



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard Wednesday, 8 August 2007

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (12.34 pm): Before I address the report of Estimates Committee B I raise the issue of the efficacy of estimates committees in their current form. As I mentioned in a similar situation last year when delivering my contribution to the Appropriation Bill 2006, the role of the opposition in a Westminster system is to constructively criticise the performance of the government, with the objective of improving transparency and competency in the conveyance of its responsibilities. Attempts to probe issues deserving of closer scrutiny and therefore expose ministers to accountability are discouraged which serves to defeat the very purpose of these committees. I have recorded a number of items in my statement of reservation which highlight defects within the present structure.

As I proceed, I would like to place on record my appreciation to Deborah Jeffrey and the research staff and also to the ministers and their departmental staff. Furthermore, I express my thanks for the even-handed manner in which the chair, the honourable member for Cleveland, managed this committee.

During the estimates hearings the Minister for Health announced an external independent review across Queensland of the needle and syringe program but gave no time lines and no allocation of a budget for the implementation of it. Obviously the minister has been forced to acknowledge the failures and gaps being discovered by a system that clearly needs an urgent review. Grave concerns about the way the service was operating contrary to Commonwealth legislation caused the coalition to call for a review and monitoring of this harm minimisation program at the beginning of this year.

In reply to my question as to whether there was a mental health prototype in Queensland involving the transfer of public mental health patients into an open ward in a private facility, the minister had to source the answer from one of his departmental staff. By doing this the minister does not inspire confidence in Queensland's public health system when he can sign off on a three-year contract yet know nothing about the details and therefore none of the potential implications and risks.

Acknowledging the short time allocated for this debate, I will refer to a few of the items of concern in Child Safety. It was disconcerting to hear from the minister that child health passports, which were introduced in January 2007, will not be provided for all children in care until 2010. It was found in the trial that 66 out of 70 children had serious health problems and yet despite these statistics the government has failed to facilitate cross-the-board implementation of this very important document.

This government has frequently boasted about the capabilities of its much heralded computer system, ICMS. Despite having this system, the minister has confessed that the government is not in a position to actually have accurate and up-to-date statewide data on children in care. Of great concern is that in some instances the system does not know the current location of children, nor can it provide whether siblings have been placed together.

Making policy on the run was evidenced when the minister admitted in regard to One Chance at Childhood that she had 'an answer that is not quite certain yet' but this government is quite prepared to rush in and throw \$12 million at an initiative which it clearly has not thought through. No explanation as to

how this program will work, exactly where specialist staff will be placed and whether they will be shared between Child Safety service centres is worrying when one considers the permanent implications of this initiative.

The minister has stated that she does not feel there is a need to look at whether we should set maximum limits for the number of children a foster-carer can have under their roof saying she has no complaints about a foster-carer household being too big. As I mentioned in the House today, there are serious complaints that require urgent investigation, and I am pleased to learn that the minister's department will act swiftly on the case I highlighted today.

Overcrowding is not conducive to the best interests of any of these abused children, yet they are crammed like sardines in a tin while the department is paying around \$3,700 per fortnight to the foster-carers. Closer scrutiny of foster-carer licensing is critical as situations like those mentioned above are unacceptable and not helpful in the healthy development of these children. During the hearing I asked a question about the licensing of foster-carers and whether or not any children had been left in the care of foster-carers who were not licensed. The minister's response related solely to blue cards. However, I was also particularly interested in the three tiers of licensing which the minister detailed during the 2006 hearing. I remain concerned that not all foster-carers may, in fact, be fully licensed.

Admissions that case plan reviews are not all up to date and that the quality of the plans can be improved highlight a major procedural deficiency as these plans are the backbone of decision making for a child.

Kinship care is at 58 per cent in New South Wales but in Queensland it is only 28 per cent, reflecting potentially flawed procedures and lack of follow through by staff to use kinship care as the first alternative and this, in turn, has contributed to the overburdening of foster-carers. The minister is struggling to deal with the growing problems in this portfolio, particularly in the areas of staffing and collation and communication of data. Meanwhile children are suffering. I appeal to the minister to approach all of these areas with the care and concern that I know that she has displayed in taking on this portfolio.