

DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT — BUDGET

Motion

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [3.51 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the Barnett government for failing to quarantine essential front-line services from budget cuts, in particular the Department for Child Protection and Family Support.

It is interesting that we have just had a bipartisan debate on the revision of GST funding for this state. Bipartisan debates on motions moved by members are not particularly common, but the thing that interests me about all these motions that flooded onto the notice paper from the government's side of this chamber about nine months ago is that the government rarely finds enough speakers to take up its full allotted time. That, of course, is never the case on this side of the house because when we move motions, every single member on this side of the house feels passionately about them and will not be denied their opportunity to have their say. Clearly, that is not the case on the other side of the chamber. That is a shame because occasionally we get motions that contain at least the seeds of good ideas.

Members will notice that this motion moved in my name is couched in fairly general terms. That is because what we see affecting a very large majority of the Western Australian community is the effects of front-line budget cuts across the range of services provided by the government as well as the resources and services funded by the government and provided through the community. Over the years I have taken a particular interest in child protection, so that is what I will focus on. It is worth drawing honourable members' attention to the fact that when we talk about the work done by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, we must be very careful to point out that this is one particular area of government thinking that if we stay within our silos, or to be more accurate, if we allow ministers, cabinets and governments to allow that thinking to go on within government silos, we get very poor outcomes. That is really what I want to focus on in the 40 minutes allotted to me in this debate.

I could, of course, go through all three service delivery areas of the department and I could pick apart the places where there have been significant cuts to front-line services. I will do a little bit of that, but we have four hours for this debate and I know that my colleagues on this side of the house are all keen to join in the discussion and talk about the situation in their own electorates and what is affecting their communities. I do, however, want to leave myself time to draw particular attention to the fact that when a department is failing to deliver services to the community, it is very important that we break down the barriers that we are inclined to erect around service delivery and look at where this joined-up government is failing to deliver, in particular portfolio areas. I can honestly say that the department itself has performed reasonably well over the last decade or so. It has been a tumultuous time for the department and it is probably fair to say that issues around child protection, child safety and the whole question of mandatory reporting of abuse, neglect and assault of children have really entered the broad consciousness of the community in the last 10 years in a way that had not happened previously. Members must remember that it is only in relatively recent times that we even began to talk openly about topics such as incest. I well remember in the late 1980s or early 1990s when *The Australian Women's Weekly* ran a famous survey on incest. It was an insert in the magazine. The magazine was absolutely inundated by hundreds of thousands of responses from people who wanted to talk about their experiences of incest. All of a sudden, we, as a community, realised that that particular form of abuse was rife throughout our community. Of course, it happens not only in Australia, but throughout the western world.

Since that time we have come to understand that the ways we have traditionally talked about and managed issues of child safety in our community were simply inadequate. Every day, when we listen to radio reports such as *PM* or watch the nightly news, we hear extracts from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Quite frankly, I think everybody in this chamber must feel that red mist descend in front of their eyes when they hear some of the accounts of our past failures. Of course, it would be extraordinarily naive to say the least, and I would go as far as to say extremely dangerous, if we were to believe that those practices had changed or that those problems have been resolved today. The thing that chills me most about those reports is that it is not unlikely that, were we able to dip into the range of institutions that present themselves as being child safe today, we would find similar degrees of misunderstanding, incompetence and malpractice as are now being revealed about past experiences. We can only hope that the royal commission will bring about the kind of quantum change that we are still to effect in Australia.

I am making a general point. These issues about child safety and child protection have begun to be talked about in our community in a different way. The community's expectations of government have changed and the department has made a pretty good job of responding to those changes. In this context, I pay tribute to the two Labor ministers who were instrumental in changing the direction of the department. They were my colleague in the lower house, the member for Mandurah, David Templeman, and the Leader of the Opposition in this house,

Hon Sue Ellery, who was his successor. Those two ministers were the key to effecting those organisational and attitudinal changes in the department that have put nearly 10 years' of change in place. That was marked for me when I started to go through the 2012–13 annual report of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. I read with particular interest the director general's report in the light that Mr Terry Murphy has only another four weeks in the job before he moves on to what I am sure will be calmer if not greener pastures. Mr Murphy has been with the Department for Child Protection and Family Support for almost the whole length of the time of this quantum change in the organisational focus that I have been talking about, and he has led most of that change. I was particularly taken by the tenor and tone of the first three paragraphs of the director general's report in the annual report, which I will now share with honourable members. It reads —

All government departments must stay agile and responsive to the changing needs of the community and the opportunities for more effective work and making a greater impact. A department that it is not innovating and growing in organisational capacity and growing how well its people do the work, will be falling backwards in meeting its challenges.

At the same time an organisation cannot grow and develop and become progressively more effective if it is in relentless pursuit of the latest intellectual wave and is changing in order to be seen as changing.

Getting this balance right is a challenge for governments and their departments. It is particularly pronounced in the field of child protection and family support, where tragedy and contention are inherent in child protection work and these can be widely publicised, while successes pass unnoticed, and the wicked problems we tackle remain a part of the community landscape.

I find those words quite powerful and moving, and they are a fitting tribute to the work that Terry Murphy has done as the director general of the department.

Those words move me because when I framed this motion I wanted to talk about what exactly cuts to front-line services mean. Over the years I have noticed that governments tend to duck and weave when it comes to the definition of front-line services, so I make the point that if we are going to define how well a department or a government is delivering front-line services we ought to be talking to people in communities who are in need of assistance. Some of what I want to talk about today in relation to this motion relate to things that the minister may claim are not front-line services, but I am trying to remove some of the onion skins around the protective cocoon that departments tend to build around themselves and ministers tend to encourage to protect their patches. I think they are the cocoons that Mr Murphy refers to in a critical sense in those first three paragraphs. I suggest that if we want a sense of how well the government in general and child protection in particular is delivering front-line services, we ought to look at the impact of some of the government's policies and spending priorities in communities. It is when we look at that level that we see that things are genuinely failing, and these are the areas about which we ought to have genuine concerns, and we ought to have a proper debate in this place about how to do things better.

I was not going to dwell on headline, front-line services cuts, but one thing that I must mention, because it was handled in a particularly clumsy way by the government when it decided to take this step in the middle of last year, just after the budget, is the minister's decision to remove the provision of emergency relief, or the bulk of emergency relief provision, from her department's officers. I had a lot of to say about that at the time because I thought it was mean, it did not save very much money and it added to the confusion and concern among people who are some of the most vulnerable in our community. If a person walks into the office of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and asks for money, it is almost always because they have run out of money to feed their children; it is not because they have made some kind of lifestyle choice down the track that has led to that position. To cut that money was particularly mean and unnecessary.

I have found an account of this. Again, I stress that I am referring to accounts from the coalface, from the middle of communities that experience those cuts, and share with the minister, and the government in general, what effect those cuts have had. I draw the minister's attention to a piece in the *Collie Mail*, dated 5 September 2013, at page 3, entitled "Crisis cuts add to woes", which reads —

COLLIE Emergency Relief Centre volunteers are concerned about the wellbeing of single parents and families after cuts to crisis care funding.

Centre co-ordinators Grace Pears and Ray Hebbard were responding to news of a \$615,000 cut to funding for crisis support for at-risk families.

"It certainly will affect us. They used to be able to go to the Department of Child Protection if they lost their wallets or were in need of money," Ms Pears said.

"It doesn't say money is getting handed on to services like that. It's going to have to come out of what we get here."

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.