Child Safety front-line staff have undergone in the past two years, the implementation of a problematic core information system could seriously impede case responses.

The minister also made mention of a number of inquiries regarding the department's operations. I have expressed concern that many such inquiries take place internally and no report on the findings is made public. The minister inevitably refers to the necessity for privacy, and I certainly acknowledge his genuine concern to protect the identity of the children involved. However, I believe that the outcome of these matters needs to be subject to public scrutiny and parliamentary scrutiny, which was a key commitment expected by the CMC. It is okay for junior members of a department to access this knowledge, but it is not okay for members of parliament at times to be given access. We all know that there are two sides to every story. It does help a member if they are able to have both sides of the story, because this is not a political area and I do not believe that members of parliament are trying to play politics with vulnerable children.

The opposition does acknowledge the considerable progress made and in particular the continued dedication and hard work of the staff who work in one of the most complex and difficult areas of the government. I would also like to commend the minister on the 'Improving permanency for children in care' discussion paper that was released, I think, yesterday and with the proposed permanent parenting order. I would be very interested to see how this rolls out because I think this is an excellent initiative, and I look forward to hearing how that progresses.

I move on now to Health and express my deep concern about the ongoing problems with chronic bed shortages at the Townsville Hospital. Recently the Minister for Health belatedly announced that the Townsville Hospital was to receive 22 new beds to help cope with chronic access block problems, but when the government released its plan to increase bed numbers statewide over the next three years there were no more beds planned for Townsville—nothing for at least another three years. This is despite official figures showing that on weekdays at least every single day there have been between two and 20 patients—nine this morning alone—waiting on a trolley in a corridor for a bed. Curiously, the figures for weekends, when one would expect higher admission rates, are not freely available. During the week they are available, but weekends are not.

In May I brought to the attention of the House the extended waiting times of up to 130 days for oncology patients in Townsville awaiting radiation treatment. I was very pleased to see reports recently that these times have been halved, but only because the staff and nurses at the Townsville Hospital agreed to work extra shifts to reduce the backlog. Please note that this did not happen because the department allocated more resources but because it called on existing staff already under intense pressure to do more. I pay tribute to those staff who gave up family and personal time to reduce the suffering of their patients and I express my disgust that the minister has offered no better option.