



Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Wednesday, 14 May 2008

MOTION: PUBLIC SERVANTS, WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (5.30 pm): I move—

That this House:

Supports an open and professional public sector and calls on the State Government to undertake an awareness campaign through advertised media and Queensland public sector publications, alerting public servants to the provisions of the Whistleblowers Protection Act that allow them to speak to Members of the Legislative Assembly freely and without fear of retribution about practices in their workplace and that such communication is not in breach of their Code of Conduct.

I want to start by looking at the final report of the Queensland Health Systems Review written by Peter Forster. At page 58 under the heading 'Perverse Use of the Code of Conduct', which I have referred to in the motion, he states—

It is considered by the Review that on occasions the Queensland Health Code of Conduct has been used as a tool to bully or intimidate Queensland Health staff. It is written in a style typically reflective of the formal prescriptive and bureaucratic aspects of culture, rather than an inspiring patient or consumer centred approach.

Over the past five years since the Bundaberg Hospital tragedy we have heard a lot in this House, in the media and in our wider communities about the problems in public hospitals and about health reform. Today I move a motion that will bring Queensland one step closer to curing the ills of our public health system. In order to understand an organisation or system, firstly we must examine its cultural foundations. Looking at the culture that underpins Queensland Health, it is not hard to see why our health system is sick. When looking at the culture of Queensland Health, Peter Forster stated at page 56 of his report—

It was reported during district visits that bullying and intimidation on the one hand, and blaming and avoiding responsibility on the other, typify part of Queensland Health's culture. Descriptions such as 'tribalism', 'tokenistic consultation', 'no culture of teamwork' and a 'culture of power and control' were repeated themes throughout the consultation.

Queensland Health, along with other governmental departments, is plagued with cultural problems. Queensland Health is built upon a sinister foundation of control, blame laying and retribution. The department resembles a malevolent dictatorship where arbitrary orders on clinical matters are made at the top rather than on the front line in operating theatres. Budgets are slashed, staff numbers are frozen and resources to our public hospitals are robbed by bureaucrats whose primary objective is not achieving better clinical outcomes for patients and improving the lives of Queenslanders but presenting a pleasing balance sheet to the Treasurer and health minister at budget time.

Occasionally when good managers can overcome these challenges and make headway in clearing emergency departments, clearing waiting lists and ensuring that more Queenslanders are treated—such as we saw last year with Dr David Thiele at Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital—they feel the full force of the executive razor gang. They are publicly embarrassed and victimised, which has a destructive impact on staff morale. As the alternative health minister, every week I receive phone calls and correspondence from doctors, nurses, allied health staff, administrative staff and patients testifying about the chronic problems in Queensland's public health system. Yet of these complaints and pleas for help, very few people want to go on the record. Staff are scared for their jobs if they dissent against the autocracy driving the health system.

Earlier this month I was able to read firsthand about the problems plaguing our health system. A senior emergency doctor in a major Queensland public hospital gave a heart-rending account of life on the front line. He told a story of chronic bed shortages, organisational problems and his sheer frustration at the powerbrokers who refuse to do anything about the problems that can cost lives in our hospitals. It was an alarming warning. He said, 'I am your doctor, too, and one day the life lost may be yours.' In an open letter to all Queenslanders he pleads to the executive, 'We are drowning down here in the emergency department. I am your doctor, too, and I am tired of waiting for the problem to be fixed.' His thoughts resonated with Queenslanders, who are frustrated and angry at the ignorance and the incompetence of this government in fixing the life-threatening problems in our hospitals. But, as with most people who speak out against the system, Queenslanders cannot put a face to a name. For all his courage and leadership in bringing these matters to our attention, like all his colleagues this doctor is afraid of the consequences of dissent. He cannot afford to lose his job. Nor can his peers, who have families and mortgages they need to support. If they dare to speak, their words are not listened to. Instead, they lose their jobs. The confidentiality clause in their employment contract states as much.

