

KIMBERLEY — SUICIDE PREVENTION

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.56 pm]: I wish to add a couple of comments to the remarks of Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich a few moments ago, when she addressed the issue of suicides in the Kimberley.

I thought the way the Minister for Mental Health, Hon Helen Morton, and some of her colleagues on that side of the house responded to the remarks of Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich was a little troubling in one particular respect, which is that in the four days that we have sat so far this year, it will surely have become evident to the government that it now has the Minister for Mental Health and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs sitting in the Legislative Council together; the shadow ministers for those two portfolios are sitting opposite them. I think I can fairly say that Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich and I have tried to demonstrate to the government that on the very difficult issues of mental health and Indigenous affairs, we are very keen to work with it.

Hon Michael Mischin: Oh, come on!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Does Hon Michael Mischin have a problem with that?

Hon Michael Mischin: I have a problem with your sincerity about it.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Why is that?

Hon Michael Mischin: I've heard it all before.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I am sorry?

The PRESIDENT: Order; just direct your comments through the Chair.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I am not quite sure what has upset Hon Michael Mischin.

Hon Michael Mischin: I'm not upset; you've taught me cynicism!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: There is nothing cynical about what I am saying. I know that there are no standing orders covering cynicism, otherwise the government would find itself in real trouble most of the time. But I can assure members that there is nothing cynical about the remarks I am making, and I wish that Hon Peter Collier was in this place, because I think he would be giving Hon Michael Mischin a bit of a glare as he leaves the chamber.

The PRESIDENT: Order; the member has been around long enough to be careful about making observations about that, because we all know that members come and go for various reasons in terms of the chamber and other work we may have commitments to. Hon Sally Talbot has the call.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich and I will be working together on this side of the house on these issues, and I hope that Hon Peter Collier and Hon Helen Morton will adopt the same strategy; there is no point in this divide-and-conquer mentality when addressing some of these serious issues. We will do our best to raise the issues we think need to be addressed; we will hold the government to account; and we will expect it to put actions in place to match the rhetoric. The government cannot get away with empty words on these issues. Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich and I have put questions to the government today about reports into suicides in the Kimberley. I mentioned seven suicides that have occurred in one month, and Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich went back to October, since when there have been 10 suicides.

My question to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs today stemmed from a public hearing held last Friday by the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations. We had the Department of Indigenous Affairs come to the hearing to hear about its annual report. Having had shadow responsibility for the Indigenous affairs portfolio for only a matter of days before that hearing was called, I spent the week engrossed in the annual report. By the time we got there, I would not say that I was as familiar with it as my predecessor in the other house, but I think I had my head around most of the issues. One of the key areas of questioning I prepared was about Oombulgurri. When we got to that section of the annual report—I can tell honourable members who are interested that it is on pages 9 and 10—we noted that the section began with a statement about the amount of money and effort that has gone into improving government services in Oombulgurri. During their preliminary remarks made in answer to questions on that section, the people from the department referred to Oombulgurri as an unsustainable community. That did not quite fit with what we were reading in the annual report, so we then spent some time trying to draw out of the officials what had gone wrong and why, on the one hand, they had presented an annual report that stated that improved government services were making life better in Oombulgurri, and, on the other hand, they referred to the community as unsustainable. Honourable members will be familiar with the reports that have ensued over the weekend about the community of Oombulgurri being reduced to only a handful of people because most of the residents have elected to leave.

Going through the measures that were put in place as part of what was referred to in the annual report as an action plan for that community, mention was made of improved services for a women's refuge, and of the urgent need to put in place suicide prevention programs. I note that when I asked the director general of the department about the suicide programs, he was not able to give me any sort of answer at all. Hon Helen Morton might want to go back to the transcript to check that my recollection of that part of the hearing is correct. He was not in a position to answer a question about suicide prevention programs. I did not assume that to mean that there were no programs, but I was a little surprised that no answer could be given to that question, particularly as they must surely have been part of the action plan, and there was reference to the action plan in the department's annual report. That question remains to be answered, and Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich moved towards that today. It is certainly something that we will take up again in this place tomorrow.

We also raised questions about the women's refuge, because specific mention was made of it in the annual report's list of achievements. I asked whether the women's refuge had, during that 12 months, been fully staffed, and whether it was operating 24/7. Even though it does not fall directly under her portfolio, Hon Helen Morton knows, as most members of Parliament know, the role that women's refuges play in our communities. They are places where women and children can go to escape violence, particularly domestic violence that means that they cannot stay at the place in which they live.

I was very disturbed to find out that there is no women's refuge "per se"; I put inverted commas around that, because I think a phrase like that was used in the hearing. I pressed them on that, and I was told that there was no women's refuge in Oombulgurri to compare with, for example, the women's refuge in Mandurah where I work. It was apparently more like a women's art centre—a place where women could go to paint or do craftwork. In other words, we were told that a community with the terribly troubled history that Oombulgurri has—the Minister for Child Protection is sitting opposite me —

Hon Robyn McSweeney: There are 12 people in Oombulgurri.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I know how many people are there now; I am talking about 18 months ago, when it was a thriving community. It was deeply troubled, but there were well over 100 people, somewhere around 150 people, in that community. That was when the Minister for Child Protection's government talked about putting an action plan in place to make that community a better place, to help it thrive and to help it get over some of the traumas that had been inflicted upon it because of child abuse and violence.

There is no functioning women's refuge there; I am not for one moment suggesting that a community of 28 people needs a fully functioning women's refuge, but I am saying that if the government put those services into a troubled community like Oombulgurri, people would be given the chance to stay. If there are no effective suicide prevention programs and no women's refuge to afford people the kinds of safe havens that women and children in our communities in the city and the regional centres can avail themselves of, of course people will choose to leave; but to paint their leaving as being somehow a triumph of self-determination for Aboriginal people is just ludicrous. It is grossly unfair to those communities, but much more seriously than that, it is a total misreading and misunderstanding of the problems in those communities.

We will be pursuing these questions, eyeball-to-eyeball, across the chamber; that is what this place is set up to do. As I said to Hon Peter Collier last Thursday, these things are very difficult and very complex; but very difficult and very complex is what we do in this place. We will keep bowling the questions up to the government, and we expect answers back.

House adjourned at 10.06 pm
