



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Wednesday, 14 May 2008

MOTION: PUBLIC SERVANTS, WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (6.05 pm): Listening to Labor members opposite, one would think that utopia was in operation in Queensland's Public Service—that light streams from the heavens, that there is peace and goodwill on earth and no fear abounds, particularly within the ranks of the Queensland health service. It is that service in particular that I want to draw attention to, because I hate to inform parliamentary Labor members but utopia in fact does not abound. The reality is that the culture of the upper bureaucracy of Queensland Health still abounds and has not changed since it was revealed as being a rotten culture of bullying and a rotten culture that really was one of fear and suppressed the sharing of information that would have led to better health outcomes for patients.

This is very relevant when talking about whistleblowing legislation. This is very relevant when talking about people's awareness of the letter of the law of whistleblowing legislation and also whether the culture of how that is applied has changed. Given the contributions of Labor members, I hate to say again that we seem to have a government that is unaware that the culture has not changed. Perhaps it was not listening in recent months when we heard about the issues of nurse safety in far-north Queensland where once again the health department bureaucracy had covered up—covered up reports from staff about their valid concerns which unfortunately resulted in the alleged rape of a nurse. Since then we have also heard about many other incidents where people who feared for their own personal safety or who had genuine concerns about public safety and standards in the health system found that they were not listened to and were bullied as a result.

There are some fantastic people operating in Queensland Health, but the culture of the bureaucracy at its upper levels has not changed. That is why I strongly support the efforts of my colleagues in bringing forward this motion, because it aims to highlight that people should have not only the letter of the law but also a government and a parliament that supports the efforts of our public servants to do their job—that is, to be able to operate without fear of their own bureaucracy, let alone fear of other public dangers. Quite clearly, as we have seen with people who have sought to bring information forward through whistleblower provisions, those people often do not feel that they are adequately protected. I challenge Labor members to not just talk about making this legislation more openly available and people being educated about it; I challenge them to actually support the public servants who want to see a culture change where they are able to speak more freely, certainly with members of parliament, without feeling that they will be pilloried for doing so.

When I was the shadow health spokesperson for the coalition I was astounded by the number of people who approached me with some quite distressing situations within the health department. Of course when you raise these issues publicly, protecting their privacy because of their fear of the code of conduct that was operating under this government, the government would brush it off and say, 'It's not true,' or 'People are whingeing,' or 'They can complain within the system'. Guess what? These people had often put their concerns forward within the system, but they knew that they were not protected adequately by the whistleblower provisions in reality and they knew that there were other ways that they could be penalised.

It is time we saw not only a change in the culture of Queensland Health by leadership that values its staff and wants to see better health outcomes; it is also time there was a change in the culture of this government by an understanding that people want to serve Queenslanders as good public servants and want to know that the letter of the law is also supported by a parliament that understands the difficult job they often find themselves doing. In reflecting on the challenges in Queensland Health, we know that under this government there has been a greater focus on controlling information rather than using information internally in order to improve outcomes. The government has been so concerned about criticisms that it will suppress information that needs to come out in order to improve patient outcomes and provide a better health system.

I strongly support this motion moved by my colleague that is before the parliament, because it is about providing Queenslanders with a Public Service that is able to serve without fear or favour and which knows that there are those who are attempting to bring about a culture of change to support those who are out there doing a good job.