Staff are faced with a decision: speak out and get fired, or put up and shut up and take home a pay cheque. Of the medicos and medical staff I have met who have blown the whistle, most of them had to resign from their position in Queensland Health before they gained the confidence to speak out. We have seen this with oncology services at the Gold Coast Hospital. A nurse for whom I have great respect was able to lead a crusade to secure better services, but only after she gave up her government job to do so. There are many more examples of this. Just this morning I was in contact with a whistleblower who said to me, 'Unfortunately, I have paid a very severe price for acting on my professional conscience: the complete loss of professional earnings, loss of my practice, my professional reputation, my marriage and my family.' It is an extraordinarily high price to pay for justice. No-one should have to pay it.

It is not just Queensland Health staff who are afraid. Patients fear talking to me in case their discord finds them falling to the bottom of long waiting lists. Patients want to get treated but they do not want to be sent to the bottom of the queue. That is how afraid patients are of the system. We live in a democracy. It is outrageous that someone living in Queensland in 2008 should be so fearful about speaking out against their elected government that they are self-censoring because of fear of retaliation by those in power.

Clearly, there is a severe cultural problem in Queensland Health, as well as other government departments—Justice, Child Safety and Infrastructure, to name just a few. If the Premier is going to fix the problems she needs to commit her government to full and transparent reform of the organisational structures and systems on which the executive operates. The Premier, cabinet and caucus should all support an open and professional public sector.

That is why today the Queensland coalition is calling on the state government to undertake an awareness campaign through advertised media and Queensland public sector publications which draws attention to the provisions of the Whistleblowers Protection Act that allow them to speak to members of parliament, freely and without fear of retribution, about practices in their workplace. In the health area this would give front-line health staff security in the knowledge that they can help improve Queensland's public health system without fear of reprisal.

When we are talking about health reform, greater funding alone is not the solution. Certainly any increase to existing expenditure is absolutely necessary to ensure that our hospitals are well resourced, well staffed and able to cope with the massive demand being experienced across health services as a result of population growth. However, throwing buckets of money into a department beleaguered by the systemic problems of Queensland Health is neither going to fix the system nor provide the best return on investment.

This government and the health minister have been far too focused on fixing the system from the top down. It does not take a rocket scientist to realise that the best solutions to the problems plaguing our hospitals lie with the people on the ground who actually work in hospitals. It is not only a person sitting behind a mahogany desk in Charlotte Street who should be dictating to doctors in emergency departments how they should be treating patients, especially with other demanding decisions to be considered at the coalface. Doctors should be given more clinical freedom because at the end of the day they are the ones who are going to be held responsible for patient treatment.

Queensland is blessed with strong and dedicated health staff. Without them, the health system would have collapsed long before now. The Bligh government has a legal and a moral duty to look after its staff and provide them with a safe, happy work environment. Not only will this address staff retention issues, it will produce better clinical outcomes for patients.

Before I conclude I want to refer to something else that Peter Forster said in his final report on the Queensland Health Systems Review. In the 'Overview of the Current Structure' at page 68 he stated—

Queensland Health has a bureaucratic, mechanistic structure characterised by highly centralised formal authority and hierarchical layers of decision making. The high level of centralised control reflects an earlier history when the organisation was much smaller and when generalist managers controlled central office and hospitals.

Under the heading 'Problems with the Current Structure', he also stated—

Queensland Health's mechanistic structure does not support a responsive, integrated and efficient health system.

What we are seeing from health workers and patients is that they are afraid to come to us and speak about the problems that are there for fear of the retribution that will come from those above. In order to bring the insidious problems that hinder our health system to an end, we need to start talking openly and frankly about the problems. That way the government might start to make headway in turning the corner when it comes to Queensland Health. That is why today I am asking the Premier and the health minister to commit to bona fide health reforms and measures—such as guaranteeing whistleblower rights—that will give the public health system back to Queenslanders.