



Speech by

Rachel Nolan

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (5.42 pm): I rise to add my support to the Community Services Bill brought to the House by the communities minister, Warren Pitt, and wish to commend him on the consideration and compassion he has brought to the development of this legislation, as indeed he brings to all of his ministerial responsibilities. The primary responsibility of government is to help people. Ironically, given that public regard for government has diminished in recent decades, the extent to which government actually does help people by providing disability services, public health, advocacy services and the like has in fact increased massively in recent decades, and we do that to a large extent by funding community based non-government organisations.

In Ipswich these organisations are myriad—Allara Association, FOCAL Extended, the Ipswich Women's Centre Against Domestic Violence, the Ipswich Regional Advocacy Service, Ozcare and St Mary's Employment Group. There are more than I can begin to name. As this network of social services grows both in number and in resourcing, it is timely that the government works with the sector to move from the historically ad hoc funding basis to establish professional standards of accountability and service provision. That is what this bill does. As the explanatory notes outline, the bill will achieve this by establishing a process for community organisations to become eligible for assistance and clearly identifying the types of assistance that can be provided to community organisations. On the other side, it improves government's ability to deal with funded organisations that are going off the rails by establishing a monitoring and enforcement framework which can be triggered by noncompliance with the bill and giving the minister power to set standards for service provision.

To outline the need for such changes, I want to deviate for a moment from those formal guidelines to tell members a story, perhaps the likes of which they will be familiar with from their own experiences in their own electorates. The story is of an NGO in Ipswich that went badly off the rails. In the late 1990s the Ipswich Women's Health Centre was one of the best community based organisations in the district. It had a great committee of strong local women from a range of backgrounds, including health, a senior female police officer and generally there was an accountant and a solicitor, as any good committee should have. It was ably run by an outstanding local woman, Cathy North. It was well funded thanks to the provision that had been made for it by the then Treasurer and member for Ipswich, David Hamill, and it provided a range of services, such as sexual assault counselling and other things, to Ipswich women from a range of backgrounds.

Despite this being what one would think was a really strong, well-resourced and well-organised community based organisation, in 2002 things started to go bad as a new element of radical feminists, largely from Brisbane, began to influence this organisation which, while certainly feminist, had been more moderate in its outlook. These women came along and began quite actively to change the service's focus from service provision to quite blatant political activism. A new far more radical coordinator took over, but after concerns about her performance and the direction in which she was taking the centre the committee terminated her employment.

At the AGM this coordinator brought a group of radical friends from Brisbane. They moved a motion of no confidence in the longstanding committee, elected a new committee—ignoring the constitutional provision for nominations to be received a fortnight out from the AGM—took over the organisation,

reappointed the old coordinator and within a very short space of time ran it into the ground. It was, as the member for Hervey Bay says, a good old-fashioned stack. By March 2003 Queensland Health had defunded the service amid allegations of fraud and declining service provision. Queensland Health was forced to bring the service into the department, where it continues to run today after an enormous amount of work on the part of Cathy North, Ruth Gregory and others. So it has today at great expense to the taxpayer been resurrected and is again a terrific Queensland Health-run organisation in Ipswich.

I tell this story not just for its own sake but because it reveals the fundamental vulnerability of community based organisations. While all this unfolded, Queensland Health was unwilling to intervene until service provision was affected, but by then, despite my entreaties and the entreaties of the committee, it was clearly too late. At the time I wrote to the then health minister suggesting a number of changes around the funding and administration of these important service providers. The suggestions I made centred on a closer, more transparent and more professional relationship between the funding department and the NGO. I am pleased to see the gist of those suggestions being applied in this bill today.

NGOs continue not just to provide services but to be central parts of the fabric of our community. Those people who work in them and who voluntarily give their time on management committees are, in the vast majority, good people serving those who are often more vulnerable in our community. The model of community based service provision is, however, often small scale and vulnerable. It is easy for NGOs to simply let their management obligations get on top of them or, as was the case with the Ipswich Women's Health Centre, to be swamped by pernicious elements. For that reason, this bill's aim of strengthening non-government organisations is vital if government is to meet its core responsibility of helping people. I commend the bill to the House.