

## FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER

### *Statement*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [9.54 pm]: Earlier today the house finalised the debate on a motion moved by me several weeks ago. That motion states —

That the Council condemns the government for its failure to provide adequate resources for child protection workers and carers to deal with the prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder amongst children in the care of the director general of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and for withdrawing legal support for children who are abused or injured while in care.

Because these motions are time-limited to four hours and because there was no shortage of speakers on both sides of the house wishing to contribute to the debate, there was no time for me to speak in reply, as the standing orders allow, before the time allotted to the motion expired. I am therefore taking that opportunity now.

The motion was driven by two specific things that happened on the watch of this Minister for Child Protection. The first was the death of a child on the Dampier Peninsula. The second was the closure of the civil litigation unit in the minister's department. A couple of government members made smart alec remarks about these two things not being connected. They should be ashamed. Admittedly the child in question was not injured; he was killed. His case would not have come to the civil litigation unit if that unit still existed. The case shows that things go tragically wrong for children in the care of the director general; and the legal unit, which in the past has had considerable success representing the interests of children who have been injured or abused, has been axed by this minister.

I want to thank the many honourable members on this side of the house for their thoughtful, constructive and extremely passionate contributions to the debate. I also want to pay tribute to Hon Dave Grills, who gave a heartfelt account of his personal experiences of working in the practical sense with the kinds of problems presented with FASD amongst communities and families. We have all at some stage felt the kind of frustration that I heard in the honourable member's voice when he said —

It is tragic that we sit here and talk about it instead of getting together and doing something ...

I say to the honourable member, through you, Mr President, that talking is what we do in this place because it is the way political argument works. That is why debates such as this and the one we had this afternoon matter. We lost the argument today, but that will not prevent members on this side of the chamber from challenging the government to do things better and from holding the government accountable when it gets it wrong.

To the minister, I say what a bitter disappointment you are. I for one thought you were made of sterner stuff. I thought you would be up to the job of having a serious debate about this issue.

### *Point of Order*

**Hon HELEN MORTON:** Mr President, I understand that you have made statements that members are not to refer directly to ministers in that way—"you" and stuff like that—and that the statement is meant to come through the Chair. Could you just ask the member to retract those statements, please?

**Hon Adele Farina:** That's interesting from someone who is always pointing the finger.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! I have often said that I draw the line when the tone of the debate crosses the line into personal comment and personal accusations. It is not out of order for a member to say that somebody has been a disappointment in their view, and it is not unreasonable that somebody might take umbrage at that. That is part of the debate of this chamber. But I have mentioned before finger-pointing and saying "you, you, you", and that members should refer to other members by their correct title.

### *Statement Resumed*

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** I take your advice, Mr President, and I will repeat my comments.

To the minister, I say what a bitter disappointment the minister is! I for one thought that the minister was made of sterner stuff. I thought she would be up to the job of having a serious debate on this issue. Instead, she came into this place and engaged in the cheapest of cheap debating tricks. You know, Mr President, and I am sure the minister knows, that there is a hierarchy of incompetent ways to present an argument. The very worst is just to call one's opponent names. The minister is guilty of this. Her default position, like a stuck record, is to tell people that they are dumb, silly, stupid and ignorant. The problem the minister creates is not just an ineffective way of arguing but that she thereby trivialises the issues. The minister could have walked into this place with real authority and addressed this motion honestly and openly.

I put it to the minister, through you, Mr President, that she sits through many of the same briefings and seminars as I do. The minister hears the same analyses, the same statistics and the same personal accounts of the sadness and hopelessness that besets families, carers and communities affected by FASD. The minister presumably reads the same material that I read, so she knows that paediatricians like Dr John Boulton say things such as —

Medically, we're facing an almost untreatable holocaust, and all the efforts of Western medicine have achieved little; all the new buildings and services haven't really improved things.

The minister knows that the September 2012 report of the Education and Health Standing Committee on FASD states—I will quote from page 129 of that report, just in case the minister has not read it —

The Committee was surprised to hear from witnesses that they believed there was minimal awareness at a Ministerial level of FASD. There was expressed concern that the government may delay responding to FASD because of the known costs of providing the resources required to address the problem.

I note that those comments were collected by the committee during a visit to the Kimberley.

I put it to the minister, through you, Mr President, that she makes a very serious mistake when she comes into this place and engages in petty pointscoreing instead of answering the substantive basic question contained in this motion. That basic question is: does the government have adequate resources to deal with the complex problems involved in caring for children with FASD? How dare the minister come into this place and answer that question in terms of things like casework practice manuals and practice frameworks, when every child protection worker in this state knows that resources are stretched to breaking point.

I share with honourable members a paragraph from a recent article in *The Age* about Fitzroy Crossing —

FASD is already reaching out to shape the future of the Fitzroy Valley region. Take four Central Kimberley children and look 10 years beyond today. On the best scenarios, one will be completing school in Perth, and one, perhaps, in Broome while the third will be caring for the fourth, a FASD sufferer. A preventable illness thus claims the full energies of half the group. Experts in the field suspect the FASD-affected population in the overall region is about 400 people, all needing degrees of understanding and special care. It has not always been forthcoming: perhaps 40 per cent of the inmates in Kimberley jails have a FASD-type condition. The argument that some, at least, of those prisoners have reached the wrong destination hangs in the air.

I say to the minister, through you, Mr President, that she should talk to her workers on the ground, talk to carers and talk to families, and she will hear what it is like for people to not have access to services, to not be able to access the help and support that they need, and to not have assistance for FASD kids at school. Those exact points were the points made by carers at a recent forum hosted by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

I put it to the minister that she and the backbenchers whom she briefed to talk on this motion clearly thought that they had landed the killer blow when they accused me and other Labor members of politicising the issue of FASD and legal support for children. There is a rich history to that term. Politicians in the nineteenth century who fought against slavery were accused of politicising the issue by the Deep South conservatives. Politicians in the United States who are currently fighting for sensible gun laws are accused of politicising the issue by the far-right gun lobby. The minister does not want the issues that are raised in this motion to be politicised. That is because the minister wants to build a case based on risks and manuals and practice guidelines, when what we need is the kind of energy and passion shown by people such as John Boulton, June Oscar and Emily Carter, who put this minister to shame.

I will finish with the words of June Oscar, as quoted at the end of the article that I referred to earlier —

“We’ve had to make hard decisions before,” says Oscar. “We had to take responsibility, to be seen to be caring and to be acting, acting for our children, taking responsibility for ourselves. That’s what we have to do now, again, and we know it isn’t going to be easy this time. In fact, this is the hardest, longest challenge of all.”

If only that kind of inspiring statement was being made by the government.